

JUST DO IT

Notes on Politics and Race at the Dawn of the Obama Presidency¹

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Abstract

President-elect Barack Obama will take office after a campaign that was pathbreaking on many levels. The argument here, necessarily somewhat speculative, is that Obama's management of his racial identity and of racial politics is roughly predictive of his soon-to-begin management of executive power in the United States. Obama is characterized as a "practical idealist," a true pragmatist in the deeply grounded, philosophical (as opposed to vulgar) sense of that term. Attention is directed to the way Obama has handled or may be likely to handle the racial politics of the election itself, the ongoing realities of structural racism in the United States and the problem of exercising executive power in an endemically racial state, the role of race in national politics, and the role of race in global politics. The uniqueness of this new administration—headed by a preternaturally skilled and intellectually prepared Black politician—is not chiefly located in the symbolism of Obama's Blackness, important as that is. Rather it is Obama's formation as a Black intellectual and politician that may be expected to guide his thought and action in the White House.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Political Agency, Coalition, Realignment, Transracial Politics, Cross-Class Politics

INTRODUCTION

President Obama's electoral victory signals a new opening in U.S. politics, and his victory carries tremendous significance in world politics as well. His assumption of the presidency is a remarkable event, astounding in its racial significance, yet also firmly located within "normal" politics. The victory was an overdetermined outcome, not only of a masterful campaign but also of the political-economic meltdown of the previous regime and the attendant national and global political crises: the collapse of neoliberalism and the breakdown of the "Washington consensus"; the growing uselessness of warfare in the age of postcolonialism and nuclear proliferation; an unprecedented legitimation crisis; and the increasingly evident obsolescing

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of the nation-state.² Obama's election points to a transformation of the political system: the rise of a new public sphere rooted in the "politicization of the social," which had its birth in the "new social movements" of the 1960s and, most specifically, in the Black freedom movement.

The election touches on a huge list of themes that is difficult to wrap one's head around. Yet we social scientists, we race theorists, must address these themes. We must ride this train. Obama has provided significant if general statements on these and a host of other issues; indeed he enters the White House as one of the most well-informed and articulate interpreters of his times ever to take the helm; in this he perhaps rivals Lincoln. If the new president can so deeply and beautifully rise to the occasion by producing new social theory and policy analysis, surely we social and political scientists, who largely supported him and are indeed excited by him, can do no less.

In this essay I provide an analysis of Obama's political position as he approaches the inauguration, giving prominence to the theme of race and its relationship to the enormous project the new president is assuming.

Obama as Pragmatist

Obama has a well-developed pragmatist political orientation that may be characterized by the metonymic term *practical idealism*. Taking my cue from the radical and race-conscious pragmatism introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois, I explore how Obama's experience of his own raciality and his analysis of race as an enduring sociopolitical condition³ have shaped and will continue to shape his understanding and potential accomplishments as president of the United States.

By *pragmatism*, I mean something quite unlike the vulgarized use of the term so often invoked by commentators to describe Obama's politics. That common usage usually signifies little more than opportunism, which is an attribute of virtually all mainstream politicians. Instead, I mean the *real* pragmatism associated with such attributes as "situated creativity" and "self-reflective action." I follow not only Du Bois ([1903] 1999; [1935] 1977) but also John Dewey (1939), George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1967), Cornel West (1989), and others in linking those tropes to democratic commitments (Glaude 2007; Taylor 2004; Gooding-Williams 2006; Outlaw 2005; Johnson 1996). Taking democracy seriously, as I believe Obama does, means recognizing that everyday people are capable of making and remaking themselves and their society. Politically they engage in what C. L. R. James called "self-activity" (James et al., [1958] 1968). They are the "navigators" of their own lives, always individually and sometimes collectively—when political conditions warrant. This is the foundation of my take on Obama's political philosophy and on his approach to governing: informed by his experience of the deeply rooted contradictions of race and racism in American society and politics, Obama's presidency signifies a new and closer connection between social movement politics and statecraft.

Obama's "practical idealism" combines a social-movement-derived ethos with a highly developed mainstream political skill set. Rhetorician, political strategist, legal scholar, and wonk, a self-described "child of the movement" and member of the "Joshua generation,"⁴ Obama incarnates a unique "double consciousness" all his own. "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" ([1903] 1999, p. 11) was how Du Bois famously described that condition. And while Obama still inhabits it, he now proposes to reinterpret its meaning in light of the real if unsteady progress the United States has made toward

racial democracy in the more than one hundred years since Du Bois wrote that sentence.

This essay's title—pillaged from the Nike slogan—reclaims the possibility not of resolving the Duboisian contradiction of American racial dualism, but of *operating within it from a position of power*. To do so is something utterly unprecedented in U.S. history. We are so used to understanding the dualism formula as a recipe for subordination and powerlessness that we are relatively incapable of imagining its converse: a template for justice making, egalitarian action, peacemaking, and political reform. These are ideals, not attainable political objectives; yet movement toward them is indeed possible, particularly at this historical moment, given Obama's approach to electoral politics and his potential approach to governing, grounded in the real-pragmatist tradition—the radical one.

Real pragmatism—this uniquely American body of philosophical thought—is attentive to agency in context. As early as the 1920s, pragmatism developed the basic framework of social psychology in recognizing the complexities of the social structuring of the self (Mead [1934] 1967). In Mead's view, human beings possess self-directed sensibilities that they deploy in myriad social interactions, mindful of the social contexts in which they are situated.⁵ The democratic potentialities of this framework are significant. Pragmatism suggests, in its most open sense, that all human subjects possess political agency; it grants “voice”—or the possibility of achieving it—to each individual, the lowly as well as the elite.⁶ It rejects the usual elitism of social science and political philosophy: the presumption that most people are politically disengaged, indeed almost entirely so. C. Wright Mills famously wrote in *White Collar*:

We are now in a situation in which many who are disengaged from prevailing allegiances have not acquired new ones, and so are distracted from and inattentive to political concerns of any kind. They are strangers to politics. They are not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it. If we accept the Greeks' definition of the idiot as a privatized man [*sic*], then we must conclude that the U.S. citizenry is now largely composed of idiots (Mills [1951] 2002, p. 328).

Despite the attractions of such a perspective today—when reality television, FOX News channel, *American Idol*, and *Project Runway* dominate the airwaves in a U.S. version of the “bread and circuses” atmosphere of the Roman empire—our fierce engagement with the issue of race in the 2008 elections suggests that the North American public is far less “inactionary,” much less “strangers to politics,” at least in this respect, than the comments by Mills would imply. How Obama managed the race issues raised by his campaign also reinforces this idea.

