

# RIGHT PLAYS THE RACE CARD

Right Wing Leaders Foment Racial Resentment and Point Fingers to Avoid Accountability

November 2009

**Introduction**

**R**ight-wing pundits and political leaders committed to the destruction of the Obama presidency have been openly fomenting racial resentment or tolerating those who do. In one breath, they accuse President Obama of being racist and in the next they and their media allies howl with indignation if their own racial rhetoric is challenged. Among their charges: that President Obama hates “white culture” and that his health care reform efforts are a backdoor means to reparations for slavery that will “enslave” doctors and put the “racial grievance industry” in charge of emergency rooms.

Race-baiting pundits try to insulate themselves by falsely claiming that liberals play the “race card” to equate any criticism of the Obama administration with racism. In fact, this charge is itself an example of inflaming racial resentments for political gain. In other words, crying “You can’t even criticize Obama

without being called a racist” is just one more way to suggest that white conservatives are being oppressed.

At the same time, Religious Right leaders insist that Obama’s election has put the nation under a “curse” and ask Black Christians to repent for putting “race over God.”

It is imperative that political, media, and cultural leaders be willing to hold public figures accountable for destructive rhetoric while not allowing right-wing racial arsonists to divert energy and focus from the administration’s legislative agenda. The most important question is not whether a particular pundit or politician harbors racist feelings; it is whether they are fomenting and inflaming racial resentment as a political strategy without concern for the destructive and dangerous consequences. That political behavior can and must be challenged without getting stuck in “is he or isn’t he” arguments. →

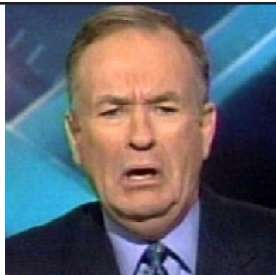
**USING RACIAL RESENTMENT AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY**



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“We need segregated buses...In Obama’s America, the white kids now get beat up with the black kids cheering...”



**Glenn Beck:**  
[President Obama] “has a deep seated hatred for white people, or the white culture...”



**Bill O’Reilly:**  
“the left sees white men as a problem”

## The Political Use of Racial Resentment in the Obama Era

Fomenting racial resentment as a political strategy has a long and dishonorable history in the Republican Party ever since the passage of civil rights legislation and the Nixon campaign's "southern strategy." Ronald Reagan, the conservative movement's icon, tapped that strategic vein when he made a campaign stop in Philadelphia, Mississippi, site of the notorious murder of three civil rights workers two decades before, to declare his support for "states' rights."

It is clear that some right-wing strategists have calculated that fanning the flames of racial division could be one way to try to win back some of the white

### FOMENTING RACIAL RESENTMENT AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY HAS A LONG AND DISHONORABLE HISTORY IN THE REPUBLICAN PARTY EVER SINCE THE PASSAGE OF CIVIL RIGHTS LEGISLATION AND THE NIXON CAMPAIGN'S "SOUTHERN STRATEGY."

working-class voters who backed Barack Obama and other Democratic candidates in 2008. Central to this race-baiting strategy is accusing Obama himself of being a racist who is deliberately advancing policies that are meant to help people of color at the expense of white people, and foreigners at the expense of Americans. This is a particularly potent and potentially explosive strategy at a time when millions of Americans are out of work and economically vulnerable.

When Barack Obama was asked about the controversial arrest of Harvard Professor Skip Gates and answered that he thought the police had acted "stupidly" (a comment for which he quickly apologized), Rush Limbaugh declared that Obama was "fanning the flames of race" as "a black president trying to destroy a white policeman." Limbaugh, whose record of racially charged rhetoric is well-documented, has also said recently, "We need segregated buses... In Obama's America, the white kids now get beat up with the black kids cheering, right on, right on, right on...."

To cite just a few other examples:

- Fox News' Glenn Beck went a step further to declare that President Obama

"has a deep seated hatred for white people, or the white culture..." Hatred of "white culture?" That's rhetoric more appropriate for an avowed supremacist like David Duke.

- Bill O'Reilly told his viewers that "the left sees white men as a problem" and sees putting women and minorities in power as the solution.
- Right-wing blogs still abound with charges that a campaign reference to his own grandmother as a "typical white person" reflected anti-white racism on Obama's part.

