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## A Series of Unfortunate (and Unsavory) Events

### *Paving the Way for "Obamamania"*

It's like when you go to the dentist, and the man's going to take your tooth. You're going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff in your jaw called Novocain, to make you think they're not doing anything to you. So you sit there and, because you've got all of that Novocain in your jaw, you suffer peacefully. Blood running all down your jaw, and you don't know what's happening because someone has taught you to suffer—peacefully.

—Malcolm X, *Message to the Grassroots*

Like all of us, Barack Obama exists in a world where certain groups suffer disproportionately. As with all downtrodden people, an ever-present question looms for America's poor and colored: What's next? Less than a year after Obama's election to the United States Senate, another in a long series of answers presented itself. This time her name was Katrina. In the wake of the unimaginable destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, many Americans called for a new national discussion on race, racism, and class. From jazz impresario Wynton Marsalis' thoughtful article in *Time* to a plethora of missives from black intellectuals, various voices posited that the ugly reality of systemic American racial dichotomization still demanded attention.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, they were largely dismissed in the main.

The lion's share of white Americans proclaimed there was no racial dynamic involved in government response or anything else in the Gulf

Coast region following Katrina's devastation. This was simply a natural disaster, and natural disasters made no choices based on race. Of course, this was true: the storm made no conscious decisions. But had our country made choices long before Katrina that diminished certain citizens' life chances because of the color of their skin? The debate was intense. Just as Katrina's rain and winds faded into history, former Reagan secretary of education and George H. Bush drug czar William Bennett asserted on his nationally syndicated radio show, "I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down." He quickly added, "That would be an impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down."<sup>2</sup>

While some called Bennett's comments offensive and racist, he was not without supporters. Rush Limbaugh opined that Bennett "should have been applauded" for his comment. *National Review* columnist Andrew McCarthy called Bennett's statement "a minor point that was statistically and logically unassailable."<sup>3</sup> McCarthy was incensed by what he called "a shameful effort to paint him [Bennett] as a racist. He's about as bigoted as Santa Claus." Courtland Milloy of the *Washington Post* (who is black) flipped the issue back onto black folk when he argued that black people really had no right to be upset about Bennett's comment, because many of them are actually engaging in the abortion process. "There is a problem here," Milloy chided, "but it's not Bennett, whose comments illuminated a moral inconsistency in black America that is far more harmful than anything he said."<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of either denial, ignorance, or deception, these fellows missed the point. Why was Bennett immediately drawn to the example of black babies? Why not Asian, Hispanic, Jewish or even white ones?

Before the Bennett coffee brewed, three white New Orleans police officers mercilessly beat sixty-four-year-old retired black elementary school teacher Robert Davis in the French Quarter. Like Rodney King and Donovan Jackson-Chavis, the thrashing was caught on tape, but, of course, nothing wrong or racial really happened. The officers claimed they merely had to restrain Davis because he was publicly intoxicated and resisted arrest. Contrarily, Davis stated he had not had a drink in twenty-five years. Interestingly, no breathalyzer was taken. As in many cases of black men being beaten or killed by police across the country, New Orleans Police spokesperson Marlon Defillo said "race was not an issue."<sup>5</sup> Officer Robert Evangelist was charged in the beating but ultimately acquitted by District Judge Frank Murillo in a

trial without a jury in July 2007. Murillo commented after the trial that he “didn’t even find [the case] a close call.”

The denial of a racial dynamic is often a reality in cases such as these because, for many, the end of racial history (and the racism that accompanied it) is upon us. If one defines race out of existence (ala Ward Conerly) or denies the reality of racism, neither requires engagement. At this historical moment, across lines of race, many deny the persistence of racism and its often violent physical, psychological, and public policy consequences. To make matters worse, those who seek to call attention to these issues are often themselves labeled racist. Barack Obama does not have this problem.