To be sure, Obama's position is necessarily strategic in conventional ways. His often-emphasized commitment to “postpartisanship” is judicious and realistic. His determination to be “the president who happens to be Black,” rather than “the Black president,” will be as crucial to determining his effectivity in office as it was to getting him elected. In addition, Obama—like all national leaders—represents a coalition of varied constituencies. That coalition, that “power bloc,” to employ the Gramscian term, is both cross-class and transracial. Once more, if that bloc had not been cultivated and consolidated, Obama would not have reached the White House.

Yet Obama's pragmatism is also informed by the realities of race in the United States today. His experiences—and ours—continue to be suffused with the racial dualism that informs his political position. His revealing chronicle of his own

journey toward Black self-consciousness, his account of his marriage and family life, his work as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side and as a professor of civil rights law and of constitutional law all lead us to that view. Consider as well his record as a rising political leader. Representing Hyde Park, dealing with Chicago politics and Springfield politics, gaining support (and taking his lumps)⁷ not only in the "Black metropolis" but also in the virtual Dixie of southern Illinois, and then stepping firmly onto the national political stage in 2004, Obama is both a product of the deep Black American political tradition and an inheritor of his party's post-1960s crisis. He assumes the mantle of Douglass, Du Bois, and King and confronts the "culture wars" and "identity politics" that split the Democratic Party, the White flight and "Reagan Democrats" who abandoned it, the "triangulation" the Democrats reluctantly embraced under Bill Clinton. To be sure, he is also unique, synthesizing and varying the lessons of these traditions and events. His slogan "We are the ones we have been waiting for" invokes the 1960s' commitment to a deeper democracy, the radical pragmatist dimensions of that legacy. Just recall the principles and goals of the civil rights, Black power, and New Left movement, the signs on those banners: *Power to the people*, *Let the people decide*, *Participatory democracy*. He is fully aware that the structural racism which presently defines the United States still institutionalizes discrimination, shapes the carceral state, demands ongoing racial profiling, shapes White anxieties and White flight, resists affirmative action, and generates negrophobia and nativism. As the March 14, 2008, speech "A More Perfect Union" strongly reveals, the president is a racial theorist.

So in this essay, written before his inauguration, I discuss Obama's political orientation, focusing on a few broad arenas. Throughout I stress the role of racial dualism and the "practical idealism" or "real pragmatism" that emerges from it; I view these matters as the organizing principles of his politics.

This essay contains five sections. In the following one, "Notes on the Election and Race," I discuss the crucial role of race in every U.S. national election. Obama's victory may be seen as the long-awaited reversal of Richard Nixon's election in 1968; it has the potential to reshape mainstream electoral politics. The election is both celebrated as an outcome of the "new social movement" politics, which owes its origins to the Black movement and the upheavals of the 1960s, and hailed as finally putting an end to the 1960s (Perlstein 2008a). The ways Obama managed his own racial identity during the campaign tell us a great deal about his complicated relationship with political currents of race.

In the next section, "Executive Power and the Management of a Racial Regime," I address the problem of "structural racism" as the Obama administration will confront it. Obama is assuming the leadership of a nation that on a deep level still thinks of itself as White. His ability to challenge structural racism is limited. To undo the main outrages of the George Bush II regime and to overcome the economic meltdown into which the country (and the world) is now plunging would be great accomplishments on their own, of course. Indeed such achievements themselves would contain antiracist dimensions. For example, significant job creation and social investment would greatly benefit Black and Brown people, even if such measures were not specifically aimed at the ghettos and barrios. Beyond this lie race-specific politics: educating the nation to reject racial inequality in all forms and to accept and honor racial difference (in much the same way that we accept and honor other forms of social difference). Obama's approach to racial governance is poised between the fierce pressures he will face to sustain core structures of racism (notably institutionalized discrimination) and his commitment to seize this opportunity to undermine and undo such structures.

The third section, “Domestic Politics,” is in response to the *Du Bois Review*’s call for papers for this issue and puts special emphasis on this set of problems. Here I discuss Obama’s U.S. political coalition, or “power bloc,” and its peculiar political requirements. He faces enormous domestic problems, to be sure, yet the current crisis also presents new opportunities. It has enabled him to create a significant cross-class coalition, grouping working-/middle-class supporters with “enlightened-capitalist” class sectors. Another question located here is the potential for popular mobilization under an Obama presidency. There is a radical movement out there, tempered by the abuses of the Bush II regime, that supported Obama’s campaign and indeed significantly overlapped with it but that is also quite distinct from the campaign and insists on its autonomy. The new president will seek both to orient himself toward that movement and to maintain his independence from it.

In the fourth section, “Global Politics,” I consider Obama’s approach to what he calls “the world beyond our borders.” His popularity abroad is not unwarranted; it is driven not only by his charisma and the alternative he represents to the preceding forty-three “usual suspects” but also by his unique personal links to Africa and Asia, the global South and East. Above all, Obama is not W. In his writings Obama stresses “soft” power, although he stops short of repudiating “hard” alternatives. He is infinitely more in touch with the problems of the global South and East, as well as those of global warming and ecological threats, than his predecessors were. But that is not saying much. The combination of rebuilding international trust for the United States through a combination of restored sympathy and openness to negotiation, on the one hand, and retention of superpower status and *realpolitik*, on the other, represents a wide chasm for Obama to straddle. Obama’s global politics, his foreign policy, and notably his commitment to ongoing counterinsurgent war making represent the least race-conscious, and also the least pragmatist, aspects of his political position.

In this essay’s concluding section, “Just Do It,” I summarize Obama’s approach to the political transition he seeks to lead. The new president is a realist and a real pragmatist. He is progressive and generally democratic. The burden of structural racism is enormous; it undermines egalitarian and democratizing reform initiatives in civil society. This set of problems at first appears very “normal,” not unlike the problems Clinton faced at the beginning of his term, for example. But Obama brings something very new to the mix: his ability to mobilize people (by the thousands, if not the millions) in support of his initiatives. This ability derives from both his personal and his political background; at a deep level, it is a product of his Blackness.

