

From 'Keep on pushing' to 'Only in America': Racial symbolism and the Obama campaign

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“From ‘Keep on Pushing’ to ‘Only in America’: Racial Symbolism and the Obama Campaign”

When a then relatively unknown Barack Obama strode onto the stage at the 2004 Democratic National Convention to deliver a keynote address, he did so to the strains of Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions’ Civil Rights anthem “Keep on Pushing.” This was a nice, if somewhat predictable, touch, one that drew a bright, white line from Obama to the Civil Rights Movement that made his meteoric rise possible. Though only the music remained in that rendition, it is worth recalling the lyrical content:

A great big stone wall
Stands there ahead of me
But I've got my pride
And I'll move on aside
And keep on pushin’

In 2008 as Obama concluded the speech accepting his party’s Presidential nomination, a very different anthem rang out. This time the speakers blared Brooks and Dunn’s “Only in America.” From the album *Steers and Stripes*, the song insists:

Only in America
Dreaming in red, white and blue
Only in America
Where we dream as big as we want to
We all get a chance
Everybody gets to dance

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Only in America

Aside from its effective, if crude, message, the song was also rife with political symbolism since Brooks and Dunn had performed it at George W. Bush’s 2000 inauguration. Shortly thereafter, it became a post-9/11 anthem, spending 18 or 19 weeks in the Country Top Ten, on the strength of its first line: “Sun coming up over New York City.”¹

In four short years, the Obama theme had morphed from “Keep on Pushing” to “Only in America,” a shift that lends insight into the way the Obama campaign navigated U.S. racial politics. Where the Impressions sing of climbing over a wall armed with pride and determination, Brooks and Dunn insist that everyone can have the American dream as long we “[dream] in red, white and blue.” The 2004 Obama soundtrack reminded us that historically black Americans have had to wrest their rights from a nation that has brutally and systematically disenfranchised them. The 2008 soundtrack claimed that anybody, even the half Kenyan, half Kansan man with the “funny name” could be president. The audacity of adopting the Brooks and Dunn anthem made the point. The Obama family could stand on a stage serenaded by good old boys just as easily as the Bush family could. And under the fading Denver light, they did.

Really, the packaging of Obama as *uber*-patriot should have been harder than it was. His opponent John McCain was a decorated war hero who’d been a prisoner of war in Viet Nam. Of all the cards in his hand, this was McCain’s strongest. And yet

¹ Chris Willman, “Only in America’ Could Obama Borrow the GOP’s Favorite Brooks & Dunn Song”, 2008), 30 May 2009.

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the Obama campaign cannily used the American flag to undermine that advantage. At major campaign events: the race speech at Constitution Hall, the acceptance speech at Mile High Stadium, Obama appeared with flag stands on either side of his podium – in Denver, he upped the ante by doubling the flags to four – cementing the impression that Obama was a statesman and a patriot. By contrast, McCain’s indoor campaign appearances propped him in front of a green, sometimes blue, backdrop with the slogan “A Leader We Can Believe In” and his website address. It’s not that American flags weren’t present; they were. Huge mounted flags usually flanked the backdrop, but the McCain campaign seemed not to understand the composition of television close-ups, which inevitably cropped out the flags. The Obama campaign, by contrast, positioned smaller flags so close to the candidate’s podium that they literally outlined him as far as the eye could see and the camera could pan. So masterful was this stroke that Conservative commentators sniped about the fact that Obama was prematurely laying claim to presidential iconography.

Flag waving aside, the Obama campaign also used his racial identity to their advantage, turning what were obvious deficits – his Kenyan father, his Muslim grandfather, his semetic middle name Hussein – into “no go zones” by branding those who would raise these issues as bigots. When Conservative talk radio host Bill Cunningham underscored Obama’s middle name at a McCain rally as proof that Obama would want to meet with “world leaders who want to kill us,” McCain was

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forced to publicly repudiate his comments.² Repeatedly putting McCain on the defensive robbed the campaign of precious media time, forcing the campaign to raise Obama’s race in less overt, more sophisticated ways. Obama’s bi-racial, bi-cultural identity actually worked in his favor, becoming a synecdoche for an “up by his bootstraps” personal narrative designed to align him with “ordinary (white) Americans.” The fact that he was raised by a single mother became a testament to his humble beginnings, rather than a symbol of familial dysfunction, as it would have been had his mother been black. Obama pressed this point home, recalling at most campaign rallies how his mother had to battle her health insurance company on her deathbed. This anecdote was particularly effective in a depressed economic climate with millions of uninsured, aligning Obama’s story with the nation’s economic woes.

His bi-racial, bi-national identity also became a living symbol of the nation’s “melting pot” history and an indication that the Civil Rights Movement had done its job. These were points Obama memorably made in his Constitution Hall speech on race. In discussing Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s inflammatory comments, Obama admitted that his former pastor was full of contradictions but declared “I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother” a woman who admitted that she feared black men she saw on the street. He concluded, “These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.” Where one might have understandably linked Wright’s comments with the Modern Civil Rights

² Maeve Reston, ""McCain Condemns Remarks on Obama", "[Los Angeles Times](#) Feb 27, 2008 2008, , sec. Politics: Jul 1, 2009.