No one has accused Obama of racial bias, because he has not talked much about race since arriving on the national scene. For many, the fact that he avoids any deep analysis of the subject is a part of his appeal. For others, that reluctance raises a great deal of angst. Outside of the pesky race issue, what else (if anything) is wrong with Barack Obama? One of my colleagues at the University of Louisville joked, “His name sounds too much like Osama” (one would suppose the middle name Hussein would also give a few xenophobes pause). Beyond that, at first glance Obama seems almost flawless. To be sure, he is nothing short of the greatest political phenomenon in recent memory. He is tall, handsome, of exotic racial heritage (his father Kenyan, mother white American), clearly intelligent, masterful with words, and charismatic. Obama is only the fifth black U.S. senator in the history of the country—only the third since Reconstruction. He even won a Grammy for the spoken word version of his autobiography. He is easily the Democrats’ hottest commodity. To be sure, this is not difficult. Even though the Republicans have accumulated a veritable laundry list of missteps that many think have placed the country and world at risk, both the 2006 midterms and 2008 presidential year elections were and are, respectively, in doubt.

### Wrong Turns for the Right

As the country prepared for the 2006 midterms, the list of Republican embarrassments was long, both professionally and personally. Political careers started to take hits in 2005 surrounding the indictment and eventual conviction of lobbyist Jack Abramoff of numerous improprieties. The first to fall was California House member Randy “Duke” Cunningham, an associate of Abramoff, who resigned from the House

in November 2005 after pleading guilty to accepting at least \$2.4 million in bribes and underreporting his income for 2004. He pleaded guilty to federal charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, mail fraud, wire fraud, and tax evasion. In March 2006, he received a sentence of eight years and four months in prison and an order to pay \$1.8 million in restitution.

In June 2006, longtime Republican enforcer and House majority leader Tom DeLay, also associated with Abramoff, resigned his Texas seat to fight charges that he illegally funneled corporate funds to state legislative races. DeLay denied wrongdoing, but two of his former aides pleaded guilty in the Abramoff case. In July 2006, uber-conservative Ralph Reed, of Christian Coalition fame and a former Abramoff friend and associate, lost a primary race for lieutenant governor in Georgia. Of course, any number of factors not involving Abramoff could have contributed to Reed's loss. The same could not be said for Ohio Republican Bob Ney. In May 2006, the House Ethics Committee launched an investigation into bribery charges against Ney. In August, he announced he would not run for a seventh House term. At the time of his resignation, the Justice Department was also investigating allegations that Ney took gifts, trips, and campaign donations from Abramoff and his clients in exchange for official actions. Like DeLay, Ney denied wrongdoing and said he decided not to run in an effort to spare his family. "I can no longer put them through this ordeal," he said.<sup>6</sup>

In August 2006, while campaigning for reelection to the United States Senate, then Republican presidential hopeful George Allen seemed to cross the line with a racial insult. During a campaign rally in Breaks, Virginia, Allen pointed out S. R. Sidarth, an Indian American volunteer from the camp of opponent James Webb. Sidarth, a twenty-year-old University of Virginia student, was serving as reconnaissance for Webb with the common political practice of taping Allen's rallies and looking for chinks in his armor. Before a totally white audience (not including Sidarth), Allen launched into a brief but troubling rant. "This fellow here. Over here with the yellow shirt, Macaca, or whatever his name is. He's with my opponent. He's following us around everywhere. And it's just great," Allen said, as his supporters began to laugh. After noting that Webb was raising money in California with a "bunch of Hollywood movie moguls," Allen said, "Let's give a welcome to Macaca here. Welcome to America and the real world of Virginia." Despite the sarcastic "welcome," Sidarth was already at home. He was actually born in Virginia. Ironically, Allen was the outsider of sorts. He was born in, of all places, California.

As it turns out, “macaca” or “macaque” (literally a type of monkey) is a rather nasty racial slur originally used by Francophone colonials when referring to native populations of North and Sub-Saharan Africa. In *The Troubled Heart in Africa*, Robert Edgerton recounts that in the Belgian Congo colonial whites called Africans “*macaques*” and insisted that they had only recently come down from trees. The term *sale macaque* (filthy monkey) was also occasionally used.<sup>7</sup> The word is still used in Belgium as a racial slur referring to Moroccan immigrants or their descendants. Among other things, Allen’s camp and his supporters claimed he did not even know what “macaca” meant, and he simply “made the word up.”

Beyond that, Allen asserted that he was just teasing Sidarth. Further investigation prompted some to believe that maybe Allen *did* know the word’s meaning. At a University of Virginia commencement ceremony in 2005, the wife of his collegiate French professor who introduced Allen bragged that Allen’s performance in French was “excellent.” The plot thickened when Allen’s parentage was examined. In Tunisia, “macaca” is used as a racial pejorative when referring to black Africans, similar to the way “nigger” is used in the United States. By Allen’s own admission, his mother is a French colonial born in Tunisia. So there was at least the possibility he had been exposed to the word “macaca.”