NOTES ON THE ELECTION AND RACE

The 2008 election was the first to have a viable Black candidate, but it was hardly the first U.S. election to be about race. In fact, every national election is about race. Go back as far as you want. You’ll find the slavery-oriented elections, the immigration-oriented elections, the Jim Crow elections. You’ll find civil rights as an issue *before* the eruption of the modern civil rights movement (1948 anyone?). There’s Lyndon Johnson’s famous statement after the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (“We’ve just handed over the South to the Republicans for at least a generation”); there’s George Wallace; there’s Lee Atwater and his Willie Horton ad. Return to the present: remember the George Allen “macaca” incident? It effectively ended Allen’s absurd status as presidential contender (along with his Senate career). In the old days racism was much more overt, of course. When we ask, why are Black voters so

astute? why do they tend to vote *en bloc*? the answer is clear. They were “trained” under Jim Crow (when of course most Blacks weren’t permitted to vote at all). But the ones who could cast their ballot for senator or governor had to choose between, say, lynch-mob candidate “A” who wanted to have a lynching *every day* and lynch-mob candidate “B” who only wanted to hold lynchings *every other day*. Distinguishing between the worst and the merely very bad hones one’s voting skills to a razor-edge.⁸

Dualistic Whiteness

Why do White voters remain so susceptible to fear of a black hat? Of course, deep down, many Whites (especially older voters, especially working-class men) are still “negrophobic” (Armour 2000). At the same time, Whiteness and White racial politics have changed a lot under the influence of “the movement,” broadly conceived, and as a result of the institutionalization of civil rights norms.

In “deep” White racism, the residual racism that was never forced to modernize itself but just went underground, Whites consider themselves superior to Blacks; they believe that Blacks are less intelligent than Whites; furthermore they think Blacks don’t work as hard as Whites, don’t want to work, and are dangerous and criminal. Even more, they see immigrants (mainly Latinos) as taking “our” jobs, lowering “our” wages. Both Blacks and Latinos (and maybe Asians) are also “outbreeding us”; they’re “taking over.” This is the “ideal type”—“old school” White racism—but it’s still around, still lurking beneath the surface. Perhaps Whites believe this stuff less, or perhaps only a part of them believes this—the unconscious part, the anonymous and disavowed part, the part that comes out when they’re drunk or think they’re alone with other White people who agree with them. The serious survey research on racial attitudes and the best ethnographic work on race as “lived experience” bear this out (Bobo 2001; Hacker 1992; Feagin 2000).

All this crap consolidates White “group position” (Blumer 1958), links it to U.S. nationalism (Walters 1987; Swain 2002), and evinces tendencies toward racial despotism (Lipsitz 1998; Singh 2004). Working for Obama in the White heartland during the last few weeks of the election, I watched White voters from the working classes struggle with their prejudices big time. So much so that I came to appreciate (perhaps perversely) their honesty. “I can’t have a Black man over me,” I was told. No one used the N-word (I was, after all, canvassing for Obama),⁹ but some Whites said they were “uncomfortable” with the idea of a Black president. At some front doors White voters clearly displayed the mixture of fear and guilt that social psychologists and sociologists of emotion might expect from them. “After what’s been done to them [that is, Black folk], they’ll take advantage,” I was told. “That whole reparations thing, that makes me uncomfortable.”

But hold on! In the real world, many Whites are beyond this point, far more racially open than Whites used to be. This is especially true of younger voters and to some extent White women (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Whites have embarked on a journey of racial transition. Many Whites are antiracist—at least a lot of the time. There is now White “double consciousness”; this is not exactly news.

How parallel is this to the dualistic Black experience Du Bois analyzes: “An American, a Negro”? Far from parallel, in fact. “Two warring ideals . . . ; two souls, two thoughts; two unreconciled strivings”: Whites don’t have to face anything like that kind of pressure. To a significant extent they can still think of themselves as “just people,” people “without race.” Much White antiracism is really antiracism *lite*: “I don’t see color. A person’s just a person to me,” etc. But the mere diffusion

of “color-blind” racial ideology, its very appeal to Whites, indicates the partial breakdown of White supremacy and the rise of the conflicted and divided Whiteness I am discussing here. The United States is still a White nation, but not nearly so much anymore. Today, Whites too have to consider their dual identities: an American, a White, two nervous souls. And in some places they’re already a minority themselves: California, New York City, New Mexico, indeed Texas are now majority non-White, and the whole country is trending that way: “Shortly after 2050, experts predict, America will no longer be a majority white country—with consequences for our economics, our politics, and our culture that we cannot fully anticipate” (Obama 2006, p. 232).¹⁰

How did this emerging White racial dualism affect Obama’s campaign? He had to navigate within it, operating in a whole new way. Despite early charges that he was insufficiently Black (Dickerson 2007), he steadily upheld his Blackness. Michelle helped a lot in that department, and any serious observer willing to read his books also had to draw that conclusion.¹¹

Steering through the shoals and reefs of “double consciousness,” though, was a central issue, perhaps the primary issue, of the 2008 electoral campaign. But before we consider in a bit more detail the course Obama steered, take a look at those reefs! There’s the Bill Clinton reef, the one that dismissed him after South Carolina as the “Black candidate,” in the Jesse Jackson mold. There’s the Islamophobia reef (the turban picture, the madrassa charge, the stressing of his middle name). There’s the anti-Semitism reef (repudiate Farrakhan! denounce Palestinian terror! stand up for Israel!). There’s a Black nationalism reef (Jeremiah Wright) and a Black-left reef (Reed 2008; Ford 2008), whose main criticism—although it was usually not expressed this forthrightly—was that Obama was “Tom-ing.” So lots of Whites and a few Blacks went after Obama, rightists (mainly) but also some leftists. He steered through the channel, trying not to run aground, trying to appeal to voters who are not ruled by fear or resentment.¹²

Realignment and Race

Various commentators have argued that the 2008 election may have reshaped mainstream electoral politics. That year may prove to be a “realigning” year; it is still too soon to know, but it’s possible. Lacking any predictive or prescriptive powers, I can still affirm that realignment will require the establishment of a mass Democratic base that is “majority-minority.” Considerably more responsive to the “rising tide of color” among the U.S. working classes than their rivals the Republicans, the Democrats under Obama must move along class lines to intervene in the deepening economic crisis. This means undertaking significant social investment (O’Connor 1973), which will then boost social mobility (“I believe in spreading the wealth around,” as Obama told Joe the Plumber), and this will push the realignment agenda forward.

Any realignment will be helped considerably by the Republicans, who remain in thrall to their Christian right/White base. The Republican Party is the White party. It attracts tiny percentages of Black voters, and way fewer Latinos than it attracted even in 2004, despite tremendous residual cultural conservatism and fierce religiosity in both communities. The GOP still has some Cuban Americans and a token conservative of color or two, maybe some Asian Americans uncomfortable with their lingering racial otherness. But basically it’s a restricted scene, like some suburban golf club, only lower status. Greenwich, Connecticut, and La Jolla, California, went for the Democrats on November 4.