These pundits reach millions of people with their irresponsible and inflammatory rhetoric, and others, including less visible radio hosts, reach millions more. Unfortunately, Republican leaders who share the far right's goal of damaging the Obama presidency have not shown much interest in challenging egregious race-baiting claims about the president and his administration. RNC chairman Michael Steele, however, demanded that the president disavow Carter's

comments, accusing Democrats of "playing the race card ... from the bottom of the deck." Steele hasn't been so quick to challenge the overt race-card playing by right-wing pundit/power-brokers like Limbaugh and Beck.

And many Democratic strategists, having concluded that any discussion of race is bad for the White House, prefer that the conversation be avoided altogether. Thus, when Jimmy Carter spoke the obvious truth that some of the hostility directed at the Obama presidency is a reflection of racism, conservatives and much of the media adopted a "oh, no, he didn't" stance while the White House quickly dismissed any role that racism might play in criticism of the president.

Some journalists and organizations have been willing to take on the right's racial manipulations. See, for example, the Media Matters video "Fear of a Black President."

### The Sotomayor Nomination

Much of the radical right's response to the nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the US Supreme Court rested on the implication – made more or less explicitly by right-wing pundits and GOP senators alike – that

white people could not expect to be treated fairly by Sotomayor, and that her nomination was further evidence of racial bias in the Obama administration. In addition, some commentators slammed the very notion of diversity. Many picked up the “white men need not apply” headline Mark Halperin put on an article about the court vacancy. Pat Buchanan derided the number of women on the president’s reported short list and denigrated Judge Sotomayor as an “affirmative action” pick while suggesting without any



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evidence that she had not earned the stellar academic credentials she received at Princeton and Yale.

Sotomayor’s “wise Latina” remarks were taken out of context to imply that she was some kind of ethnic supremacist, and her ruling in the Ricci affirmative action case was wildly distorted to suggest that she was a judicial activist who lived to use the law as a club against white men. Pundits like Rush Limbaugh and elected officials like Tom Tancredo called her a racist. Pat Buchanan charged her with having a “race-based” approach to justice and having demonstrated “a lifelong resolve to discriminate against white males.”

The attacks on Sotomayor were part of a larger right-wing strategy to portray Obama as a dangerous radical intent on putting other dangerous radicals on the bench. Ed Whelan, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, slammed another potential Obama judicial nominee, Deval Patrick, the African American governor of Massachusetts, as “a racialist

extremist and judicial supremacist.”

The Sotomayor nomination fight put in sharp relief the political calculation being urged by right-wing strategists that Republicans should not worry about alienating Latino voters and should use the nomination as a chance to rally the party’s right-wing base. Pat Buchanan made the racial calculus clear:

The imperative of the GOP is not to appease a city that went 93-7 for Obama, but to win back its lost voters.

In 2008, Hispanics, according to the latest figures, were 7.4 percent of the total vote. White folks were 74 percent, 10 times as large. Adding just 1 percent to the white vote is thus the same as adding 10 percent to the candidate’s Hispanic vote.

If John McCain, instead of getting 55 percent of the white vote, got the 58 percent George W. Bush got in 2004, that would have had the same impact as lifting his share of the Hispanic vote from 32 percent to 62 percent.

But even Ronald Reagan never got over 44 percent of the Hispanic vote. Yet, he and Richard Nixon both got around 65 percent of the white vote.

When Republican identification is down to 20 percent, but 40 percent of Americans identify themselves as conservatives, do Republicans need a GPS to tell them which way to go?

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*-Pat Buchanan*

Why did McCain fail to win the white conservative Democrats Hillary Clinton swept in the primaries? He never addressed or cared about their issues.

These are the folks whose jobs have been outsourced to China and Asia, who pay the

price of affirmative action when their sons and daughters are pushed aside to make room for the Sonia Sotomayors. These are the folks who want the borders secured and the illegals sent back....

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### A consistent line of attack

There is seemingly no policy issue for which right-wing pundits cannot find a racial resentment angle. Glenn Beck, for example, has insisted that every

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single policy initiative that the Obama administration is trying to advance in Congress is grounded in the president's supposed obsession with getting white Americans to pay reparations for slavery, or as Beck put it, "settling old racial scores" (even though the president is on record in opposition to reparations).

Earlier this year when economist Robert Reich testified that stimulus funds should benefit not only white construction workers but also other groups of workers, some right-wing pundits like Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin wrongly suggested that the Obama administration was plotting to keep stimulus funds away from white construction workers altogether and have them sent instead to "[Rep. Charlie] Rangel's pet constituents."