Disturbingly, conservative advocates rarely apologize for such offenses. They either seek to explain them away or divert attention from the issue. In the Allen case, conservative columnist Cal Thomas attacked former King protégé Andrew Young rather than unconditionally condemn Allen. Thomas asserted that Young’s comments about some Jews, Koreans, and Arabs who operated businesses in black neighborhoods were more racist (if such a thing can be measured) than Allen calling Sidarth a monkey.<sup>8</sup>

To be fair, Young sank himself into hot water with no help from Thomas. In August 2006, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* asked Young about serving as a Wal-Mart spokesman even though the chain forced a number of mom-and-pop stores out of business. Young commented,

Well, I think they should; they ran the mom-and-pop stores out of my neighborhood. But you see, these are the people who have been overcharging us, selling us stale bread and bad meat and wilted vegetables. And they sold out and moved to Florida. I think they’ve ripped off our communities enough. First it was Jews, then it was Koreans and now its Arabs; very few black people own these stores.<sup>9</sup>

At the time Young was heading Working Families for Wal-Mart, a group whose mission was to help improve the retail and corporate giant's public image in minority neighborhoods. To be sure, Young (like many, not all, of the old civil rights icons) was baring his capitalist fangs—this time for Wal-Mart. This fact should not be ignored even though he resigned in the midst of the controversy because, in his words, he “didn’t want to become a distraction from the main issues.”

Thomas’s skewering of Young aside, Virginia voters initially seemed largely unmoved by Allen’s “macaca moment” or subsequent defenses. Following the insults and denials, Allen remained the front-runner for some time before his eventual loss to Webb by a slim margin. In fact, the Allen debacle was not the first public display of racial insensitivity from a Grand Old Party heavyweight in recent memory. One of the most notable was probably Trent Lott’s now infamous speech at Strom Thurmond’s one hundredth birthday party and retirement celebration, which eventually led to the Mississippi senator stepping down from his position as Senate minority leader in 2002 (Lott held his Senate seat until his retirement in late 2007. He was named minority whip in 2006).

In 1948, when the Democratic Party nominated Harry Truman for president on a platform featuring a prominent civil rights plank, Thurmond proclaimed that Truman’s federal antilynching and antipoll tax initiatives were “oppressive” to southern states and threatened to destroy the South’s “way of life.” Thurmond, who some argue reformed later in life, famously exclaimed, “All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Nigger race into our homes, our schools, our churches.” In support of this stance, disgruntled white southern “Dixiecrats,” led by the Mississippi delegation, left the Democratic Convention and organized a separate States’ Rights Party that nominated Thurmond for president and Mississippi governor Fielding Wright as his running mate. Despite Truman’s reelection, the Dixiecrat ticket carried four states from the Deep South: Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Mississippi gave the Dixiecrats 87 percent of its vote.

Alluding to this fact, Lott exclaimed, “I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years, either.”<sup>10</sup> Strangely, Lott labeled Thurmond “a great humanitarian” despite the fact that many regard him as the epitome of the most virulent forms of racism and white supremacy in American politics and society in the twentieth century.

To cap the GOP's troubles off just before the 2006 midterms, Florida Republican congressman and House deputy whip Mark Foley resigned in late September after a series of sexually explicit e-mails sent to teenage male pages surfaced. In one note from August 2005, Foley asked a sixteen-year-old page if he made him "a little horny." According to ABC News, some of the exchanges were too graphic to be made public.<sup>11</sup> After his resignation, Foley disclosed that he was gay, an alcoholic, and had been molested by a clergyman as a child. He immediately checked himself into alcohol rehabilitation as his Republican colleagues attempted to distance themselves from him.

The Foley story was disturbing and ironic on a number of levels. Many felt it was illustrative of the party's hypocrisy. At least the Republicans' opponents wanted to expand it to such a level. They may not have been totally wrong. During the summer of 2005, Foley introduced legislation to shield children from adult exploitation over the Internet. Not only did he push the legislation hard, but he was, in fact, the chairman of the House Missing and Exploited Children's Caucus. This quagmire got deeper when the *Washington Post* reported that some in GOP leadership knew about Foley's habit as early as 2000—long before it was made public.<sup>12</sup> The ripple ran all the way to the top with calls from some quarters for the resignation of Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert.