Obama and Racial Identity

“Obama doesn’t just complete the civil rights movement; in some ways, he reinvents it,” columnist Errol Louis wrote (Louis 2008). Obama’s victory is unarguably a consequence of the Black movement. In a general sense, his politics are those of the “new social movements” of the 1960s. With respect to civil rights, his stated commitments are quite strong.¹³ As a supporter of women’s rights and as an anti-imperialist—the two other pillars that along with antiracism uphold the politics of the 1960s—his credentials are weaker.¹⁴

His management of his own racial identity during the campaign tells us a great deal about his complicated relationship with those political currents. During the campaign (perhaps the most highly racialized national election in American history, with the possible exception of the 1860 election), he approached race in an entirely new way; he *recognized the contradictions*. To quote some now familiar lines:

I can no more disown [Reverend Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe (Obama 2008).

Yes, in mid-March 2008, Obama still sought dialogue with the Black radicalism and nationalism that necessarily and logically maintains strong roots in ghettos (and in Black middle-class enclaves) across the United States (Dawson 2001). He disapproved, he admonished, but he also recognized the roots of that anger. In fact he explained it as a generational phenomenon (“the Joshua generation”). He refused at first to spank Reverend Wright when the preacher’s provocative video went viral, settling for mere disagreement instead. Later, when Wright persisted, Obama did disown him. And in regard to Whites—his White grandmother no less—he is sometimes wary (he “cringes,” for example), but he is also accepting. Overall though, the Philadelphia speech provided the nation with a Lincolnish sort of lesson, as Garry Wills (2008) has pointed out, an advanced message on race and democracy.

Obama’s election may be seen as the long-awaited reversal of Nixon’s 1968 election and an attempted repudiation of “Nixonland” (Perlstein 2008b), the polarizing and vituperative political style pioneered in that year. Nixon owed his narrow victory to his harnessing of racial reaction and “backlash.” His “southern strategy” (Phillips 1969) cut the link—already attenuated after the New Deal (Weiss 1983)—between the Republican Party and its historical associations with Abraham Lincoln, abolitionism, and Reconstruction. Nixon inaugurated the reign of the New Right and the neocons, turning not only to the right but also to the White. Now Obama’s election discredits that racial regime, overcoming the legacy not only of Wallace and Nixon but also of Reagan and the two Bushes, of Lee Atwater and Karl Rove. Obama operates both as an “authentic” Black man and an inheritor of the Black movement’s mantle, and simultaneously takes advantage of the “majority-minority” demographic trend and White racial dualism. He gains substantial majorities among “voters of color” (near unanimity among Blacks), and recuperates a good-sized portion of the White vote. Thus, he represents a possible new “majority-minority” electoral coalition, something that might have staying power. In the longer view, Obama’s election

is a result of the post–World War II racial “break” in both U.S. and global racial politics that I have analyzed elsewhere (Winant 2001).

EXECUTIVE POWER AND THE MANAGEMENT OF A RACIAL REGIME

In respect to race, the United States is an incomplete democracy. Racial oppression was key to organizing both state and society. Today, after slavery, anticolonial revolution, conquest (of indigenous peoples, the Southwest, and other people and places) civil war, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the post–World War II journey, through racial reform and backlash, after all that, the economy, the political system, and the national culture are necessarily structured in significant ways by race. Despite civil rights reforms and limited desegregation, a great deal of inequality and informal, regrooved “American apartheid” persists. Obama cannot possibly demolish this “structural racism,” but he can work to diminish it and to transform it.

Realistically speaking, sisters and brothers, to overcome this racial system would involve profound and tumultuous change, revolutionary change. Even the Civil War and Reconstruction—which Du Bois ([1935] 1977) designated as the second phase of the American Revolution—did not overturn the structural racism of their epoch. These were huge and bloody events, but not huge enough for that purpose; Obama’s election, important as it is, remains a “normal” event. The products of centuries of accumulated injustice and inequality, the accreted inequalities and indignities generated by U.S. (and global) racism will remain central for both the United States and the planet long after Obama’s term has ended.

Yet it is possible both to reduce and to transform structural racism. It is possible to lead the United States (and indirectly, the world at large) toward a racial system that honors rather than abhors racial difference, that is more deeply democratic and less profoundly despotic. To do this will require addressing race openly, recognizing its conflicts and contradictions, as Obama did in his March 14, 2008, speech, “A More Perfect Union,” and occasionally on the campaign trail:

What they’re going to try to do is make you scared of me. You know, he’s not patriotic enough. He’s got a funny name. You know, he doesn’t look like all those other presidents on those dollar bills, you know. He’s risky.

This Obama, who told the truth about himself in the nearly all-White town of Union, Missouri (July 30, 2008), rejects the fear and the racist strategies that currently dominate much of White America.

In reaction to the election, frequent announcements were made that the United States is now “beyond race” (Fournier 2008; Williams 2008; Swarns 2008); this position resembles neoconservative claims that in the post–civil rights era the country is now “color-blind.”¹⁵ But the idea that the United States can move “beyond race” is vacuous, and the related idea that the concept is too enmeshed in misconception and too subject to manipulation to be useful succumbs to hopelessness and despair. No avoidance is admissible: we remain a society where the median Black family possesses about *one-twelfth* of the median White family’s wealth (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006), where more than 12 million (mainly Latinos/as) are undocumented (Passel 2006), where an estimated 4 million cases of housing discrimination occur every year (National Fair Housing Alliance 2008; White and Shy, 2002; Gannett News Service 2007), where Black unemployment rates are double those of Whites, and where Black college graduates can expect to earn about the same pay as White

high school graduates.¹⁶ It will take more than a presidential election, however momentous, to change those patterns. More than charismatic leadership will be needed to overcome a system of inequality and injustice that is so deeply woven into the national social fabric.

Indeed, any list of the racial illnesses that afflict us will remain incomplete. Here are more: incarceration, profiling, homelessness, medical racism, anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism, electoral disenfranchisement.¹⁷ Structural racism is neither about beliefs nor even about actions directed at those considered racially different (meaning in general those not considered White). No, structural racism is about the accretion of inequality and injustice *in practice*; it's about the way things work, regardless of the reasons why; it's about outcomes, not intentions nor beliefs. So if vast inequalities in wealth persist across racial lines, for example, they may persist not because White people presently intend to impoverish Black or Brown people; they may persist because of years and years of some people doing better than others do. Inequality accumulates; injustice becomes normal; they come to be taken for granted.

Think of the game Monopoly. The players start out equal, right? Everyone has two \$500s, five \$100s, and so on. But by the end of the game, one player has a monopoly: one owns all the property, and the other players are so mortgaged up, so much in debt, that they can no longer play. So the game ends: there are winners and losers. And then what happens? They put all the stuff back in the box. When they play Monopoly the next time, everyone starts out equal again.