Right-wing attacks on ACORN and glee over its recent problems abound with imagery of urban corruption. At the recent How to Take Back America conference session on voter fraud and ACORN, Republican activist Kris Kobach, who is running to be Secretary of State in Kansas, asserted that in America nowadays no one is disenfranchised because of the color of their skin; it is now voters like those in the room who are disenfranchised when their votes are cancelled out by the supposed voter fraud carried out by ACORN and its allies. On right-wing pundit Michele Malkin's blog, a commenter responding to

her "Obama is ACORN. ACORN is Obama" diatribe, wrote, "Now as President B. Hussein Obama he has credibility as a marxist, black nationalist and Chicago street hustler/organizer but little else. He could no more disown ACORN than he could Jeremiah Wright or his Typical White Grandmother."

### Health care reform

At first glance, health care reform would not seem as likely an issue for racial wedge politics. But racially charged arguments have been made alongside the by-now familiar charges of government takeovers, socialism, fascism, and death panels. Investors Business Daily and Fox Nation teamed up to portray health care reform as "affirmative action on steroids" and to suggest that reform is actually a back-door way to implement reparations for slavery:

The racial grievance industry under health care reform could be calling the shots in the emergency room, the operating room, the medical room, even medical school. As Terence Jeffrey, editor at large of Human Events puts it, not only our wealth, but also our health will be redistributed.

At the recent How to Take Back America conference organized by far-right doyenne Phyllis Schlafly and her heir-apparent, right-wing radio host and activist Janet Folger Porter, a panelist attacked health care

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*-Comment on Michele Malkin's blog*

reform saying it would amount to a reenactment of slavery by our first black president, this time with doctors being enslaved. Bishop Harry Jackson, the Religious Right's favorite African American minister, has denounced health care reform proposals that he claims would divert health care resources from wealthier to poorer Americans as "reverse classism."

Two academics, Marc Hetherington of Vanderbilt University and Jonathan Weiler of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, recently found an "extraordinarily strong correlation between racial resentment of blacks and opposition to health care reform," a relationship that did not exist during the Clinton health care debate.

## Blaming the Black Church for the Obama 'Curse'

Religious Right leaders have long tried to build alliances with the Black Church by focusing on areas in which many churchgoing African Americans hold more conservative views than many of their progressive political allies. But in a strange twist on this strategy, some Religious Right leaders, black and white, are suggesting that Black churchgoers must repent for having voted for Obama. Before the election, Bishop Harry Jackson and others suggested that voting for Obama would be voting against God. But because America did elect Obama, the nation is now living under a curse, declares Janet Porter, and America must repent. At How to Take Back America, Porter recounted the story of attending a showing of a new “documentary” portraying legal abortion as black genocide, after which a speaker urged people to confess if they had voted for pro-choice candidates like President Obama. An African American woman, Porter says, rose and prayed, “Forgive me Lord, for putting race over you.”



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## Other race or race-coded strategies from the Right

The “birther” movement – the ongoing theory and ludicrous legal campaign alleging that Barack Obama was born in Kenya and therefore not a legitimate president – is all about portraying the president as an African usurper, not one of us. While some right-wing pundits and political leaders have distanced themselves from the “birthers,” there has been no real fallout for those who continue to insinuate that Obama is not an American: birther Janet Porter was recently lavished with praise by presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee and members of Congress who

attended her conference.

Another thread of right-wing attacks on Obama is that his Christianity is a fraudulent cover and that he is a secret Muslim. Author Frank Gaffney, also welcomed at conservative political conferences, has even accused Obama of sending coded signals to Muslim extremists indicating that he’s willing to accept Sharia law (of course this anti-Obama theory is wildly inconsistent with right-wing complaints about Obama’s support for LGBT equality, but that’s never been a problem for the Right). The depth of anti-Muslim hostility and hysteria were reflected in wildly inflammatory charges that the Council on American Islamic Relations was infiltrating Congress with spies and putting national security at risk, all based on an organizational memo that it was seeking to place young people in internship positions.

Still another theme is the return of “states’ rights” on steroids, such as Texas Gov. Rick Perry earlier this year suggesting that Texas should consider seceding.

