

# **THE OBAMA ERA— RENEWAL OF KING'S DREAM OR A NEW JIM CROW?**

## **BAMN'S CALL FOR REAL HOPE**

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### **CONTENTS**

#### **I. The Obama Era**

1. The Obama Candidacy: On the Verge of an Historic Step Forward.....	1
2. The Key Question: the Growing Political and Moral Maturity of the American People.....	3
3. The Obama Movement and the Question of Leadership.....	4
4. The Other Side of American History: the Role of White Racism; the Shamefaced Racism of the New Jim Crow .....	5
5. How American History Has Really Changed for the Better.....	8

#### **II. The New Jim Crow**

6. A Balance Sheet: King's Dream vs. a New Jim Crow .....	10
7. "Racism without Racists"/"Racists without Racism" .....	11
8. The Emergence of the New Jim Crow.....	12
9. Racism Today .....	14

#### **III. The Obama Paradox**

10. The Real Significance of the Obama Campaign: Redefining What National Leadership Means .....	19
11. The Meaning of an Obama Victory: The Political Maturity of the American People .....	21
12. The Paradox of the Obama Candidacy.....	21
13. Barack Obama and the Historic Struggle within the Democratic Party.....	24
14. The Two Obamas .....	26

#### **IV. Obama and the Struggle for the New Civil Rights Movement**

15. The New Jim Crow Clinton-Style .....	30
16. The New Jim Crow McCain-Palin-Style.....	36
17. The Importance of Defending Obama against Racism; Fighting Racism in the Era of the New Jim Crow .....	41
18. Why BAMN Cannot Endorse Barack Obama .....	47
19. Obama's Philadelphia Speech: "A More Perfect Union"—The New Atlanta Compromise and the New Jim Crow.....	50
20. Renewing the Struggle for Equality in the Obama Era.....	64



## I. The Obama Era

### 1. The Obama Candidacy: On the Verge of an Historic Step Forward

1. In the face of a downward-spiraling economic crisis, the American people are on the verge of electing the nation's first black president. Most generally accepted predictors of electoral success indicate that Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, should be elected the next President of the United States on November 4.

The likelihood of this outcome grows in the wake of the financial crisis of fall 2008, the gargantuan government bailout, and an overall American economy in decline—a situation which frightens most Americans and for which most Americans blame the policies and attitudes of the Republican Party and the Republican administration of George W. Bush. In the light of these conditions, most political polls and most political commentators agree in predicting failure for the Republican Party and success for the Democrats in the November 2008 Congressional and presidential elections.

Should these indicators hold true, the United States will be inaugurating Barack Obama next January as the nation's first black president, and President Obama will be working with a relatively friendly Congress dominated by his own party.

2. Almost all Americans recognize that the election of the first black president would be an event of historic importance.

To millions of black and other nonwhite Americans it would be far more than that. It would be an assertion of their long-denied rightful place in American history, a milestone in the struggle against white racism and for equality. To millions of nonwhite people around the world, the election of Barack Obama as the American president would represent a vindication of their own basic dignity and self-respect in a world still defined by racial inequality and dominated by racism.

Furthermore, throughout American history white racism has been a profound and pervasive force, decisively distorting American politics irrationally in a way that has undermined the ability of millions of Americans to act—indeed to think—rationally about their own economic and social interests. Ever providing the rich and powerful with a divide-and-conquer strategy to prevent united mass struggle for social progress, racism has, over and over again, been the key factor in delaying the victory or securing the defeat of human progress.

Precisely because of the importance of the irrational factor of white racism in our history, Barack Obama's victory in the November elections must be recognized as far more than a question of the victory of one very gifted, moderately progressive black American or of his moderately

progressive party. It is a question of the American people, in their majority, asserting themselves on the side of what is rational in American history and against what has been most irrational and ugly. It would represent a vindication by the American electorate of their own progressive and rational convictions—of their own rational self-interest and their own most humane and large-minded principles. It would represent, even taking into account all necessary qualifications, truly a victory of reason against unreason.

3. Nor should the fact of the economic crisis be used, as it has been by certain political commentators, to diminish the significance of an Obama victory, as if the economic situation would guarantee victory to ANY Democrat in this election year. This attitude ignores the fact that a period of economic crisis could easily provide ideal ground, as it has in the past, for the arousal of irrational racist fears—in this case especially irrational fears of placing the presidency in black hands at such a time. Also, explaining an Obama victory as an inevitable consequence of the economic crisis, tends to belittle the factor of the considerable abilities Barack Obama must have in order to have brought himself to this moment in history.

Given the role of racism in American history, Barack Obama has to be an unusually gifted politician and, more than that, in a number of respects a rather remarkable person indeed to be in the position he is. He has to have had a great deal of downright courage simply to make and stick to the decision to run for President against the abundance of counterindications in American history and against abundant advice that now is not the time to change that history. Many commentators have remarked on Obama's "coolness under pressure," his extraordinary discipline, self-control, and determination. He has to have human qualities as a leader that are strong enough to force their way through the traditional American white blind spot that has blinded millions of white Americans specifically to the leadership qualities of black people. Even a new Great Depression would not be enough on its own to force light through that blind spot.