Well, you can see where I'm going with this. Imagine a game of Monopoly as a generation in your life, or a full lifetime for that matter. What if when the game ends the winner could keep Boardwalk, Park Place, Marvin Gardens, and all the rest while the losers just stay in debt? If the next game begins where the last one ended, what would be the losers' chances (the next generation's chances)? What if the next game also begins where the last one ended? And the next and the next? Structural racism, and in fact structural inequality of all kinds, works like that. It locks people into their unjust fates.¹⁸

Inequality is both a race problem and a class problem. Since structural racism cannot be done away with, it must be managed. Formidable as it is, it can be reduced, ameliorated by progressive redistribution of resources. At this writing Obama has apparently decided to address inequality by emphasizing class-based approaches. He is no doubt impelled by the tsunami of the current economic crisis and by the requirements of launching his administration with the broadest possible popular support. With this approach to executive power, he is following the precedents of past waves of domestic reformism (the Progressive Era, the New Deal, the Great Society). He is likely correct in expecting that Black and Brown SES will improve by reducing general inequality, creating jobs, making social investments, and so on. Since winning the election Obama has made only passing reference to race issues; he has had much more to say about class.¹⁹

What if the Obama administration merely undertakes more and better enforcement of existing civil rights laws? His campaign positions and books called for such policies, hardly radical measures. Yet even enforcing the existing civil rights laws would represent a challenge to institutionalized discrimination, if carried out. To be sure, seriously enforcing existing law would be a herculean task, given that most remedies for discrimination are civil, not criminal (Lieberman 1998). Yet confronting racial inequality and injustice—antiracism—has gained new interest and legitimacy as a result of his election. Much of the confrontation the nation has to have with structural racism is cultural: in everyday experience and in organized political and cultural life *noticing* race and respecting racial difference is a kind of “creative

action,” if it remains democratic; this is another pragmatist lesson (Joas 1996). We might borrow from Durkheim to say that both in mainstream cultural venues and in everyday life a new “effervescence” is apparent, especially in popular initiatives to identify and oppose racism, to “sit at the welcome table,” so to speak. These initiatives cross the “color line” to some extent; they “lift the veil.”

This is the impulse Danielle Allen (2004) has described as “talking to strangers,” practicing civic trust in a self-aware fashion, which brings us back to the theme of racial pragmatism, of “practical idealism” vis-à-vis race. Allen has no illusion that race will be overcome or that a “color-blind” United States is possible. Rather, she argues that trust and dialogue across the lines of conflicting interest—most especially in her view, racial lines—are central dimensions of citizenship and democracy. Thus far the risky task of trusting those on the other side of the color line has largely fallen to people of color, often “everyday people” who have time and again found ways to make sacrifices in service, not only to their own oppressed groups but also to their country as a whole. Often, too, sacrifice has been the work of movement folk who have risked their lives and comforts in pursuit of democracy and justice.

The success of Obama’s administration will depend to a significant extent on its ability to support and foster such action, to extend and deepen the movement, to invoke “the better angels of our nature,” not merely in rhetoric but also in action. Obama’s approach to racial governance remains poised between pressures to sustain structural racism and opportunities to undermine and undo it, often presented “from below” by social movements and by “everyday people.”

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Obama’s U.S. political coalition, or “power bloc,” cuts across race and class lines. Assuming the presidency after the unmitigated disaster of the Bush II years, Obama inherits enormous problems of domestic policy: heightened social inequality and the conflicts it entails, the breakdown of the antistatist and predatory capitalist economic policies put in place under Reagan (“Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.”), institutional and infrastructural disarray, abandonment of the commons and the public sphere, the general decay of social bonds. . . This list could be greatly extended.

Yet political advantages emerge from this situation. Electoral coalitions do not disappear after Election Day; they must be translated into governing coalitions. This means developing policies in their interest, of course, but it also means combining what could be widely disparate policy initiatives into a coherent overall synthesis. Obama is moving in that direction, arguing that U.S. prosperity and even survival are dependent on the country’s making an intensive commitment to reinventing its mode of production as a “knowledge economy.” Such an approach would echo the New Deal in its social investment components (O’Connor 1973) but would differ in its explicitly post-industrial content (Block 2005). It would benefit the working classes, mainly in education and health care but also in job creation, infrastructure rebuilding, increased access to the Internet, and the development of a “green economy” (Jones 2008). It would benefit capital by socializing many of the costs of the reproduction of labor—notably training and the provision of job skills—but also, very crucially, by socializing the costs of health care. Dispensing with work-related health insurance (the result of an uneasy compromise between big labor and big industry in the late 1940s) would free companies such as General Motors from the impossible situation of being “a health insurance company that makes cars” while simultaneously offering reliable health insurance to

working people and, for the first time, the poor. Though such a domestic policy synthesis would undoubtedly represent major gains for both the popular strata and the corporate elite, it would also involve Obama supporters in compromises, if not capitulations, of their own. Notably, single-payer, government-run health insurance seems to be as far “off the table” for Obama as it was for the Clintons, no doubt because the insurance “industry” occupies a seat at that table of Obama’s backers in the finance-capital sector. Other parallel compromises (or “sellouts”) might be expected in such areas as trade policy and military industrialism. Overall, building a “knowledge economy” would permit the reorganization of capital and the reintegration of a substantial portion of the working classes, enhancing U.S. competitiveness in global markets, reducing social conflict (including racial tensions), and potentially consolidating a hegemonic electoral base not unlike the New Deal coalition forged by Franklin Roosevelt.²⁰

Here I merely summarize the three main components of Obama’s domestic political coalition.

Obama’s “Enlightened” Capitalist Base

Bush’s abandonment of collective capitalist interests in favor of the most predatory, violent, and ecologically wasteful sectors of the corporate elite has divided what was previously a fairly united and consensual ruling class. Finance capital, which until recently was the dominant force in the domestic economy (and to some extent, the global economy; see below), is in particular disarray; regional differences have also been exacerbated; and manufacturing, or the old-line industrial sector, is in deep trouble. In this situation, numerous “enlightened” capitalists have thrown in their lot with Obama, recognizing the need for increased state regulation and more effective postindustrial policy making, as well as the need for heightened political stability.²¹

Obama’s Popular Base

That brings up the other big component of the Obama coalition: the working classes. For now, let’s use that plural term loosely, merging it with mainstream parlance: “the middle class.”²² Readers of the *Du Bois Review* do not need to be reminded about the impoverished state of the U.S. discourse on class. They should remember, though, that the working classes are becoming less and less White. If any reincorporation of the popular strata into a new and more inclusive hegemonic regime is to be achieved, a very important component of the domestic policies required will be capital’s abandonment—or at least its significant diminution—of the racial “divide and rule” strategies that have shaped the U.S. political economy for a very long time. Obama is particularly well suited to the task of obtaining the loyalty (or, as his left-wing critics might say, reinforcing the subordination) of the popular strata. The shrewder sectors of the U.S. bourgeoisie certainly recognize that the nation’s working classes—on whom they still depend not only for labor but also for consumption—are on the verge of a transition to a “majority-minority” demographic.