## Other Racial Politics on the Right

In addition to the multiple-front efforts to diminish support for the Obama administration by fanning racial resentment among working class white Americans, Religious Right leaders continue to wage wedge campaigns designed to use issues like abortion and marriage equality to try to divide churchgoing African Americans from the progressive movement. Of course, it’s a challenge to pursue both strategies simultaneously. Thus we were treated to the somewhat astonishing display of Harry Jackson pleading with right-wing activists at the Values Voters Summit to stop sounding so racist in their attacks on Obama because it was getting in the way of his ability to mobilize black clergy for his anti-gay campaign in the District of Columbia—a campaign which itself fans racial and class divisions in an effort to defeat marriage equality.

Opponents of legalized abortion are making a new push to convince African Americans that legal abortion is genocide being waged against black people. Anti-choice activist Day Gardner has said of Obama, “his skin may be black but he doesn’t care about black babies.” Along the same line, Rep. Trent Franks, who called President Obama “an enemy of humanity” at How to Take Back America, also touted his “Susan B. Anthony – Frederick Douglass Pre-Natal Non Discrimination Act,” which would ban abortions carried out on the basis of race or sex.

He bragged that the bill would put members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other liberals in a bind, because they don't want to support discrimination, but that if they do vote for the bill, they will be acknowledging that "there's a person involved."

### Real Dangers

The election of Barack Obama as president was rightly considered a milestone in American history and evidence of progress in overcoming racial barriers. But that progress has undoubtedly unleashed a backlash against liberalism and the federal government generally and against Obama in particular— and some of that backlash is calculated to create or worsen racial resentment, a poison that can be extremely toxic.

## THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA HAS UNDOUBTEDLY UNLEASHED A BACKLASH AGAINST LIBERALISM AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT GENERALLY AND AGAINST OBAMA IN PARTICULAR

The Southern Poverty Law Center recently reported on the revival of anti-government extremism in the form of the Patriot movement, and that movement's ties to racial supremacists and xenophobes:

The original movement also had its mainstream backers, but they were largely confined to talk radio; today, Beck is just one of the well-known cable TV news personalities to air fictitious conspiracies and other unlikely Patriot ideas. CNN's Lou Dobbs has treated the so-called Aztlan conspiracy as a bona fide concern and questioned the validity of Obama's birth certificate despite his own network's definitive debunking of that claim. On MSNBC, commentator Pat Buchanan suggested recently that white Americans are now suffering "exactly what was done to black folks." On FOX News, regular contributor Dick Morris said, "Those crazies in Montana who say, 'We're going to kill ATF agents because the U.N.'s going to take over' — well, they're beginning to have a case."

Also in the SPLC report:

A key difference this time is that the federal government — the entity that almost the entire radical right views as its primary enemy — is

headed by a black man. That, coupled with high levels of non-white immigration and a decline in the percentage of whites overall in America, has helped to racialize the Patriot movement, which in the past was not primarily motivated by race hate. One result has been a remarkable rash of domestic terror incidents since the presidential campaign, most of them related to anger over the election of Barack Obama.

Indeed, the threat of violence is only just below the surface. At the How to Take Back America conference, it was suggested that "the Second Amendment" would be the best response to government plans to force people to take H1N1 vaccine or to quarantine people with flu. In another workshop about recognizing

the signs of living under communism and fascism, people were exhorted to buy more guns and ammunition. When someone asked how to respond if the government tried to take them, the answer shouted by one participant was "one bullet at a time."

Just this month, the Boston Globe reported on an internal Secret Service report on a record number of threats against the president:

The unprecedented number of death threats against President Obama, a rise in racist hate groups, and a new wave of antigovernment fervor threaten to overwhelm the US Secret Service, according to government officials and reports, raising new questions about the 144-year-old agency's overall mission.

### Conclusion

Republican strategist and commentator Pat Buchanan has complained that presidential candidate John McCain didn't "drape Jeremiah Wright around the neck of Barack Obama, as Lee Atwater draped Willie Horton around the neck of Michael Dukakis." The media would have howled, he said, but McCain might be president. Many right-wing pundits and political leaders seem to have taken Buchanan's ideas to heart: no accusation about President Obama, no conspiracy theory about his administration's actions, no inflammatory charges designed to fan racial resentment seem to be beyond the pale. The time to start holding these racial arsonists accountable is now, before the anger they are stoking leads to irreversible acts of violence. ■



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