

The perils of racial solidarity

Written by Kevin Alexander Gray

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Many familiar black voices, political and otherwise, are on mute. Even The Wall Street Journal's Daniel Henninger asked, "Where were Obama's friends?" in the crescendo of the Jeremiah Wright-Obama falling out.

I agree that the instinct, demand or nudge of racial solidarity, to "shut up" and "be quiet" is the current undertone in the black cultural cosmos. As a warning it reflects the adage, "If you can't say some good, don't say anything at all."

Obama has to navigate race fear and so do black people. We always do. Comedian Jon Stewart jokingly asked Obama if elected, "Will you pull a bait and switch and enslave the white race?" Joking aside, it is precisely the sentiment that underlies white race fear. I've heard the same thing said in seriousness by more than one white person. Comments like, "if Obama [or they] gets the White House what will they [blacks] want next?" or, "if Obama wins blacks will think they're running things or in charge."

So, racial solidarity requires being quiet so as not to confirm or fuel racist whites' race suspicions of Obama. As a caller on one of the radio shows I did in the days after Wright's National Press Club appearance said, "We know he's [Obama] saying what he has to say. He has to convince white folk that he's 150 percent with them, so we should just all be quiet and let him do what he has to do."

I was talking on the phone to a friend who supports Obama the day after he kicked his preacher to the curb. She wasn't mad at Obama or Wright. She was blue "over the whole mess." But she, like many others, saw the media as the culprit in the blow up. She agreed with Wright's politics but wondered aloud if Hillary had something to do with it. She felt the hurt between the two men and bemoaned the over-expansive personas many black preachers carry around and how it doesn't play everywhere. The Press Club isn't a black church. On Obama she repeated a common theme, "Yeah, he saying what he got to say. He's a politician." Still, that realization didn't stop her from sliding the race gag order by me suggesting that I not write or say something "that would give the other side (Clinton) anything to latch on to."

Racial solidarity has muted some black voices but the corporate media has silenced all others not singing their tune or a tune they approve. The race discussion for them boils down to

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Obama swearing allegiance to America (which for some blacks translates to "white") versus what they pose as an allegiance to "black." But the danger in their deal is that black Americans are also required to substitute Obama for real structural racial progress as in, "You got Obama. See, we're not so racist or bad after all; now, you black folk shut up!"

So, to open your mouth in the middle of that toxic stew gets you the Wright treatment. When I was coming up we called it being a "fish." It's akin to being someone's or some TV network's Sistah Souljah or Willie Horton. Farrakhan didn't take the bait so Wright got the hook. Before Wright, Chris Matthews and his cohorts dangled Jesse Jackson out there often repeating the line that Obama "is not like Jesse Jackson" so as to make Jackson's name (and his politics, importance, "style" and period) a pejorative. All of it falls into the category of being declared a "bad nigger" that all "good blacks" would be wise to avoid.

And who knows who will be the next black bogeyman. It could be Barack Obama's fellow Chicagoan Congressman Bobby Rush. He was once a Black Panther. Or, Trinity church's new pastor, Otis Moss. He said that he likes slain rapper Tupac Shakur whose mother was also a Black Panther. What about James Cone, "the source" of that "radical," "anti-white," "anti-capitalist" "revolutionary" "socialist" black liberation theology? FOX television seems to think Cone and his ideology deserve denouncing.

On several of the black radio shows I did, callers were split down the middle on Wright and Obama. Most callers "white and black" had no trouble understanding the differing prospective [perspective] of a church born out a history of enslavement versus one that often condoned or turned a blind eye to enslavement. Most agreed with Wright's take on American history and where the country is today in regards to its relationship with the rest of the world. On Joy Cardin's Wisconsin Public Radio program most callers were sympathetic to Wright even after his Press Club appearance. On that particular show most offered the view that he had the right to say what he said, how he said it and when he said it. As for Obama, I would say callers were more anguished about him having to reject his minister and play the denouncement game than anything else.

No doubt, those on Obama's side, on black radio, pretty much slammed Wright the same way they slammed Tavis Smiley for not maintaining the gag rule. There was some name calling. But it basically boiled down to he should "shut up" with a few "the Clinton's are behind it" with a couple of Wright "is with Hillary" or "he got

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paid; tossed in for good measure.

Smiley violated the gag order when he criticized Obama's refusal to address or attend anything that seemed too black like his New Orleans race gathering and the Memphis events around the anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. Black folk started "hating" on him because they saw him as "hating" on Obama. During the time Smiley took his lumps I heard folk say, "Look, Obama's already got us, we aren't the people he needs to convince; and, "if he spends too much time with us we know how white folk will react." Translation: "Don't hate the playa, hate the game."

So after a period of "not feeling the love" Smiley left his morning spot on the popular Tom Joyner radio show. But I have to say I didn't lament Smiley's departure and it's not because I agree with his "haters." It's because of his tie to Wal-Mart.

Yet racial solidarity is not just in play among blacks. It's evident among some of Hillary Clinton's white support. I believe that the difference between Obama and Clinton voters who back their candidate solely on their race is that a higher percentage of Clinton's white supporters, some 17 percent of white voters in Pennsylvania expressed, "they wouldn't vote for a black under any condition."

So, fair or not, Clinton is accused of campaigning on the racist implications of people who would not vote for a black if they were in a one person race solely because of their race. And, when you represent a racist perspective you might get called a racist. Still, the question is asked, "Why are whites who support Clinton racist and Obama's black support not labeled as such?" My response has been that, fundamentally, racism is about power, and blacks hold little if any power over whites. And, blacks have long voted for white candidates in large measure. Past black support for Bill Clinton, "first black president," mythology included, is evidence of that fact. Moreover, if Obama used a similar language about "hard-working American blacks not being represented," or something like that [either another comma here or none after "represented;"] he would be re-labeled "the black candidate." Clinton is allowed to be the "women's candidate." Both can be "generational candidates" but neither can be "race candidates."

When the roll is called I'll go on record being against unthinking, uncritical and blind solidarity be it racial, gender or sexually-related, etc. As for being with Wright or Obama. Well I

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agree with history. I agree with Wright saying, "The United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them on slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position[s] of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law"; I agree with all of that.

Like Wright, I agree that progressive politics in the last 40 years has affirmed the Cuban peoples' revolution, aided the anti-apartheid movement, opposed Reagan's war in Central America, and maintained that Zionism is racism. I'm an unapologetic secularist so I'm not into "damning" waiting for God's wrath to smite anybody. I believe that the people, on earth, are responsible for change. Just as important, I believe Obama is a piece of the story, not the whole story. And if solidarity makes you blindly fall in line without a demand to know where you are going, you may end up lost, or worse. As Edward Said once said: "Never solidarity before criticism." Lastly, would Obama denounce the statement that "America is the greatest purveyor of violence on the planet"? Martin King said that. So the unanswered question is how much room does racial solidarity allow Obama before the other edge of it cuts him? Racial solidarity is quite a perilous thing indeed.