### What's Wrong with the Democrats?

The Republicans' implosion did little for the Democrats other than make it clear that the Democrats were so woeful they could not "win" anything. The Republicans had to "lose." As the 2006 elections approached to set up the presidential showdown in 2008, the GOP's mounting list of inconsistencies, questionable domestic policy decisions, global missteps, and outright scandals finally took their toll. In effect, the Democrats benefited mightily from Republican failures rather than their own successes. Because of the emptied-out talent level of his party, Barack Obama was now actually receiving pressure from many quarters to run for president. While he and those close to him continued to deny any interest in throwing his hat into the presidential ring, Obama's actions sometimes betrayed his comments. In September 2006, he was the special guest of Iowa Senator Tom Harkin at his annual steak fry at the Warren County Fairgrounds in Indianola, Iowa. Harkin had hosted the event for the past twenty-nine years, and it had become a regular stop for Democratic presidential hopefuls. Of

course, Obama explained his presence away by saying he was only there to help fellow Democrats in the midterm elections, not to pursue his own political ambitions. Many observers had legitimate doubts.

Despite the reservations of a few, most people across lines of race and political party loved Obama. In the 2004 Illinois race, he won a stunning 40 percent of the state's Republican vote. Even this, upon closer examination, was largely the result of more strange Republican behavior. In June 2004, just prior to the November elections, Republican nominee Jack Ryan dropped out of the race. He did so after child custody hearing testimony was made public in which his exwife (actress Jeri Ryan) accused him of insisting she go to "explicit sex clubs" in New York, New Orleans, and Paris during their marriage—including a bizarre club with cages, whips, and other apparatuses hanging from the ceiling. She testified that Ryan also wanted her to have sex with him while others watched. Ryan dismissed his exwife's allegations as "ridiculous accusations" but eventually yielded under the pressure and left the race.<sup>13</sup>

The Republicans' last minute replacement in a hopeless race? Conservative Alan Keyes freshly transplanted from Maryland. Even before Ryan's implosion, he was polling a bit behind Obama. After his exit, the cause was lost. Even serious conservative politicians considered Keyes little more than a political dilettante who posed no real challenge. Hence, Obama's immediate political future was sealed. Upon observation, it is easy to see that "Obamamania" was more a result of a series of unfortunate (and unsavory) events than individual achievements. In many respects, Obama is the product of timing. The political bar was lowered so horribly by missteps by both parties that Obama did not have to do much beyond deliver a cliché-filled, nonoffensive speech to endear himself to many disgruntled and desperate Americans.

Does being the beneficiary of advantageous timing make Barack Obama a bad person, yet undiscovered seedy politician, or untrustworthy leader? Absolutely not. On the flip side of that coin, these factors do not necessarily make him great either. So, what is wrong with him? Frankly, in the political reality in which we live and languish, very little. But, from a progressive's point of view, nothing is terribly right with him either. To be sure, he is all the things mentioned above and more. Doubters (and worriers) believe the greatest source of his appeal is also his greatest problem: he seems painfully "safe." He presents no discernible threat to the status quo.

The first red flag for some was actually raised a few days after the nation began to hear of Obama outside of Illinois. During the 2004 Democratic National Convention and before his now classic speech,



when asked by a reporter about the Democrats' concern that all speakers toe the party line, Obama replied that he had no problem staying on message. In fact, Tavis Smiley seemed to confirm Obama's flexibility when he reported the next week that Obama allowed personally important parts of his speech that Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry's campaign team found disagreeable to be "excised." Yet, during his oration before the Democratic Convention and the nation (with no mention of the censorship by his own party) Obama still referred to America as a "magical place."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, neither Obama's nor the Democrats' "message" was convincing enough as the Democrats (not including Obama) were once again drubbed on election day.

