

Final Lecture EC 1370, April 29, 2010, Prof. Glenn C. Loury

You will recall that on the first meeting of this course – what seems like a long time ago now – we began by considering three speeches: Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural address; Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 commencement address at Howard University; and, then presidential candidate Barack Obama’s ‘race speech,’ given at Philadelphia’s Constitution Hall in March 2008, during the height of the primary campaign.

I’d like to begin today’s final lecture for this course on race and inequality in America, if I may, with a tale of two more speeches – one by President Barack Hussein Obama, and the other by that great American social prophet, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Permit me to quote briefly:

A. First, here is Barack Obama in Oslo accepting the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize:

“We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations -- acting individually or in concert -- will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.

“I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King's life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there's nothing weak -- nothing passive -- nothing naïve -- in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King.

“But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world... To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason...

“But the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions -- not just treaties and declarations -- that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.”

B. By contrast, here is Martin Luther King, Jr. denouncing the Vietnam War, at Riverside Church, New York City, on April 4, 1967:

“As if the weight of such a commitment to the life and health of America were not enough, another burden of responsibility was placed upon me in 1964; and I cannot forget that the Nobel Prize for Peace was also a commission -- a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for ‘the brotherhood of man.’ This is a calling that takes me beyond national

allegiances, but even if it were not present I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? What then can I say to the "Vietcong" or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?

"This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers."

So, here we can see the two greatest African American leaders of the past half-century as they address themselves to the gravest public question of our time – that of war and peace. My, what a difference 40 years can make!

Recently I had occasion to comment on a lecture by Prof. Eric Sundquist at the Lionel Trilling Seminar, sponsored by the English Department at Columbia University. Prof. Sundquist is a distinguished literary scholar at UCLA. He closed his elegant remarks by inviting our speculation as to what the late, great African American novelist, Ralph Ellison, might have thought about Barack Obama's ascendancy, which he did not live to see; and, how he might have related it to the public ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. It fell to me to offer some thoughts in reaction to Sundquist's literary musings.

Frankly, I have no idea what Ellison would have said about all of this. As a 'mere' economist in the company of so many distinguished men and women of letters, I kind of felt as though that question was above my pay grade! Certainly, I did agree with Sundquist that Ellison would have eschewed any "naked attempt to discover analogues in quotidian politics..." But, as a social scientist, I am inclined to reject the analogy for *political*, no less than for *aesthetic*, reasons:

indeed, I would go so far as to state that the election to the American Presidency of Barack Hussein Obama does NOT constitute anything close to a fulfillment of Martin Luther King's famous 'dream,' and that it is a dangerous folly – a grave political and moral error – to so frame Obama's electoral success, which is what I wish to speak about this afternoon.

My main worry has to do with what Obama's ascendancy could imply for the future of what I am going to refer to here as the *black prophetic tradition*. I am skeptical about the connection of a President of the United States who happens to be an African-American to that tradition. I speak here not about his personal views, as someone who identifies as a black man, or as a Christian believer. Rather, I speak about his role as the occupant of a very special, very powerful office, with all of the responsibilities that entails.

I wonder whether or not these are commensurate matters at all – the black prophetic tradition, on the one hand, and the exercise of executive power on the other hand. I wonder if they are denominated in the same units of currency, if you will -- whether this *black prophetic tradition* can be made to articulate in any coherent way with the exercise of the powers of the office of the presidency. I am extremely dubious that it can, and I believe that lack of coherence between the political and the prophetic – between the civically profane and the civically sacred – has far reaching political consequences for all of us concerned about racial justice in America.

What do I mean, then, by “the black prophetic tradition?” Well, I see it as an outsider's and underdog's critical view about national narrative of the United States of America. It is, to be concrete, an historical counter-narrative – one that, for example, sees the dispossession of the native people of North America as the great historic crime that it was. One that looks back on the bombing of Hiroshima with a feeling of horror and national shame. It's an insistence that American democracy -- which of course has always been a complicated political compact,

