

From *The Los Angeles Times*:

Obama's post-racial promise

Barack Obama seduced whites with a vision of their racial innocence precisely to coerce them into acting out of a racial motivation.

By Shelby Steele
November 5, 2008

Shelby Steele is an author, columnist and senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

For the first time in human history, a largely white nation has elected a black man to be its paramount leader. And the cultural meaning of this unprecedented convergence of dark skin and ultimate power will likely become -- at least for a time -- a national obsession. In fact, the Obama presidency will always be read as an allegory. Already we are as curious about the cultural significance of his victory as we are about its political significance.

Does his victory mean that America is now officially beyond racism? Does it finally complete the work of the civil rights movement so that racism is at last dismissible as an explanation of black difficulty? Can the good Revs. Jackson and Sharpton now safely retire to the seashore? Will the Obama victory dispel the twin stigmas that have tormented black and white Americans for so long -- that blacks are inherently inferior and whites inherently racist? Doesn't a black in the Oval Office put the lie to both black inferiority and white racism? Doesn't it imply a "post-racial" America? And shouldn't those of us -- white and black -- who did not vote for Mr. Obama take pride in what his victory says about our culture even as we mourn our political loss?

Answering no to such questions is like saying no to any idealism; it seems callow. How could a decent person not hope for all these possibilities, or not give America credit for electing its first black president? And yet an element of Barack Obama's success was always his use of the idealism implied in these questions as political muscle. His talent was to project an idealized vision of a post-racial America -- and then to have that vision define political decency. Thus, a failure to support Obama politically implied a failure of decency.

Obama's special charisma -- since his famous 2004 convention speech -- always came much more from the racial idealism he embodied than from his political ideas. In fact, this was his only true political originality. On the level of public policy, he was quite unremarkable. His economics were the redistributive axioms of old-fashioned Keynesianism; his social thought was recycled Great Society. But all this policy boilerplate was freshened up -- given an air of "change" -- by the dreamy post-racial and post-ideological kitsch he dressed it in.

This worked politically for Obama because it tapped into a deep longing in American life -- the longing on the part of whites to escape the stigma of racism. In running for the presidency -- and presenting himself to a majority white nation -- Obama knew intuitively that he was dealing with a stigmatized people. He knew whites were stigmatized as being prejudiced, and that they hated this situation and literally longed for ways to disprove the stigma.

Obama is what I have called a "bargainer" -- a black who says to whites, "I will never presume that you are racist if you will not hold my race against me." Whites become enthralled with bargainers out of gratitude for the presumption of innocence they offer. Bargainers relieve their anxiety about being white and, for this gift of trust, bargainers are often rewarded with a kind of halo.

Obama's post-racial idealism told whites the one thing they most wanted to hear: America had essentially contained the evil of racism to the point at which it was no longer a serious barrier to black advancement. Thus, whites became enchanted enough with Obama to become his political base. It was Iowa -- 95% white -- that made him a contender. Blacks came his way only after he won enough white voters to be a plausible candidate.

Of course, it is true that white America has made great progress in curbing racism over the last 40 years. I believe, for example, that Colin Powell might well have been elected president in 1996 had he run against a then rather weak Bill Clinton. It is exactly because America has made such dramatic racial progress that whites today chafe so under the racist stigma. So I don't think whites really want change from Obama as much as they want documentation of change that has already occurred. They want him in the White House first of all as evidence, certification and recognition.

But there is an inherent contradiction in all this. When whites -- especially today's younger generation -- proudly support Obama for his post-racialism, they unwittingly embrace race as their primary motivation. They think and act racially, not post-racially. The point is that a post-racial society is a bargainer's ploy: It seduces whites with a vision of their racial innocence precisely to coerce them into acting out of a racial motivation. A real post-racialist could not be bargained with and would not care about displaying or documenting his racial innocence. Such a person would evaluate Obama politically rather than culturally.

Certainly things other than bargaining account for Obama's victory. He was a talented campaigner. He was reassuringly articulate on many issues -- a quality that Americans now long for in a president. And, in these last weeks, he was clearly pushed over the top by the economic terrors that beset the nation. But it was the peculiar cultural manipulation of racial bargaining that brought him to the political dance. It inflated him as a candidate, and it may well inflate him as a president.

There is nothing to suggest that Obama will lead America into true post-racialism. His campaign style revealed a tweaker of the status quo, not a revolutionary. Culturally and racially, he is likely to leave America pretty much where he found her.

But what about black Americans? Won't an Obama presidency at last lead us across a centuries-old gulf of alienation into the recognition that America really is our country? Might this milestone not infuse black America with a new American nationalism? And wouldn't this be revolutionary in itself? Like most Americans, I would love to see an Obama presidency nudge things in this direction. But the larger reality is the profound disparity between black and white Americans that will persist even under the glow of an Obama presidency. The black illegitimacy rate remains at 70%. Blacks did worse on the SAT in 2000 than in 1990. Fifty-five percent of all federal prisoners are black, though we are only 13% of the population. The academic

achievement gap between blacks and whites persists even for the black middle class. All this disparity will continue to accuse blacks of inferiority and whites of racism -- thus refueling our racial politics -- despite the level of melanin in the president's skin.

The torture of racial conflict in America periodically spits up a new faith that idealism can help us "overcome" -- America's favorite racial word. If we can just have the right inspiration, a heroic role model, a symbolism of hope, a new sense of possibility. It is an American cultural habit to endure our racial tensions by periodically alighting on little islands of fresh hope and idealism. But true reform, like the civil rights victories of the '60s, never happens until people become exhausted with their suffering. Then they don't care who the president is.

Presidents follow the culture; they don't lead it. I hope for a competent president.