

# Race & Class: Obama & the Politics of Protest

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CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING contradiction of modern African-American politics: We have the first African-American president (he checked "Black" on the new census form) offering hope to millions of working-class Blacks. Yet we see a drawdown of protest politics by longtime civil rights leaders, even though the "Great Recession" is causing the greatest harm Black communities have seen in decades.

While I have written about this in previous issues of *Against the Current*, the debate among Black intellectuals and leaders of all stripes is getting more intense. The Obama presidency —more so than previous Democratic administrations — has effectively taken Black protest politics off the streets.

By all statistical data unemployment (particularly longterm unemployed), education and housing discrimination with the resulting lack of opportunities for African Americans is steadily rising. What's worse, protests in the streets are being occupied by the far right, including its most extreme militia and racist elements. The official Republican Party elites are now the dog being wagged by its bigoted white supremacist tail.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups has doubled since Obama was elected. In its spring 2010 report it summarized:

"The SPLC documented an astonishing 244 percent increase in the number of antigovernment Patriotic groups in 2009. Their numbers grew from 149 groups in 2008 to 512 groups in 2009. Militias — the paramilitary arm of the Patriot movement — were a major part of this increase, tripling in number from 42 militias in 2008 to 127 in 2009."

Yet the Michigan white "Hutaree" militia were indicted only because they allegedly planned to kill cops. But threats against Black Americans are seen as protected by the First Amendment. Many of these armed groups openly declare on their web sites hatred for Obama and Black people as a whole.

Yet the Obama administration's response is to shift to the center-right, telling Black leaders to wait and see how his approach of not doing anything special for African Americans will pay off in the long run.

## Obama's New Ally: Al Sharpton

Obama knows full well that the politics of fear and race-baiting is a big reason why most Black leaders are cautious in their criticism of him. He's knows his most loyal base remains the African-American population. But the criticisms are increasing, which is why the Obama team is reaching

out to civil right activists with credentials of militancy.

A case in point is Reverend Al Sharpton.

In a front page article in the conservative *Wall Street Journal* (March 17, 2010), headlined “Obama’s New Partner: Al Sharpton,” Sharpton is presented as Obama’s new partner to push back critical voices in the Black community.

“With his wavy bouffant and medallion necklaces,” writes reporter Peter Wallsten, “the Rev Al Sharpton famously confronted government officials on behalf of Black Americans. Now he has found a new role: telling Black leaders to quiet their criticisms and give the government a chance.”

The article notes that the Obama administration has called upon Sharpton to respond to criticism that Obama is not doing enough for African Americans, especially in time of high unemployment and new signs of racist bigotry. Sharpton, it must be recalled, was told by Obama’s campaign not to come to Iowa during the primary because of his militant past.

Sharpton would seem an unlikely defender of the do-nothing-special for the Black community approach of the White House. But there he is visiting the White House regularly (five times to date) and taking on other Black leaders who are not so patient. In fact Sharpton uses his syndicated radio show to showcase top Obama administration officials who promote the administration’s goals to a Black community that not surprisingly overwhelmingly backs the president. (A *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll has Obama’s approval rating among African Americans at 86%.)

Sharpton, of course, denies he’s doing anything different than in his more militant past. His pragmatism, wearing suits and ties, he says, throws off his foes that tend to “underestimate me as I organize.” But Sharpton’s shift in approach does reflect a deeper philosophical division among the traditional liberal leaders of the community.

Those Black elected officials who depend on more than the Black community to be elected, such as Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick and many new statewide Black elected officials — in other words, who need “the crossover votes” — see the end of “protest politics” as a positive step forward. Black leaders, in this view, are (a small) part of the Washington insiders and players. “Let’s leverage our new political power,” is the implication.

The facts of poverty, discrimination and inequality are seen less as being caused by pure racism than economic disadvantage. This new pragmatism, ironically, puts the Black liberals in unlikely convergence with the outlook of many conservative figures who oppose direct actions by the Black community and reject a positive role for government. The liberals still support a big government role, as seen in the health insurance debate, but want to primarily play by the inside-the-Beltway rules.

Even the Congressional Black Caucus is divided on the issue of the role of protest politics and how it levels criticism of Obama. Most elected officials believe their “leadership” is key to protecting the interests of the Black community. Yet many have supported protests in the past to push the White House into action. Today they are more cautious.

So while many of these officials are upset that Obama has not done more for their mainly Black constituents, and the pressure is on to do what even previous Democratic presidents have done for the African-American population, none are actively pushing for the kind of protests we see from the far right.

The theory that “the rising tide lifts everyone’s boat” has been proven wrong for the simple reason

that institutional racism makes the lifting uneven for the poorest and most discriminated sections of society. Everyone knows this, but can't seem to figure out how to move forward with what in the past was considered legitimate — going to the streets to demand justice. The first Black president makes it a hard choice.

The community, unfortunately, is left on its own as a result of the “wait for Obama” strategy. In this context of paralysis of the traditional civil rights groups and Congressional Black Caucus, an unlikely radio and television host is stepping up to the plate to pose challenging questions to Obama's team.