usually serving the interests of the wealthy and powerful -- live up to the true meaning of our espoused civic creed. It is an understanding that struggle, resistance and protest are often the only ways to bring this about. And it's the recognition that even in the late 20th and early 21st century, America has not yet to fully do so. The black prophetic tradition is anti-triumphalist, vis-à-vis America's role in the world, and it is deeply suspicious of the "city on a hill" rhetoric of self-congratulation to which American politicians, including President Obama, are so often inclined. It's an outsider's critical assessment of what we Americans do, an assessment that sympathizes in a deep way with the struggles of those who are dispossessed: Palestinians in the Middle East today, for instance, and blacks at the southern tip of Africa in an earlier decade. This tradition of moral witness within the American experience that I associate with the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century and with the civil right movement of the 20th century preaches that "collateral damage" -- where civilians are killed by U.S. military operations -- is not simply an unavoidable cost of doing business in the modern world, but rather is a deeply problematic offense against a righteousness toward which we ought to aspire. What I am calling the black prophetic tradition also reflects a universal theory of freedom -- with a strong anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-militarist tilt. (Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's controversial former pastor, is a child and exponent of this tradition of social criticism to which I here refer.)

What, then, is President Obama's relationship to this tradition? What, in this regard, are we entitled to expect from him. My principle point is this: President of the United States is an office. And, the office has its own imperatives. My view is that the person who is the Commander in Chief of the United States military, regardless of his individual biography, needs to be viewed with clear-eyed realism for who and what they are. Such a person ought not to be looked upon through a rose-tinted glass, with some romantic and wishful narrative.

So, my first point is to stress that the great traditions of black protest and struggle in America have very little to do with the exercise of the powers of the Presidency. I'm a skeptic about this kind of talk in reference to President Obama, based on the fact of his "blackness." Romantic idealists will urge that surely his biography, his history, even his skin color informs the man who is now President. Yet, for me that merely shifts the question to an inquiry about the extent that individual personality can exert real leverage over the exercise of such an office. Put plainly: the first imperative of the American presidency is to further the interest of the American imperial project, not to criticize that project. If one somehow fails to understand that, then one won't be running the show for very long.

Now, I wish to avoid misunderstanding here. I am not criticizing Barack Obama, the man. If it needs to be said, I admire him greatly. My assessment of Barack Hussein Obama, the man -- given all I know about him, the books he's written that I've read, the speeches he's given that I've heard -- is that he is compassionate, and that he is possessed of a deep historical sensibility. Left to his own devices, I feel confident in saying, he'd stand on the right side of history. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, famously, that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Well, it is at least arguable that the rise of Barack Hussein Obama represents one way in which that moral arc is, indeed, bending toward justice. He is someone, I think it fair to say, who has made more room within his own philosophy for a concern about the dispossessed than anyone who has held that office, at least in my own lifetime. He is, I would reckon, aware of the imperfections of American democracy and of the inflated character of some of the rhetoric that he himself has had to use as a matter of political expediency. But the point I'm making here is that the office has its own imperatives; and, that's something which those of us who have been clamoring for change, and who may yet be sorely disappointed, must take the measure of.

But, there is a second point I wish to make. It is about the larger narrative concerning race and inequality in our country, and about how the Obama's ascendancy alters our national discourse on issues of race and social justice. I recall that there was a heated discussion on this matter during the 2008 campaign, when candidate Obama gave that speech on 'race' to which I referred at the start of this course – a speech made necessary, I might add, by the uproar that arose when inflammatory comments of his former pastor – the Rev. Jeremiah Wright – came to public light.

The speech was very well received at the time, but I was singularly unimpressed by it. "The greatest speech on Race since ML King's 'I have a dream' address," is how the gushing TV talking heads described it – breathlessly, thereby revealing a shocking degree of historical amnesia and ignorance. (In my own mind I was comparing, unfavorably, Obama's speech with LBJ's commencement address at Howard University in 1965 where, embracing the 'We Shall Overcome' rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s movement, LBJ staked-out an almost radically progressive political position on racial matters which, in the fullness of time, issued in profound consequences for the lives of black Americans. Ironically, taking a substantively progressive stand on racial matters was the very last thing candidate Obama wanted to do during the 2008 campaign, and since. Ambiguity on such matters was (and is) an electoral necessity for him.

As you now know, because of our work in this course, LBJ's position was that the people of the United States were obligated to undertake a massive expansion of social investment for the disadvantaged in American society, and that this obligation rested at least in part on the historical necessity that we act so as to reduce racial inequality in our country. What LBJ had to say in that late-spring afternoon, 45 years ago -- about race, history, policy and social obligation -- has echoed down through the generations. Of course, nobody could have expected Obama to

argue for a return of the Great Society. Still, I thought at the time of Obama's 'race speech' that the views about race and American social obligation which he felt comfortable giving voice to – whatever their merits – did not belong in the same league with those of that white Southerner, LBJ, not even close. And, I was deeply suspicious of the gleeful alacrity with which the relatively tepid pronouncements of this talented young black politician were being enshrined by America's political elites as words for the ages...