Immediately after the election, Princeton public intellectual Cornel West commented that 70 percent of the people who voted for President Bush believed there was a direct link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. One in three still believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Research by the nonpartisan Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) echoed West's sentiment. An October 2004 PIPA survey of Bush supporters just prior to the election concluded that 72 percent believed Iraq either had WMD or a major WMD program just before the war. Even after chief U.S. weapons inspector Charles Duelfer reported to the contrary, 56 percent of Bush supporters mistakenly believed most experts said Iraq had WMD. The same percentage also believed Iraq was either directly involved in September 11 or provided al-Qaeda substantial support.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, when drawing a link between information sources and perceptions of reality, PIPA concluded that people who predominantly got their news from National Public Radio (NPR) or Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) held beliefs on world realities that were closest to the truth. Those who primarily got their info from Fox News had views that were farthest from the truth. Most Bush supporters reported that Fox News was their primary news source. To be sure, some of our national troubles are fueled by the media, but as West said, much of it is also indicative of "deliberate ignorance and willful blindness on behalf of many fellow citizens."<sup>16</sup> Without a doubt, a good percentage of our citizenry is in denial or so wrapped up in its own international and domestic neonationalistic mean-spiritedness that the country has been placed on a path many consider retrograde.

This environment of myopia, narrow religious and political dogma, and narcissistic self-absorption enabled Bush political strategist Karl Rove to author a plan he felt would mobilize more than 4 million Evangelical Christians to support Bush prior to the 2004 presidential election.

Even in the face of inner circle concerns that Rove's plan lurched the Bush camp too far to the right, Rove successfully blurred the line between church and state and exceeded his goal by actually motivating more than 8 million Christian fundamentalists to pull the lever for Bush in his successful reelection bid. By strategically injecting gay marriage and abortion into the fray, the Rove Plan carved out space for the paternalistic, homophobic, religiously intolerant Christian Right to take center stage in American politics and public policy.

Christian fundamentalists effectively cloaked intolerance in the guise of "morality," wrapping themselves in the American flag and beating their opponents' challenges back with the Bible. Not surprisingly, a certain percentage of socially conservative, religiously devout blacks all too willingly joined these ranks. In 2004, black electoral support for Bush actually rose roughly 3 percent from 2000 rather than declined.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Democrats sat silently and accepted their fate. Their "message" was unclear. Their candidates, headed by the doomed John Kerry, were largely uninspiring. Their strategies seemed reactionary instead of proactive and progressive. And their imagination had seemingly left the building with Bill Clinton four years earlier.

In the minds of some, the most serious problem with Obama's commitment to staying on the empty Democratic "message" was not simply that the party's message lacked clarity and conviction. The greatest difficulty was more troubling. When he proclaimed he had no problem staying on message, he seemed to forget (or maybe he never knew) that those who have really impacted the world—the true visionaries—have frequently stayed *off message*. There are a few other potential problems with Obama that merit consideration. Some argue that he shares one with another Democratic celebrity and 2008 presidential opponent: Hillary Clinton. For all his faults, Bill Clinton actually seemed to believe in something. However, many see his wife as a purely political animal guided by, more than anything, the pursuit of power, often seeming willing to say and do whatever to garner and maintain it. She plays the American political power game well and usually stays "on message."

Others believe Obama shares another problem with America. In our current political haze, we have forgotten that there is not only a gap between political reality and political imagination, but a yawning chasm. Jeffrey H. Reiman articulates it well in his book *In Defense of Political Philosophy*:

The politics of a nation is one thing; its political imagination is quite another. Politics amounts to the day-to-day decisions and actions of

politicians and their audiences. But political imagination refers to that sense of connection between the real and the ideal, and the boundary between the possible and the utopian, which is felt before it is reasoned out.<sup>18</sup>

Undoubtedly, Barack Obama is great at slotting himself into the existing political reality. Unfortunately, though many horribly unimaginative Americans see Obama as ingenious (everything is relative), he may have, in actuality, sacrificed his political imagination somewhere along the way. This is the site where we locate his greatest danger. He presents an image that exudes and engenders hope. He even made it the centerpiece of his latest book, *The Audacity of Hope*. But is he capable of delivering? He offers light-hearted, nonconfrontational rhetoric about change, but no clear vision or discernible commitment to it where certain issues are concerned. Unlike Corey Booker, Michael Steele, Kenneth Blackwell, and others, we do not know exactly who and what Barack Obama is. Many, however, see Obama as a political savior and have, therefore, invested all their hopes, dreams, and imaginative energy in him. Unfortunately, he may not have as much of these as his supporters. They are committed to the belief that Obama is “different.” But is he?