## Reviving King's Call

Rejecting the theory that “protest politics” is dead or a diversion in the “post racial” era of Obama, Tavis Smiley, a prominent radio and PBS television show host, is using his medium to do so. Smiley refers to those former militants like Sharpton who have adopted “more pragmatic” tactics as mistaken. For Sharpton “to speak truth to power about the suffering of Black people on the one hand,” Smiley told the *WSJ*, “and then to be running in and out of the Oval Office and trying to run the president's agenda or express White House talking points” is not possible.

Smiley is an advocate of placing more pressure on president Obama to advance the interests and the rights of the most oppressed. He joins Bob Herbert, an African-American columnist for the *New York Times*, in pushing for more action by the Obama White House even as he defends Obama from the virulent attacks and “nonstop ugliness of the GOP and its minions.”

Smiley recently produced and narrated one of the best documentaries I've seen on the lessons from Martin Luther King, Jr. “MLK: A Call to Conscience” (<http://video.pbs.org/video>) is a PBS program about King's decision to oppose the U.S. war on Vietnam before this became majority sentiment, even though more work was needed to achieve full equality for African Americans. King gave his now famous speech, “Beyond Vietnam” on April 4, 1967 — one year to the day before he was assassinated in Memphis where he went to support striking sanitation workers.

Smiley's presentation is powerful because he shows through his interviews and King's remarks how King first came out against the war, even when the entire civil rights establishment opposed his stance as not helping to advance the civil rights agenda. In fact, King said that the war was an issue of morality and on that basis alone no American could support it.

King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in 1965 had pushed back when he first indicated his opposition to the war. The Board's reasoning: How could King turn against president Lyndon Johnson, who had signed the landmark Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts?

King responded that the war must be opposed. He also raised issue with the for profit system we live under, and spoke out against “racism, extreme materialism and militarism.” In his 1967 speech at Riverside Church, King described his inner struggle:

*“Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: “Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix,” they say. “Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?” they ask.*

And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless

greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live. In the light of such tragic misunderstanding, I deem it of signal importance to try to state clearly, and I trust concisely, why I believe that the path from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church — the church in Montgomery, Alabama, where I began my pastorate — leads clearly to this sanctuary tonight."

## **The Necessity of Protest**

Tavis Smiley notes that King understood and advocated ongoing protests even after the adoption of the new laws that ended Jim Crow segregation. King firmly believed that public protests against poverty and the war were necessary. His aides didn't want him to go to Memphis either.

As the most prominent African-American civil rights leader and with his large personal capital at stake, for King to push more protests and to oppose Johnson's war showed what type of leader he was.

Many on the left saw King at the time as a moderate, because of his nonviolent tactics in contrast to the more militant nationalist and Black Power currents that were challenging the two-party and the "free market" system. But what pushed him to a more radical position wasn't the more militant younger generation (such as the leaders of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael in particular) or the views of the revolutionary visionary Malcolm X.

King genuinely believed that to eradicate racism and inequality required more than legislative action. He also didn't believe he "owed" president Johnson because of the civil rights legislation. The popular movement won that legislation.

King could have changed course and backed the war — as some civil rights figures, like Bayard Rustin, did. He would have been toasted by the ruling establishment as a "great patriotic American." As Harry Belafonte explains on the PBS program, if King had come out for the war he would've been seen as a genuine American hero and "statesman."

King's decision to stand up to the White House and other civil rights leaders is remarkable considering the lack of backbone we see today. (It is noteworthy that some 75% of Americans opposed his stance on Vietnam at the time of his death. The rising antiwar movement would change that sentiment in a short time.)

The arguments that Obama's war in Afghanistan is a "just war" and "necessary to fight terrorists" fly in the face of the lessons King taught through his more radical approach toward war and politics. The politics of protest — not depending on elected officials or Congress — is what's missing today in civil rights and labor politics.

The default in leadership has left the "politics of protest" to the organized far right. It is not surprising that white working people in particular, and seniors living under a government-run Medicare program, are misguided and fooled by race-baiting and end up supporting the positions of big business and big insurance cartels against their own interests.

The Tea Party, Republican elites and others openly reject supporting issues of concern to the poor, minorities and the working class. The most powerful response by progressives to those being misled is to tell them the truth and firmly reject any racist, sexist and antigay rhetoric.

Nothing is gained by saying, "These white misguided working people have a point because they are

mad at government and Wall Street.” Far-right movements historically always tap that type of genuine anger to serve their reactionary goals.

The politics of (progressive) protests is the greatest example of Martin Luther King’s leadership. It is what the more militant layer of the Black communities took up, but went further by advocating more militant tactics than the pure nonviolence that was appropriate for the most part in the police-state reality that Blacks lived under in the Deep South.

King set the table by stating that leaders must do what’s right, not what’s popular. Equality is only possible by keeping pressure on the powers that be, even “friends.” It is a lesson that the current generation of civil rights and labor leaders have forgotten (or didn’t learn). It is one that must be followed to take back the streets from the right wing, or the steady shift to the far right will not be stopped.

In truth, Obama’s White House is to the right of Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter on all issues — even health care, offshore oil drilling and nuclear power. The “Black” Obama is what the right wingers oppose — not his substantive center-right politics. His only “victory” was to establish the concept that health care should be a right and not a privilege, even though his new health bill does not accomplish it.

The politics of protests — as a strategy — is what the Black community and the working class need. We must press and challenge Obama to do more now (as King did after the historic civil rights legislation was adopted) to advance the interests of the Black community and society as a whole.

**Malik Miah**

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