
March 20, 2008, 5:00 a.m.

Subtle, Serious, Patriotic

Barack Obama and a “long march.”

By Abigail Thernstrom

I guess I’m not supposed to like Senator Barack Obama’s Philadelphia speech — at least if I want to keep my conservative credentials intact. But I did — and join [Charles Murray](#) in celebrating its subtlety, seriousness, and patriotism. What other prominent contemporary black politician could or would have given such a speech?

Yes, Rev. Jeremiah Wright is full of hateful, anti-American rhetoric, but his views are clearly not those of the Illinois senator. Indeed, the Philadelphia speech had something of Martin Luther King Jr.’s belief in what Obama called his “the decency and generosity of the American people.” As King did, Obama appealed to our better angels, asking Americans to join him in continuing the “long march . . . for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring, and more prosperous America.” And he distanced himself from those who, like Wright, depicted a “profoundly distorted view of this country — a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that is right with America. . . .”

In effect, that last sentence distances him from the entire civil-rights community, which conditions membership on the belief that white racism is endemic — even where it can’t be seen, touched, smelled, or otherwise detected.

Anger and alienation are arguably the most worrisome aspect of black urban life and culture, and Obama talked about the “bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.” The depth of that bitterness should not be underestimated — or ignored. In 1997, two social scientists, Paul Sniderman of Stanford and Thomas Piazza of UC Berkeley, actually surveyed black opinion in Chicago. Only 17 percent of Chicago blacks in the Sniderman-Piazza sample said they disliked Louis Farrakhan. Forty-six agreed (as Rev. Wright has charged) that the federal government deliberately brought guns and drugs into the inner city to destroy blacks, while a more modest, yet alarming, 28 percent signed on to the notion that white doctors invented AIDS, releasing the disease into the black community.

And thus, when Obama said he could not “disown the black community,” he was talking about a community in which dysfunctional families and a dysfunctional ideology make for a dangerous brew. But it was, for better or worse, the community to which he belonged. And, it might be added, the community to which he had to belong if he had any hope of building a political career based on Chicago’s south side. He worked as a community organizer, but those he worked with saw him as too Harvard, too privileged, not truly one of them — and certainly not destined to stay, since he had other options in life. Joining that church, one can assume, was part of a quest to belong.

In describing Trinity, Obama struck another and too seldom heard note: one of appreciation for the

strength of African Americans who have suffered as no other group has in the nation's history. Gunnar Myrdal (*An American Dilemma*) wrote disparagingly of black culture as nothing more than a distorted and pathological version of white culture. Obama's description of the parishioners in his church gave white listeners a glimpse of a world of faith (with "raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor . . . dancing, clapping, screaming, and shouting") that has been the primary means of black survival and uplift.

Rev. Wright, as Obama says, is the product of a certain era — thankfully gone. (As are Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, and most civil-rights icons, he could have added.) Do I wish Senator Obama had walked away from Trinity Church? Sure. I suspect the reasons he did not do so are psychologically complex. In any case, Wright's Afrocentric, hate-America views, are clearly not those of Obama himself, who lives, as he says, in the only country on Earth in which his story is even possible.

"The complexities of race," as Obama says, remain unfinished American business. Much of the commentary on the Philadelphia speech suggests Obama is pulling us backwards. I think not. I wasn't happy with it from beginning to end — far from it — but it contains important messages: Blacks must not "succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe they can write their own destiny." And, working together, whites and blacks can "move beyond some of our old racial wounds."

Does "moving beyond" mean massive new government programs unlikely to solve the basic race-related problems? Probably, but that is a topic for another day.

— *Abigail Thernstrom is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.*