As of this writing, only the outlines of Obama’s domestic policies are visible, and his administration’s priorities remain unclear. Certainly important sectors of his coalition will demand “green collar” jobs and jobs from infrastructure rebuilding, mortgage renegotiation assistance, and the Employee Free Choice Act. What about other measures linked to movement demands, for example the Freedom of Choice Act?²³ What about renewing executive commitments to civil rights, largely lapsed since Lyndon B. Johnson?²⁴ The Fair Housing Act of 1968 has never seriously been enforced. What would be the racial consequences of ending racial steering, informal

redlining, and the many other effective taxes on non-White skin that continue to operate with virtual impunity in the twenty-first-century United States?

The Movement Factor

What about social movements during Obama's term? The potential for mobilization is there. Obama's campaign will assume office with a very substantial and well-organized base; is it merely left over from the campaign, or is it a potential popular movement of its own? How available for mobilization is it? No other recent president, perhaps none since Andrew Jackson, disposed of such a powerful following as Obama possesses at the dawn of his administration, not even Franklin Roosevelt, who came to office after Herbert Hoover had used the military to disperse the "Bonus Army" in July 1932 and who confronted the mass movements of his time as oppositions he had to accommodate, including the Townsend movement, the industrial union movement, various populist initiatives, the 1934 EPIC movement in California, and the organized left of that era.

Accommodating such movements might be Obama's fate as well. Despite his rhetoric of civic action ("We are the ones we have been waiting for"), Obama has so far limited his proposals to youth-oriented community service schemes, teacher training, and the like. He has not yet sought to activate the tremendous network that worked to get him elected, this time on a "community organization" basis. At the same time, there is a welter of popular movements and organizations out there, self-activated and tempered by years of anti-Bush experience. They will not take kindly to much foot dragging by the new president on such issues as war and peace in Iraq (on Afghanistan, see below), nor to compromises on abortion, torture, health care, and so on.

On the stump and in his books as well, Obama has laid out a progressive political program, concentrating on the domestic sphere. It remains to be seen how much he can implement it and what role social movements will play, either those entirely self-activated or those summoned by him. Social-movement pressure could push Obama toward the left and activate his racial-justice circuitry. Alternatively, any significant stalemate of his domestic policy agenda—from Congress or conceivably from the Supreme Court—could impel him to mobilize his troops.

GLOBAL POLITICS

Obama's popularity abroad is not unwarranted. To be sure, it derives in large measure from sources relatively unrelated to his potential policies. His Blackness is a major point of attraction in itself. While the post-World War II United States has squandered its democratic credentials and credibility via its imperial activities in Vietnam, Iran, the Congo, Palestine, Central America—it's a long list—African American politics (especially movement politics) has largely retained its international prestige.²⁵ Obama's connections to Kenya and Indonesia also play well: never before could an American president so credibly assert his familiarity with the global South.

His foreign policy orientation certainly reflects those connections. In his autobiography, Obama deals at length with the portion of his childhood spent in Indonesia and with his journey to Kenya to meet his father's family. In his writings on foreign policy, Obama stresses "soft" power, although he stops short of repudiating "hard" alternatives. Recognizing the crack-up of neoliberalism and the global dimen-

sions of the civil rights legacy, he links anti-Americanism, in general, and terrorism, in particular, to poverty and hopelessness among the world's poor. Strongly echoing the later Martin Luther King, Jr.,²⁶ he castigates structural adjustment policies and criticizes their chief enforcers, the Armani-clad thugs at the IMF and World Bank (and thus the United States, which maintains veto power over those organizations' policies). While taking his distance from the Iraq war and the generally antidemocratic record of the United States as a superpower—its involvement in the 1965 Indonesia coup and subsequent bloodbath come strongly to mind here (Roosa 2006; Anderson and McVey, 1971)—Obama does not repudiate superpower status. There's "no escape" from that position, he says, and no justification for failing to act in self-defense. Indeed even "preemptive war" might be justifiable, if you "really have the goods" on a threat to the nation. So that's the "hard-power" fallback position.

He has apparently locked himself into war in Afghanistan; this is a disaster in the making. Obama's "movement" ties are at their weakest here, in foreign affairs. His political forebears, from Martin Luther King, Jr., to SNCC to Malcolm X, opposed interventionism and "third world" counterinsurgency wars. To embrace such a war, renamed the "war on terror," as opposed to adopting a policy of intelligence, diplomacy, development assistance, and policing under international law, is a recipe for failure. Counterinsurgency wars are not only a series of atrocities visited upon poor people, on civilians; they are not only, almost by definition, a sort of ongoing, unfolding, massive violation of human rights. They are also losing propositions. Quick! Name three "successful" counterinsurgencies (that is, from the imperial point of view of Washington, London, or Paris). And Obama now proposes to defeat the Taliban and conquer Afghanistan? This is a trick nobody has pulled off since Alexander, if I am not mistaken. To the quagmire in the jungle (Vietnam) and the quagmire in the desert (Iraq), are we now to add a quagmire in the mountains?

Obama may be compensating for a perceived lack of toughness on the "national security" side. This resembles the "toughness" shenanigans of centrist Democrats, like those associated with the Democratic Leadership Council—in other words, Clinton territory. Hillary Clinton also took hawkish stances, after all. Obama may just be buying time while he deals with the economic crisis, especially in the domestic arena. Still, allowing political exigencies to dictate foreign/military policy and adopting his predecessor's war stand in sharp contrast to the pragmatic and realistic progressivism he upholds domestically. He may be going over to the dark side here.

