

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

BARACK OBAMA AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The Democratic Party is divided and in something of an identity crisis right now. In this *Perspective*, I hope to provide some analysis, centering on what exactly the Barack Obama phenomenon means to the Party and to the nation.

- First, the impact on the Party. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are evenly dividing the traditional constituencies of the Party—the black vote and the working class vote. Obama is clearly winning the vast majority of blacks—about 90%, while Clinton is winning about 60 to 70% of the working class votes. This split is thereby challenging the Party's reputation as the Party of racial reconciliation. The coalition of blacks and working class Democrats has been a powerful coalition that extends back to at least LBJ. But with the rise of Ronald Reagan, white working class voters began to vote Republican. In fact, since 1964, Republicans have won 7 out of 10 presidential contests. Also, no Democratic presidential candidate since LBJ has captured a majority of white support. There is a racial divide, and the Obama candidacy is exacerbating this divide. Bill Clinton won over whites in broadening the Party's base, but still had problems with this. So, it seems that identity politics is back! Obama is struggling to win small-town America's vote and his relationship with Rev. Jeremiah Wright has not helped this. For that reason, perhaps, Clinton has been rolling up significant majorities among whites. And with the dominance by Obama of the black vote, once loyal to the Clintons, the dominance of race in the campaign is real. Obama simply has had great difficulty connecting with working-class whites in key electoral battleground states (e.g., Pennsylvania, Ohio and Texas). While he edged out Clinton in the popular vote in the 22 states on February 5, he lost among white voters by a margin of 52 to 43%. Although Obama has attracted white affluent voters, he cannot seem to make inroads with the white working class. This is a formidable challenge and it demonstrates a racial divide that is serious within the Democratic Party.
- Second, it is very instructive who did not come forward within the Democratic Party during the month of April, the most difficult month for Obama in the campaign. The Wright sermons and the comments about working class folks he made in San Francisco caused him immense problems with the white working-class. As Daniel Henninger has pointed out, he needed support and words of encouragement. Where were the famous people who had endorsed him: Jesse Jackson, Ted Kennedy, Oprah, John Kerry, Chris Dodd, Patrick Leahy, Tom Daschle, Jay Rockefeller, Toni Morrison, Roger Wilkins, Robert Reich, etc.? Where were all the big-city mayors who had endorsed him: Richard Daly (Chicago), Frank Reynolds (Cleveland), and Sheila Dixon (Baltimore)? No one went on TV to give him

support. No one wrote an op ed piece for a major newspaper. Henninger writes: “The list is long this week of supporters who let Barack Obama hang out to dry. More than a few were last seen running out on Hillary Clinton. Perhaps the solution here is for the two soloists to meet, flip a coin and spend the next six months running against John McCain. It looks like they’re the only friends they’ve got.” Politics is about preserving your own standing and your own political situation, not defending other candidates. We saw that selfish, self-centered dimension in Democratic politics last week!

- Third, what is the theology behind Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s incendiary, bizarre and offensive comments? You cannot understand Wright if you do not understand Black Liberation theology. Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, is one of the foremost adherents of this theology. Although it extends back to the days of slavery, Black Liberation theology is a product of the 1960s. It pulls on the revolutionary message of Scripture, especially the story of the Exodus. God fought for and defended the Hebrew slaves. For many black theologians, there is a straight-line connection between Hebrew slavery and black slavery. God wanted both free! The language of Black Liberation theology is especially instructive. Black theology speaks strongly of the judgment of God; He punishes evil and sin—and no person and no nation are exempt. Black pastors have championed consistently the suffering of the less fortunate and blasted those who cause the suffering, hence, Rev. Wright’s diatribes against America, its government and its whole society. One black leader writes of Wright: “As Moses ‘damned’ his own followers for worshipping the Golden Calf . . . Wright, in the language of the prophets, damned his own country.” James Cone, one of the key theologians of Black theology has written this: “Black theology refuses to accept a God who is not identified totally with the goals of the black community. If God is not for us and against white people, then he is a murderer, and we had better kill him. Black theology will accept only the love of God which participates in the destruction of the white enemy. . . In the New Testament, Jesus is not for all, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors.” Black theology attacks what it believes are the structural evils of white America. There is little grace and little mercy in Wright’s sermons, for His God ruthlessly judges and relentlessly condemns. There are so many things that can be said about the shortcomings of Black Liberation theology, but most importantly is the central message that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” God is a God Who exudes grace and mercy and Who forgives. His message of salvation is for all people, regardless of who they are. Whites who have been involved in so much of the past shortcomings and sin toward blacks (e.g., slavery) must be forgiven and embraced, just as whites must forgive and embrace blacks. Black theology can build an identity for blacks but it also builds a huge wall that promotes hatred, not harmony and love—the core values of genuine biblical Christianity.