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Movement and the structural racism that engendered it, Obama described Wright as mistakenly seeing America as “static.” Where one might read Wright’s condemnation of America as an indication of our unfinished racial agenda, Obama positioned Wright and the tradition out of which he came as relics of the past. Wright’s mistake was in seeing America as “irrevocably bound to a tragic past.” “But,” Obama continued, “what we know – what we have seen – is that America can change.” Embedded within Obama’s “change” mantra was the assertion that electing Obama would prove that America had overcome its racial past. Racial co-existence if not exactly harmony, cooperation instead of conflict, tolerance if not wholesale acceptance, this was the promise so tantalizingly held out by Obama’s frequent assertion that it was time to get past the “old divides.” These divides were linked, in unspoken ways, to the 1960s, rather than the 1760s. Nowhere was this more apparent than during Obama’s Grant Park victory speech. President-elect Obama opened his Grant Park victory speech by saying, “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” Obama invoked the founding fathers as proof of America’s egalitarian past, linking them and him with its egalitarian present, as proven by Obama’s victory.

While the Obama campaign helped de-link whiteness and Americanness, it did so in a climate defining Arabs/Muslims (by this logic interchangeable) as suspicious foreigners. When faced with overt anti-Arab racism, candidate McCain

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was forced to affirm Obama’s “baseball and apple pie” Americanness, but not that of all Arabs. When an elderly woman doubted Obama’s fitness for office at a Minnesota rally, saying he was “an Arab,” McCain corrected her, saying, “No, Ma’am. He’s a decent, family man, citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues.” McCain’s description of Obama as honest, heteronormative and patriotic depended upon implying that Arabs are not. While McCain’s retort garnered pundit praise, his denigration of Arabs flew completely under the mainstream media radar. That is, it went unmentioned until Colin Powell, appearing on *Meet the Press* asked why an Arab was automatically assumed to be an unfit Presidential choice. If the Obama campaign made questioning his patriotism an issue of racism, , it left unchecked the anti-Arab, Islamophobic attitudes that replaced, coincided with or perhaps masked good, old-fashioned anti-black racism.

Instead, the campaign participated, perhaps unwittingly, in a process of branding Arabs and Muslims suspect citizens. Though I would not go so far as to draw a direct causal link between the two processes, I do think they are at least co-dependent; that is, the process of making Obama the quintessential patriot needed as its gauzy backdrop the process that renders Arabs and Muslims subject to detention, surveillance and ultimately rendition. And both processes participated in a racial realignment that I would date back to the 9/11 attacks. On that day, the nation became a homeland, a move that initiated certain ideological and cultural realignments. Citizen/non-citizen and patriot/terrorist binaries were mapped onto one another, such that one’s citizenship determined one’s likely threat to the nation.

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In the days immediately after 9/11, threat assessment became an everyday process of visual demarcation as hate criminals targeted turban-wearing Sikhs whom they equated with Arabs who were collapsed into Muslims in a nonsensical, if dangerous, semantic chain. According to FBI statistics, attacks against Muslims or those perceived to be from the Middle East increased 1600% in 2001 to 481 from just 28 in 2000.³ Hate crimes allow us to document this process of scapegoating racial others, but they do not reveal the more subtle ideological machinations at work in a more wide scale racial realignment. Nowhere is this racial realignment more apparent than in the “war on terror” dramas that emerged after 9/11. *24*, *Sleeper Cell*, *The Unit*, to name just three, animate nativist fears and patriotic conceits simultaneously, and they do so by featuring black men in lead roles. *24* had two black presidents long before President Obama announced his Presidential campaign. *Sleeper Cell* and *The Unit* star black “law and order” men who contrast nicely with Islamic terrorists. In these instances, black is the safe bet, black is the color that lends cover to extreme tactics like torture and rendition.

Now that we have our very own, real life black president, I find myself wondering just how long the taut line between blackness and U.S national identity can hold. How long until the dewy-eyed optimism of American ideals translated through Obama’s bi-racial body will give way to the wide-eyed pragmatism championed so despicably by Dick Cheney and other members of the Bush administration? Will we look back on the Obama era and see it as a “kinder, gentler”

³ Abdus Sattar Ghazali, *Islam and Muslims in the Post-9/11 America* (Modesto, CA: Eagle Enterprises, 2008) 148.

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incarnation of the war on terror, a war that still depends upon the Arab/Muslim outsider for its animating logic? Obama’s recent temporizing on the so-called Torture Memos and the prosecution of those responsible for America’s torture suggest that this is so. I hope not, but in too rapidly shifting ideological soundtracks from “Keep on Pushing,” to “Only in America,” black people might find our anti-racist legacy being used to produce Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners as the true “un-Americans.”

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