

It Was Always Headed Here

Obama invited some serious thinking, an invitation that's been extended many times in the past.

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Last Wednesday, [Barack Obama](#) finally found himself in a role that he had previously managed to avoid: that of explaining the history and challenges of race to America. It is a potentially treacherous place to be—and that he was there was partly his own fault. Obama could have moved more nimbly, more deftly and more pre-emptively to distance himself from the jarring—and, arguably, anti-American—remarks of his outspoken former pastor, Jeremiah Wright Jr.

But even had Wright not been a factor, it was inevitable that Obama would have been forced to make a major speech on race. He and his campaign always have been defined, in part, in racial terms. That says more about America than about Obama. He has tried hard to make the case that his candidacy is more about health care, economic opportunity and getting out of Iraq than about race. Yet he cannot escape perceptions and preconceptions based on the color of his skin. (It is telling that in our uniquely American taxonomy, Obama is almost always described as a black man with a white mother and never as a white man with a black father.) Many, of course, see his race in a positive light. Americans are eager to see his candidacy as a sign that racial divisions can be overcome, that we have moved beyond (or that he can move us beyond) the racial acrimony at the base of so much pain.

But it was not just such benign, generally unstated assumptions that forced Obama to play the role of racial teacher. It was also an unending stream of race-baiting silliness emanating from people with strong opinions about his candidacy. There was Bill Clinton, who seemed inclined to make Obama out as a latter-day Jesse Jackson. There was Gloria Steinem, who, in an op-ed, stopped just short of saying it would be unfair for a black man—instead of a white woman—to be offered the keys to the White House. Then there was Geraldine Ferraro, famous largely because she was once selected to run for vice president. She believes Obama "would not be in this position" if he had been born a white man. Never mind that most of us would probably not be in our current positions if we were fundamentally something other than what we are. Never mind that Hillary Clinton's candidacy would not exist were she not a woman—since no man could

run largely on the basis of credentials garnered by being the spouse of a former president (at least not until same sex-marriage is more acceptable than it is now).

To his credit, Obama chose not to respond to the silliness with more silliness—which, given the touchiness of race and the seeming inability of different groups to see the same picture in the same way, was probably the politically clever thing to do. Instead, he invited Americans of all hues to engage in a serious, sustained thinking through of our shared history and to focus on the continuing ramifications of slavery, America's "original sin."

It is an invitation that has been extended many times in the past, by orators even more eloquent than Obama—Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. among them. The lesson of history seems to be that the invitation is accepted only in times of crisis, when racial divisions, or race-related violence, threaten to tear the country apart.

Obama's hope is that this time is different. So it would have been nice to hear him talk more about why it is different, and what will actually cause us to come together to deal with income disparity, segregated schools and the unhealed scars of past inequities. What will cause blacks to put aside their anger, whites to set aside their resentments and people of all colors to eschew the dance of blame and denial that makes coalescing around common problems difficult? His only answer is that we have no choice. But of course we do.

Forty years ago, President Lyndon Johnson's Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released an acclaimed (and reviled) report that attempted to explain the urban riots of that era. That report challenged America to acknowledge its history of discrimination and its lingering effects and to end racial inequality. This year the Eisenhower Foundation, which considers itself the commission's successor, issued a report saying that not nearly enough has changed. Its CEO, Alan Curtis, like Obama, is banking on the hope that maybe this time is different. By focusing on the educational and economic problems that affect Americans of all colors, Curtis aspires to stimulate a new movement to meet the challenge the commission issued so many years ago.

But if the past is a guide, it seems more likely that the foundation's new report, like Obama's beautifully crafted speech, will stimulate some interesting discussions but little action. Indeed, Obama may well find some of his words hurled back at him by politicians, or their surrogates, less subtle of mind. They'll be intent on making him out to be not a transcendent, unifying figure, but just another black man wallowing in a history many Americans would rather forget.

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