CONCLUSION: JUST DO IT

These have been some notes—inelegant and schematic to be sure—about Barack Obama's approach to the political transition he seeks to lead. The new president is a realist and a real pragmatist. He is progressive and generally democratic (small d), both a child of the Black movement and a preternaturally talented and successful mainstream politician. His campaign for the presidency, while not flawless, was quite magnificent. It successfully harnessed the energies of a variegated array of progressive and reform-oriented social movements, combining those largely oppositional and egalitarian currents with mainstream political, corporate, and technocratic elements—"enlightened elites," let us call them—that were interested in crafting a new form of U.S. hegemony. Hegemony works, as Gramsci (1971, p. 182) argued, by

incorporating opposition. By contrast, opposition works—in a nonrevolutionary situation, which this certainly is—by raising the price of its incorporation as high as possible (Piven 2006). Obama's racial pragmatism, his "practical idealism," his deep immersion in and analysis of the "double consciousness" that a skilled Black leader experiences in the twenty-first-century United States have led him to seek—and perhaps find—a political territory where strategic unity may be forged between the two ostensibly different components of his coalition.

During the election, many felt this triumph was out of reach; numerous academic experts doubted that an African American could win the presidency. Other progressives supported Obama grudgingly, fearing the very success of an African American would somehow damage the cause of racial justice or inevitably lead to a "sellout." Still others, overwhelmed by the symbolic significance of Obama's election, more or less blissed out, abandoning political analysis and activism. All these reactions, while quite intelligible, fail to do justice to the political vision that secured this victory. Obama's achievement is many things, but above all it is a political initiative of electrifying possibilities.

Obama's presidency ends the forty-year epoch of reactionary rule that began with the election of Nixon, was consolidated under Reagan, and met its demise only under Bush II. Operating as a strategically crafted racial regime, the mainly Republican rule of the past four decades managed the transition from an overt and largely avowed (or taken-for-granted) White supremacy that ran both the United States and the planet until World War II, to the covert and largely disavowed White supremacy that governed after the ambiguous triumph of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s. That epoch—largely Republican-dominated after 1968—was characterized by state-led expropriation and violence against the most vulnerable social groups, both at home and across the globe. The self-destruction of that regime has produced a wide-ranging crisis: economic, sociopolitical, and ecological. Planetary survival is at stake: not only are we threatening ourselves by destroying our environment but we are also "constitutionally" threatened, so to speak. The permanent "state of exception" (Agamben 2005, 1998)—the "necropolitical" model of rule (Mbembe 2001) that presumes a state of unfreedom potentially exceeding the most inhumane and absolutist practices of the past—reached its peak only in the administration of Bush II.

The "state of exception" in the twenty-first century is a racial regime par excellence. Its crisis demonstrates that embattled hegemonies demonize their oppositions. The standard tactic is to rely upon racial (and religious) differences to unify supporters and to stigmatize critics: you're either with us or against us, a loyal subject or a "terrorist." This tactic retains some effectiveness, especially during "wartime," but it is now weakened; it is failing in practice. Obama's voters in the United States and supporters around the world now aspire to a government that will combine the support of the working classes and the poor with that of a newly vulnerable "enlightened elite" that seeks the legitimation and political stability only democracy can provide.

After the nightmare of Bush II's authoritarian and greedhead regime, we now face a still uncertain but real alternative with the election of President Obama. The new president was elected on the premise of *change*, a sanitized term for democratization and egalitarianism. He takes office poised between two possibilities: first, the prospect of radical reform, greater popular participation and deeper democracy, progressive redistribution of resources and greater social justice; and second, the real threat that popular aspirations both in the United States and abroad will be crushed by "normal politics," by business as usual. Obama was elected because he seemed

able to unite the ideal and the practical. It is now up to us to make that once desperate hope a concrete reality.

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NOTES

1. Thanks to Devon Carbado, Michael Hanchard, Michael Omi, and Frances Fox Piven for their incisive comments.
2. This is visible in more porous borders and permanent migration, extensive transnationalization of capital, increasingly diasporized racial/ethnic identities, rising regional integration on a world scale, transnational citizenship, and many other phenomena too numerous to list.
3. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama writes:

Moreover, while my own upbringing hardly typifies the African American experience—and although, largely through luck and circumstance, I now occupy a position that insulates me from most of the bumps and bruises that the average black man must endure—I can recite the usual litany of petty slights that during my forty-five years have been directed my way: security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason. I know what it's like to have people tell me I can't do something because of my color, and I know the bitter swirl of swallowed-back anger. I know as well that Michelle and I must be continually vigilant against some of the debilitating story lines that our daughters may absorb—from TV and music and friends and the streets—about who the world thinks they are, and what the world imagines they should be.

To think clearly about race, then, requires us to see the world on a split screen—to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair. I have witnessed a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature. When I hear some in the black community deny those changes, I think it not only dishonors those who struggled on our behalf but also robs us of our agency to complete the work they began. But as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn't good enough (Obama 2006, p. 233).

4. Obama used this phrase in his September 2007 convocation address at Howard University:

Everyone in this room stands on the shoulders of many Moseses. They are the courageous men and women who marched and fought and bled for the rights and freedoms we enjoy today. They have taken us many miles over an impossible journey. But you are members of the Joshua Generation. And it is now up to you to finish the work that they began. It is up to you to cross the river.

5. Mead's concept of self recognizes that creating and managing one's own self occurs under a formidable series of constraints; it is a sporadic and never completed process; and it involves internalizing a great deal of the outside world, the "others." Yet some basic aspect of this process involves the recognition of an "I": never completely present, this nominative aspect of the self is still "in charge," managing, navigating, not only in the social world but also in the inner, inculturated, socialized world that is within the head and heart of each individual. My crude summation here denies Mead his due as a complex sociological theorist and philosopher of the mind. It also glosses over the vast literature that has developed in this area. For a sampling of other key work, see Perinbanayagam (1985); Blumer (1958); Margolis (2002). For a valuable treatment of the contradictions of the political subject, see Butler (1997).
6. This notion of "voice"—i.e., political voice—has some overlap with Albert Hirschman's ([1970] 2004) idea, though it is obviously more general and philosophical. In the absence of an adequate discussion, let's equate the two in a tentative fashion.

7. “I still burn . . . with the thought of my one loss in politics, a drubbing in 2000 at the hands of incumbent Democratic Congressman Bobby Rush” (Obama 2006, p. 105).
8. Some of the text here appeared previously in Winant (2008b).
9. An anecdote, possibly apocryphal, posted at one of the most reliable electoral Web sites, FiveThirtyEight.com:

So a canvasser goes to a woman’s door in Washington, Pennsylvania. Knocks. Woman answers. Knocker asks who she’s planning to vote for. She isn’t sure, has to ask her husband who she’s voting for. Husband is off in another room watching some game. Canvasser hears him yell back, “We’re votin’ for the n***er!”

Woman turns back to canvasser, and says brightly and matter of factly: “We’re voting for the n***er” (FiveThirtyEight.com 2008).