### Et Tu, Obama?

When faced with the question of whether or not Obama is committed to a progressive vision, the most commonly encountered argument is that this once again simply raises the age-old debate between working within the system or “crashing” it. At the presidential level of politics, is that even a choice? Americans with living political imaginations not only answer, “Yes, we have a choice,” but take it a step farther and proclaim, “We also have a duty!” Political party, racial, and ideological differences aside, let us, for a moment, think as responsible Americans of good conscience who live in the most powerful country in the world. Republican losses in 2006 confirmed that a revisit of America’s approach to the world is in order. In the post–September 11 world, any analysis must begin with the United States’ sojourn into Iraq and its implications on the global stage. From the outset, the mission to “free Iraq” became so clouded by emotion and chest thumping that it was difficult to have a balanced discussion if one did not wholeheartedly buy into the mainstream Bush administration party line.

Considering the fact the United States now flexes a level of military muscle relative to the rest of the world not seen since the apex of the Roman Empire, there was little doubt that Iraq's military would be quickly defeated. Post-Saddam, nontraditional resistance and consequences, of course, are other matters altogether. Beyond military might, America has become the modern Rome in other troubling ways. In *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000), Morris Berman notes that America resembles Rome immediately preceding its decline in four key ways. Both experienced the following: (1) accelerating social and economic inequality; (2) declining marginal returns with regard to investment in organizational solutions to socioeconomic problems; (3) rapidly dropping levels of literacy, critical understanding, and general intellectual awareness; and (4) spiritual death or the emptying out of cultural content and the freezing of it in formulas (clichés, media slogans, sound bites, etc.).

In one of his most powerful passages, Berman says that once a nation reaches this point,

In the classicist phrase, the culture no longer believes in itself, so it typically undertakes phony or misguided wars (Vietnam, or Gulf War I, for example), or promotes its symbols and slogans all the more. As the organizational costs rise, yielding increasingly smaller benefits, so does the formalism, the pomp and circumstance. Just as the jaded crowds of ancient Rome zoned out on bread and circuses, Hollywood makes Rocky-type films, rerunning tired old formulas, but nevertheless, these are box office hits. And gladiatorial extravaganzas, as well as the "Rambification" of culture, are sure signs of spiritual death.<sup>19</sup>

The great question ignored in the midst of American self-congratulation and hubris is, How will the rest of the world approach the twenty-first century's Rome? Americans may lament how a good portion of the world hates their way of life and freedom, but another possibility is that many now sincerely fear what they see as American aggression. The United States has been able to maintain its position as the world's only super power without serious challenge for quite some time. The reasons behind this reality are multivariate, but one of the most important has been the fact that a decent percentage of the world has generally viewed America as benevolent.

Flying in the face of world opinion, at the turn of the century many felt the country displayed a disturbing propensity for overt callousness, unilateral decision making and bullying. The feeling that "America

does what America wants” and, in the words of George W. Bush, “If you’re not with us, you’re against us,” has left many of Earth’s inhabitants asking, “Whom will America go after next?” So, one issue beyond Iraq is apparent. When one country rises to a level of power and influence clearly disproportionate to its neighbors and is perceived as abusing that power, the neighbors are forced to engage in “balancing behavior.” That is, many countries that would otherwise have nothing in common may come together to establish a political and military “balance” to keep America, the new Rome, at bay. This perception certainly prompted Russian president and 2007 *Time* Person of the Year Vladimir Putin to rail against the United States at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, an annual forum attracting senior officials from around the world, in February 2007. Putin blamed U.S. policy for inciting other countries to seek nuclear weapons to defend themselves from an “almost uncontained use of military force.” He went on:

Unilateral, illegitimate actions have not solved a single problem, they have become a hotbed of further conflicts. . . . One state, the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. . . . It is a world of one master, one sovereign. . . . It has nothing to do with democracy. This is nourishing the wish of countries to get nuclear weapons. . . . This is very dangerous. Nobody feels secure anymore because nobody can hide behind international law. . . . The process of NATO expansion has nothing to do with modernization of the alliance or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it is a serious factor provoking reduction of mutual trust.<sup>20</sup>

U.S. Senator John McCain, (R-Arizona) described Putin’s remarks as “the most aggressive speech from a Russian leader since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>21</sup> No matter how distasteful to American leadership, the international possibilities raised by Putin warrant consideration. Meanwhile, trouble also looms domestically. Continued poverty, a staggering national debt, festering racism, classism, religious intolerance, homophobia, corporate malfeasance, and other factors have created an untenable situation for many Americans.