4. For, over and over again in American history, racial and religious bigotries have overridden economic self-interest and the exercise of reason in the political behavior of millions of white Americans. On the basis of such mass irrationality, cultivated by demagogues, the Slave Power ruled the country until a great and bloody civil war broke its hold. On the basis of this irrationality, throughout our history, worker's strikes and unions have been dragged down to defeat. On the basis of this irrationality, throughout our history, poor and working-class people have supported leaders and parties whose policies have made the poor poorer, intensified the exploitation of labor, and increased inequality and injustice.

The challenge facing the American people this year is precisely the question whether the electorate is ready, in its majority, to set aside the irrationality of white racial prejudice in favor of the rationality of their own urgent needs and interests. Until now, the answer to that question in American history has been no. For a majority to change that historic no to yes would represent far more than a tribute to Senator Obama's undoubted talents as a leader of his own party and national

electoral politician. It would represent far more than the modest electoral shift to the left that Senator Obama and his party's timid policies could accomplish. It would represent a major breakthrough in the political consciousness of the American people themselves—and in particular on the part of the American workers, poor, youth, and minorities who share the greatest frustration and anger with the current economic and political situation and bring the greatest hopes and the highest expectations to the Obama candidacy and to the prospect of an Obama victory.

## **2. The Key Question: the Growing Political and Moral Maturity of the American People**

5. It is this factor—the importance of the Obama candidacy to assessing the political character and consciousness of the American electorate, to determining the political—and, in a sense, the moral—maturity of the American people, that is the decisive, the key, the fundamental question of this moment in American history. This means that Senator Obama's success in securing the nomination of his party in itself represents a great step forward, for the Obama victory in the presidential primary contest showed that the progressive ranks of one of the two main parties of the American electoral system were prepared to insist that now is the time to take this step, and take this step over against the determined opposition of a section of their party's national leadership.

For an electoral majority to make a similar decision in the November general election, against a considerable section of the nation's political leadership and its demagogic scare tactics and over against much of the weight of the nation's real political history, would represent an even greater moment in the raising of the political consciousness of the American people. For this progressive political majority to build the support for Obama to a sufficiently massive proportion to impose their decision on the nation's undemocratic electoral system, will represent an accomplishment by the progressive sections of the American people that will tend to empower and embolden the American people themselves on the basis of their own most progressive consciousness and impulses.

It is this self-assertion of their own progressive character in a manner calculated to change history for the better that could make the November election an historical moment of real democracy, surely incomplete and inadequate in itself, but in its potential full of hope. These mass-democratic and somewhat defiantly progressive elements in the mass movement supporting Obama—in many respects in stark contrast to the moderately conservative and timidly progressive character of their candidate himself—have given the Obama movement the character of an excited and inspiring struggle for the cause of social justice. Candidate Obama's promises of a new birth of hope in America may remain all-too-comfortably vague and platitudinous in keeping with the long, not very honest tradition of American electoral cliché-mongering. But millions of his mobilized and inspired supporters have in mind a very real agenda of hope for social justice, economic rationality, equality, an end to militarism and imperialist arrogance, and the empowering of the disadvantaged and oppressed.

### **3. The Obama Movement and the Question of Leadership**

6. BAMN congratulates the American people, and especially the rank and file activists of the Obama movement, for this historic step forward and the broad hope for progressive change awakened with it.

The realization of this hope depends on the development, in this new historical period, of new leadership, new organization, and new levels of consciousness. These new developments must start with the inspiration and raised expectations of the Obama movement and with the tendencies to deepen understanding of the nature of modern society and to reopen the question of methods of political action provoked by the global economic crisis and the failure of American militarism abroad.

For BAMN, an organization dedicated to rebuilding the struggle for equality, it is crucial to appreciate the full meaning of this moment in American history. We must understand the depth of the importance of the likely election of Barack Obama as president, but we must also understand the limitations of the importance of this election and the dangers of overestimating what this election alone can actually accomplish.

7. Moreover, the ways in which Barack Obama has conducted his campaign bring out sharply the differences between the methods of modern American electoralism and the methods necessary to rebuild a mass movement for equality and social justice. At key moments it has seemed as if a central premise of Senator Obama's electoral strategy has been the conviction that a black American could only be elected president by taking care to give the impression that the struggle for racial equality is no longer an urgent matter, no longer the ongoing national crisis that it actually is. In American political history the failure of leadership to recognize the practical urgency of the question of racial equality has always meant a failure in theory and practice to address the overall question of social and economic inequality. Yet the growing economic inequality in the United States and in the world is the most urgent question of our time. In true terms, no leadership can succeed which fails to place this question at the center of its consciousness and action.