10. A more recent Census Bureau projection of the transition to a “majority-minority” United States locates it in the year 2042. See U.S. Census Bureau (2008).
11. Of course, what constitutes “affirming” one’s Blackness? Is this merely a new version of the “authenticity” arguments rooted in the 1960s?
12. Some of the text in this section appeared previously in Winant (2008b).
13. Some examples from Obama’s remarks during his convocation address at Howard University:

From the day I take office as President, America will have a Justice Department that is truly dedicated to the work it began in the days after Little Rock. I will rid the department of ideologues and political cronies, and for the first time in eight years, the Civil Rights Division will actually be staffed with civil rights lawyers who prosecute civil rights violations, and employment discrimination, and hate crimes. And we’ll have a Voting Rights Section that actually defends the right of every American to vote without deception or intimidation. When flyers are placed in our neighborhoods telling people to vote on the wrong day, that won’t only be an injustice, it will be a crime.

As President, I will also work every day to ensure that this country has a criminal justice system that inspires trust and confidence in every American, regardless of age, or race, or background. There’s no reason that every single person accused of a crime shouldn’t have a qualified public attorney to defend them. We’ll recruit more public defenders to the profession by forgiving college and law school loans—and I will ask some of the brilliant minds here at Howard to take advantage of that offer. There’s also no reason we can’t pass a racial profiling law like I did in Illinois, or encourage states to reform the death penalty so that innocent people do not end up on death row.

When I’m President, we will no longer accept the false choice between being tough on crime and vigilant in our pursuit of justice. Dr. King said it’s not either-or, it’s both-and. We can have a crime policy that’s both tough and smart. If you’re convicted of a crime involving drugs, of course you should be punished. But let’s not make the punishment for crack cocaine that much more severe than the punishment for powder cocaine when the real difference between the two is the skin color of the people using them. Judges think that’s wrong. Republicans think that’s wrong. Democrats think that’s wrong, and yet it’s been approved by Republican and Democratic Presidents because no one has been willing to brave the politics and make it right. That will end when I am President (Obama 2007).

14. He has hedged slightly on abortion rights; has never endorsed the right of gays to marry; has never defended his main opponent, Hillary Clinton, against the sexism she faced; and, with the important exception of declaring his opposition to the *Ledbetter* decision, has not yet incorporated women’s issues into his emerging domestic program. On the (anti-)imperialism front, see the section “Global Politics.”
15. To be sure, there are also various “color-blind” advocates who consider themselves on the left. See Kahlenberg (1996); Wilson (1999, 1978); for a useful critique, see Brown et al. (2003).
16. Indeed, by almost every conceivable indicator that researchers can bring forward, the same racial inequalities—the same structural racism—that existed in the past continue today, modified here and there, perhaps, but hardly eliminated and not even much reduced in scope. Here I can only hint at the vast range of data available, but for what it’s worth: O’Connor et al. (2001) provide good overview material. On residential segrega-

tion, see Iceland and Weinberg (2002); Massey (2001); Massey and Denton (1993). On incarceration, see Mauer (2006). On educational segregation, see Orfield (2001). On workplace segregation, see Hellerstein and Neumark (2005). On Black-White economic inequality, see Oliver and Shapiro (2006). On racial attitudes and racial politics, see Bobo (2001); Dawson (2001); Kinder and Sanders (1996).

17. On profiling, see Carbado (2002). On race and health, see Washington (2007); Williams (2001). On anti-Muslim/anti-Arab racism, see Gottschalk and Greenberg (2007); El Fadl (2004). On disenfranchisement, see Overton (2007); Manza and Uggen (2007).
18. The preceding two paragraphs are extracts from Winant (2008a).
19. This recalls Derrick Bell's "interest-convergence hypothesis." According to Bell, no meaningful racial reform can occur, unless it is also in the interests of Whites. See Bell (1980, 2004).

It bears repeating that both race and class are constructed categories, valuable for analytic purposes but not real entities. In concrete situations, it is frequently not possible to discern their boundaries or distinguish them from one another. Is a laid-off Black or Brown worker unemployed for class or race reasons? When a wealthy White stockbroker lies on a Caribbean beach, is he exercising his class- or race-based advantages?

20. But this time no sordid collaboration with the former slavocratic South will be required. This time the South (and some other residual areas in the mountain West, say Idaho and Utah) will be left to the Republicans, the White people's party, rather than incorporated and given veto power as they were perforce under Franklin Roosevelt. This time, Du Bois's 1935 judgment that "a solid bloc of reaction in the South can always be depended upon to unite with Northern conservatism to elect a president" may at last be superseded. Indeed, consider Du Bois's argument that the path to social justice in the United States and the world at large remained blocked by the Dixiecrat South:

A clear vision of a world without inordinate individual wealth, of capital without profit, and of income based on work alone, is the path out, not only for America but for all men [*sic*]. Across this path stands the South with a flaming sword (Du Bois [1935] 1977, pp. 706–707).

Note that Obama cracked the "solid South," winning North Carolina, Virginia, and Florida.

21. This invokes a large literature on capitalist-class fractures, "regulation" theory, and macroeconomic policy, all of it beyond my present scope. See, among others, O'Connor (1973); Habermas (1975); Aglietta (1979).
22. Although Obama's popular constituency undoubtedly includes the poor, and particularly the Black poor, he did not emphasize issues of poverty in his campaign to the extent the ill-fated John Edwards campaign did. Beyond the obvious moves—for example, denouncing Bush II administration's dereliction in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—Obama has directed his attention toward working-class, not "underclass," strata. He has expressed concern for "low-skilled workers in the rapidly growing service sector," for whom the "basic promise" of being able to make ends meet if one works hard is not being fulfilled (Obama 2006, p. 180). But he has not articulated a specifically antipoverty agenda.
23. "The first thing I'd do as president is sign the Freedom of Choice Act. That's the first thing that I'd do" (then-Senator Barack Obama, speaking to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, July 17, 2007).
24. This holds true even for Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Jimmy Carter probably did more for civil rights as governor of Georgia than he did as a single-term president. Bill Clinton raised great hopes with his "Presidential Initiative on Race" but then betrayed them with a policy of "all talk, no action"—dubbed by Stephen Steinberg as "the politics of yakety-yak" (Steinberg 2007). Because neither Democratic president actively sought to undo civil rights laws, or the limited enforcement powers they provided—which all Republican presidents since Nixon have done—Carter's and Clinton's antiracist policies may be described as "benign neglect."
25. A growing literature explores the links between U.S. domestic racial politics and global anti-imperialist politics in the post-World War II period. See for example Plummer (2003); Dudziak (2000); Borstelmann (2003); Horne (1986).
26. Which is to say, informed by the legacies of SNCC and Malcolm X, as well as the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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