These factors considered, the individual case of Barack Obama is only an example that speaks to a much larger problem. He is not the sickness. He is simply the latest and most popular symptom. Interrogating our approaches to the Obamas of the world tells us much more than examining these individuals ever could. We are now a pessimistic nation with little belief in the possibility for change and decency—

especially through politics. This hopelessness, this perception that we have no personal or collective efficacy, has led us to a place where we not only accept mediocrity—we celebrate it. We do not condemn debauchery; we ignore it. The effects are Novocainlike in that we have all been anesthetized to some degree.

In this quagmire, was anyone really shocked by the Mark Foley revelations? Was anyone surprised that there exists not the possibility but the probability that leading members of our government attempted to cover it up? Has anyone really been disturbed by the ever-increasing list of our leaders caught up in the Jack Abramoff scandal? How many have been genuinely angered by Randy “Duke” Cunningham, William Jefferson, or Bob Ney? Does anyone believe Alberto Gonzalez, Karl Rove, or “Scooter” Libby? Does anyone think Dick Cheney was not involved in Libby’s actions? Did the president not know? Did he really commute Libby’s sentence just because he felt it was “excessive,” or was this yet another display of the administration’s gangsterism? How many care that the Bush administration may have lied to involve the country in Iraq? Who cares that the Democrats were complicitous (even though they would like us to forget that now)? Did people not note the contradiction when the president stood on an aircraft carrier and declared, “Mission accomplished,” but kept sending fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, and friends off to die? Do citizens really believe that every leader who disagrees with our government is a tyrant or madman? Do they care that politicians, no matter their party, flip-flop more than fish out of water? Do Americans really trust politicians anymore—any of them? When was the last time you actually voted *for* a candidate rather than *against* one?

Is this what we have become? Deceived and numb? Hopeless and oblivious? Those who maintain political imaginations are not seeking the impossible. In fact, they are our last hope. They are merely asking for leaders who stand for something, not politicians who insult us with safe positions and empty clichés. They want leaders who tell the truth—be it good or bad. That is not crashing the system. That is making it work properly. Is Obama, the self-proclaimed “skinny guy with the funny name,” the answer? Many would certainly say, “Yes,” but for different reasons. Their reasons are often different because, as Cal Thomas observed immediately after Obama formed an exploratory committee to decide whether to run for president in January 2007, “Part of the attraction and seductiveness of Senator Obama—perhaps the main attraction—is that he is mostly a blank slate on which others can write what they choose.” He closed his article, “[There are] ques-

tions that need answering. We have a right to know what manner of individual aspires to the Oval Office, before we give him, or her, the honor, privilege and responsibility of the office. In short, it's time to start writing on that blank slate and to seriously contemplate what's written there."<sup>22</sup>

Agree with Thomas or not, his stance warrants reflection. Despite the enthusiasm associated with Obamamania, people knew very little about where he stood on most serious issues when his presidential aspirations were finally made apparent in early 2007. Without a doubt, he intentionally sought to maintain the "blank canvas, be all things to all people" image as long as he could. Nevertheless, as the searing lights of a presidential candidacy heated, he would soon be more exposed than ever. In "New Rome," would Obama be remembered for the selfless commitment of Marcus Aurelius or the treachery of Marcus Brutus? By now, he was considered not only a black leader but also a part of American leadership. In many minds, he was also the leader with the greatest potential to change the world—a daunting expectation indeed.

Even among the riders of the Obamamania wave, some seemed somewhat concerned by Obama's sometimes pliable approach and political amiability. Cornel West has commented that Obama seems to see himself as a "voluntary immigrant" and consequently lacks the "rage" connected to those who see themselves as the descendants of "involuntary immigrants."<sup>23</sup> Despite the observation, West does not dismiss Obama's possibilities:

It's very difficult for people with a blemished record to run for office. And it's hard for people to have an unblemished record. We all are tainted. We all are cracked vessels. We all are imperfect. If you're looking for purity, you have to look hard because we're all impure. People who claim to be pure are just lying and hiding something. But I have great hope for Brother Obama.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, Obama needs West's hope and prayers. The entire country does.