I also came to think during the 2008 campaign that this black presidential candidate, Barack Obama, did not really have the standing to renegotiate America's implicit racial contract on behalf of MY (i.e., African American) people. I wish, emphatically, to reiterate by this point. What, one may ask, might that 'implicit racial contract' be? Well, in a word, it is the broad recognition and acceptance by governing elites in this country -- in the press, in the courts and legal establishment, in the academy and in the broader political culture -- that structural impediments exist to the equal participation of blacks in American life, and that government-sponsored initiatives (like affirmative action at public universities, but by no means limited to this) are an appropriate vehicle for redress in this situation. It is the recognition that, despite the huge social transformation occurring in this society under the pressures of immigration, globalization and rising economic insecurity -- which are, as Obama has frequently pointed out, changes affecting all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity -- despite this new reality, we nevertheless have unfinished business here on the 'race' front. It is the willingness to constantly interrogate our institutions as to whether their actual practice is consistent with our professed ideals concerning equality and social justice. It is an acknowledgement that, imperatives of personal and communal responsibility notwithstanding, the American nation-state nevertheless bears a collective, political responsibility for the social disasters and the human suffering that are unfolding even as we speak, and that can be so readily observed in the centers of our cities.

While there has never been unanimity on these matters, there nevertheless has been a consensus view -- a view, I might add, that was reaffirmed by a relatively conservative US Supreme Court in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases. This consensus has been under attack for a generation. And I insist that it is, in effect, being effectively renegotiated by Barack Obama as a consequence of his political ascendancy. I am not here accusing Obama of being 'soft' on affirmative action here. To draw that conclusion would be to completely misunderstand me. Furthermore, some will object that Obama has shown through words and deeds his appreciation of the structural bases for racial inequality in this country. They will say that his views are nuanced, pragmatic and historically well-informed. This is all true, and I do not deny it. Still, the question that matters is not whether Barack Obama knows anything about history or sociology. The question is, what are the American people prepared to do next, if anything, about these matters? And, how will Obama's ascendancy to the pinnacle of American power promote or retard progress?

What we have witnessed in the course of the past three years during which Obama has risen from relative obscurity to occupy the most powerful office in world history is a process whereby and in effect, his very person has become for many Americans -- and, perhaps for some of you -- a site for the public expiation of collective racial sins! Now, I can fully understand why Middle America would leap at a chance for such cheap grace. What I fail to see, however, is why any serious advocate of the interests of black people in America must fall into the same swoon. Here's the bottom line of this part of my argument: Obama's *authenticity* as a representative of the black experience before the American public is not self-evident -- far from it. His experience is not representative; his motives cannot be assumed pure; and, "his mouth is no prayer book" -- as my grandmother used to say. Saying this does not make me some kind of 'race-mongering' black radical. This is not even a criticism of Obama. It is merely a statement of fact. Nor is it an

imputation to him of any nefarious intent. Sure, he is ambitious. And, yes, as Jeremiah Wright has said, he is a politician, doing what politicians must do to get themselves (re)elected. But, this issue -- concerning what consequences will ensue from his rise to occupy the nation's highest office, for the broad understanding of the American civic obligation to pursue greater racial equality in the decades and generations to come -- this is a vitally important matter for reflection and discussion. And yet, it is hardly spoken of -- it is seemingly a taboo subject.

I ask you to resist the partisan temptation to dismiss my concerns as the whining of an older generation which is unwilling to accept that, in racial matters, things have changed in 21st century America. If 'change' in our racial sensibilities means accommodating the weariness of many Americans with our long, historic, and still unfinished pursuit of racial justice, then I have no trouble standing athwart such 'progress' and yelling, 'STOP.' Nor am I here blaming Obama for the fact that formulations and arguments which are forced upon him, by the logic of his political ambitions, can nevertheless redound in such a way as to have deleterious consequences for black people in this country. Neither do I hold that he, or any other single person, speaks for all of black America. Still, none of this obviates the fact that pronouncements by prominent persons who are received, de facto, as representatives of a group can enter into the public vernacular, become part of our unexamined political vocabulary, shape how people understand and respond to the social reality within which we are embedded, and in this manner can reverberate so as deleteriously to affect other group members. This, then, and for whatever it might be worth, is the claim I am making about the danger implicit in Obama's effective renegotiation of America's implicit racial contract.