See Michael Gerson, *Washington Post* (2 May 2008); Michael Powell, “A Fiery Theology Under Fire,” in the *New York Times* (4 May 2008); John Harwood, “A Fault Line That Haunts the Democrats,” in the *New York Times* (4 May 2008) and Daniel Henninger in the *Wall Street Journal* (1 May 2008).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

THE INSANITY OF THE “GAS TAX HOLIDAY”

We are certainly in the season of raw politics--and many of the proposals being offered demonstrate that. Both John McCain and Hillary Clinton are proposing and strongly supporting a gas tax holiday for this summer. They would both suspend the federal excise tax on gasoline, 18.4 cents per gallon, for the summer months of travel (Memorial Day through Labor Day). To his credit, Barack Obama has refused to support this gimmick! It is truly an insane idea.

Listen to Tom Friedman: “This is money laundering: we borrow money from China and ship it to Saudi Arabia and take a little cut for ourselves as it goes through our gas tanks. What a way to build our country. When the summer is over, we will have increased our debt to China, increased our transfer of wealth to Saudi Arabia and increased our contribution to global warming for our kids to inherit.” This ridiculous proposal is a perfect example of what Peter Schwartz of Global Business Network has said of US energy policy: “Maximize demand, minimize supply and buy the rest from the people who hate us the most.” The point is the US has no energy policy—and this crazy idea shows that fact! How could you use tax policy to effect a change in behavior? You would probably raise the taxes on the thing you most want to discourage—gasoline consumption and gas-guzzling cars—and you would lower the taxes on those things you most want to encourage—new, renewable energy technologies. But these people who want to be our president are doing the exact opposite. And we want them to run our country?

Friedman also demonstrates how absolutely dangerous our lack of an energy policy has become. When the US Congress passed the 2007 energy bill in December, no investment tax credit was extended for solar energy and wind energy. Oil and gas kept all their credits, but those for wind and solar energy expired! The Congress is so poisoned by politics that it is turning its back on the next great global industry—clean power. Friedman comments that if these wind and solar energy credits do indeed expire and are not renewed, by 2009 more than 100,000 jobs will either be lost or not created in these very industries! That is \$20 billion worth of investment that will not be made!! During the Ohio presidential primary, the candidates were railing against the lost manufacturing jobs in Ohio, but no one mentioned that First Solar, from Toledo, Ohio, was opening its newest factory in Germany—with 540 high-paying engineering jobs. The reason? Germany has created a booming solar market and America has not! These are real facts and reflect the tragedy of a vacuum of leadership in the United States. I do not agree with Obama on everything he says—indeed, I disagree with him more than I agree. But he has the integrity and courage to talk about this excise tax suspension for what it is—a political charlatanism that actually damages Americans more than it helps them! Further, this inane proposal illustrates the paucity of leadership in Washington, D.C. It is political pandering at its worst! Perhaps we are simply going to get the leaders we deserve. May God have mercy upon us!

See Friedman’s brilliant editorial in the *New York Times* (30 April 2008).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

MADONNA: THE REBIRTH OF A SEX GODDESS

Madonna is back! The married mother of three children, she is once again re-making her image. Her newest album (her 11th studio album) is entitled “Hard Candy” and is filled with sexual innuendo and instinct gratification. Her new image is actually a remake of her old one—a sex goddess. She purposefully promotes herself as an object of desire and as a material girl. Success, wealth, materialism, raunchy language and blatant suggestions, all characterize the new (i.e., the old) Madonna.

Of late, Madonna has used her performances (i.e., her music and her dancing) to draw attention to Christianity, to poverty, to AIDS, and even to environmental causes. Jon Pareles writes that “No one since Madonna . . . has come close to achieving the same alchemy of flirtation, pop proficiency, concert spectacle and self-guided tenacity.” The Madonna brand is back!

How should we think about this phenomenon called Madonna? Incredibly successful, Madonna represents the superficiality and shallowness of so much of pop culture. Therefore, we need to think biblically about someone of her stature. Permit me a few observations.

1. She is a gifted singer and dancer. Her gifts are serving her and her alone, for they are making her famous and very wealthy.
2. She is a role model to countless teens—and young adults. As a mother, she tried the soft-pedaling of her talent and giftedness. But this new album returns to Madonna, the material girl; Madonna the sex goddess, who gyrates and sings incredibly suggestive lyrics.
3. As a role model, she could be a vehicle for good, but it is difficult to see that being achieved in this album. This is Madonna going backwards to rejuvenate her career. And she will no doubt be successful.
4. Madonna sets the standard for so much of pop culture. Her influence, her creativity and her talent have guided where so much of pop culture is going. For awhile, it seemed that she might be changing her tack—turning to more socially relevant or even spiritual issues. This new album destroys any social consciousness or spiritual emphasis. It is the material girl reborn!
5. Because of her stature and fame, she has had an opportunity to be an effective and positive role model for young women. As a mother, she could have enormous influence. Through this album, she has rejected a meaningful influence that is positive. We are back to the old Madonna, which is not a good thing.

In a very real sense, Madonna is a tragic figure. She has been on a pilgrimage of sort—trying motherhood, trying a husband, trying social consciousness and sensitivity. But she returns to the most fundamental theme of the pop culture—“it is all about me!!” That is the tragedy of Madonna. It is not all about her! What she is modeling for this generation is a newly packaged return to the same old decadence. How tragic!

See Jon Pareles's review of "Hard Candy" in the *New York Times* (27 April 2008).