I return, then, as I bring these remarks to a close, to the idea that Barack Obama and Martin Luther King stand at two ends of a process that is moving toward the enactment of

historical justice. (“He had a dream. Now the dream comes true!” – so reads the popular T-shirt with images depicting MLK and BHO...) I simply don't believe that – not for one minute. In fact, I view such a notion as dangerous nonsense – and, that's not a criticism of Barack Obama; not at all. For me such dreamy political rhetoric reflects an infantile politics. It is quite literally a matter of confusing the sacred and the profane (civically, not religiously, speaking, of course.) King's role was, in this metaphor that I am now invoking, a sacred one (in a civil, not a religious sense.) His role was to call America to a moral accounting. His martyrdom was an almost foreseeable end to the tragic drama that was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s public ministry at mid-20th century -- almost foreseeable, because the nature of the challenge that he posed to the status quo was radical. He was upsetting the apple cart, challenging the national myths, disturbing those who were smugly satisfied and comfortable with the status quo. Recall that at the end of King's life he was attacking the militarism and racism of America's war in Vietnam, even as he was also organizing poor people to shut down the government, if necessary, in order to force attention to their claims. I am not here saying that MLK was 'right' about all of these matters (though, if pressed, I would have to acknowledge that I think he was!) His mouth was no prayer book – that much is for sure. What I'm saying here is that MLK's job was to expose the hypocrisies and inconsistencies lying at the foundations of the structures of American power. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was, in that sense, a sacred, prophetic figure moving through American history.

Just take a look at what Obama had to say in criticism of his former pastor in that Philadelphia 'race' speech:

"But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm ... expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country--a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the

conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam." That statement, in my humble opinion, was and is a travesty – and I live with the hope that President Obama will one day repudiate it -- perhaps after he has left office. That statement, by that ambitious African American presidential candidate – again, in my humble opinion -- was, and was intended to be, a betrayal of the black prophetic tradition

I'm sorry, but I have to insist on this point: that a black Christian leader, ministering to a huge flock in Chicago's black ghetto, fails to agree with candidate Obama that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict arises from some allegedly 'perverse and hateful' Muslim ideology – rather than, say, from the historical fact of the radical dispossession and ongoing oppression of millions – hardly certifies that said religious leader holds what the ambitious candidate accused Rev. Wright of holding – namely, a "profoundly distorted view of this country." Such a claim is just propaganda, pure and simple, and it can serve only one purpose -- to de-legitimize criticism of American foreign policy, even as one promotes one's own electoral prospects, by what amounts to some not-so-sophisticated name calling. One may agree or disagree with Wright's (and, for that matter, Farrakhan's) reading of the situation in the Middle East, but one cannot fairly characterize those views as deluded, unfounded, irrational, un-American, or inconsistent with the historical thrust of the black freedom struggle. In the sentence of Obama's that I've quoted above, acting on behalf of his own ambitions (and perhaps articulating sincerely held views), the candidate who is now President nevertheless spoke in such a way as to deny space within the legitimate American conversation for an important dimension of the historically grounded, authentic African American political voice. In my considered opinion, it is an outrage that he has been allowed to do so.

This is why I believe that the prophetic tradition of critical political thought and faith-based moral witness out of which Martin Luther King Jr. emerged, and which he embodied, is radically at odds with President Obama's rhetoric concerning the moral significance of the American Founding. For the tradition of social criticism that emerged over the generations from the suffering of the slaves, and gathered strength from the unrequited hopes of the freedmen, is a tradition that has always been keenly aware of the moral ambiguity of the American founding. And yet, no American politician – not even one as gifted an orator as Barack Hussein Obama – can afford to give public voice to such critical skepticism about the American project.

Our unlovely history of race relations is not unrelated to the current situation – either as a matter of historical causation (because the structure of our cities, with their massive racial ghettos, is implicated in the production of deviancy amongst those living their), or as a matter of ethical evaluation (because the decency of our institutions depends on the extent to which they comport with a narrative of national purpose that acknowledges and seeks to limit and to reverse the consequences of history's wrongs.) So, let's not get confused. Let's not mix the prophetic and the sacred with the profanity of American politics – with its lust for power and money and oil and global hegemony. They don't mix. They're not about the same things.

Thank you. Prof. GL