Yet the electoral campaign of Senator Obama has been all too like the campaign of his conservative rival Senator McCain in its failure to address this fundamental question of growing inequality and grinding poverty. It is hard to imagine what Senator Obama's slogans about "new hope" and "fundamental change" mean in a nation and a world in which the poor get poorer.

8. The election of Barack Obama as America's first black president could represent an important development which could favor the accomplishment of BAMN's difficult historical task of building a new independent civil rights movement. Or, ironically, the negative features of his campaign's attitude toward the struggle for equality could mean that the victory of Senator Obama and his party could actually make it much more difficult for that necessary movement to be built.

Whether this development makes our job easier or more difficult, BAMN's supporters must have as deep an understanding as possible of this important moment in American and world history. The future of the struggle for full immigrant rights and the struggle for affirmative action and integration—and therefore the struggle for equality in America—will depend on our ability to orient BAMN's work correctly in the face of this new turn in American history.

While BAMN shares the sense of millions of Americans that a victory for Barack Obama would represent an important step forward in American history, the manner in which this victory is being achieved, in particular with regard to the struggle for equality, makes it, however ironically, impossible for BAMN to endorse Senator Obama's candidacy. The truth is that the Obama campaign's ambiguities, vacillations, and plainly wrong positions on the struggle for equality raise grave concerns, which BAMN has an obligation to address theoretically and in the most practical terms possible. The progressive fighters for the new hope of the Obama movement deserve nothing less of us.

#### **4. The Other Side of American History: the Role of White Racism; the Shamefaced Racism of the New Jim Crow**

9. To begin with, it is necessary to confront the other side of the political polarization that we are witnessing in the face of the imminent election of the nation's first black president and the evolution of the economic crisis: a resurgence of racist irrationality.

BAMN must pay extremely close attention to the ways in which the Obama candidacy has become a target for the mobilization by demagogues of the racist forces in American society. This racist mobilization is especially dangerous because it has been driven, not by some right-wing paranoid fringe, but by national leaders of the two main parties in the course of the mainstream national presidential electoral process itself.

First the presidential primary campaign of Senator Hillary Clinton, at a certain point despairing of defeating Senator Obama by any rational and legitimate strategy, cultivated a set of coded appeals to the racist fears of white voters in the Democratic primaries. This did not produce electoral success for Senator Clinton, but it did sanction the irrational racist fears and hatred of millions of Democratic primary voters, whom Senator Clinton and her surrogates provided with a supposedly respectable vocabulary in which to couch their racial prejudices.

Then, as the fall presidential campaign of Republican Senator John McCain similarly despaired of the success of any rational strategy for winning the election, the McCain campaign predictably built on the ugly precedents established by Senator Clinton.

Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was delegated the role of demagogic attack dog. At large campaign rallies at which Palin absurdly accused Senator Obama of "palling

around with terrorists," elements in the Republican crowds shouted back "Terrorist!," "Traitor!," "Nobama! Nobama!," and "Kill him! Kill him!"

Meanwhile at his own campaign rallies, McCain was firing up his crowds with a litany of attacks on Obama punctuated with "Who is the real Obama?" The crowd shouted back the expected "Terrorist!," "Traitor!," and the rest. Racist epithets abound in the McCain-Palin crowds, and the sale of racist memorabilia at Republican and conservative events this year has been reported in the news media.

The McCain-Palin policy has so emboldened the paranoid and racist elements in the Republican Party that McCain himself has been forced into a series of public statements taking a sort of polite, minimal exception to some of the more extreme paranoias (obsessed repetitions of the Internet slanders crazily claiming that Senator Obama is actually a Muslim [= "extremist"] or an Arab [= "terrorist"], because his middle name is Hussein). Yet McCain's own public behavior ("that one" in the second presidential debate), the overly polite and feeble character of his "dissociations" from the Muslim-baiting, his pretending there is some question who Obama really is, and his running-mate Palin's reckless rhetoric about "palling around with terrorists" have at least exploited, certainly encouraged, and to some extent spawned the irrational ugliness.

With understandable concern, on 15 October, during an exchange in the third presidential debate on "negative campaigning," Obama himself quoted the cries of "Terrorist!" and "Kill him!" at Palin rallies and pointed out that Palin had not offered so much as a word of objection to this sort of behavior among her crowds. In reply, not only did McCain not condemn the murderous language or declare that in the future his running mate would object to cries of "Terrorist!" and "Kill him!" from her crowds. On the contrary, he ignored these death threats against Obama, seemed to treat the people making them at his and Palin's rallies as an irrelevant, harmless "fringe"—for which he took no responsibility—and gushed defensively, rather pathetically, and unconvincingly about how "the people that come to our rallies" are "the most dedicated, patriotic men and women that are in this nation, and they're great citizens," as if the issue was excessive criticism of demagoguery, racism, and death threats. McCain then defended his demagogic methods by wrapping himself in Hillary Clinton's use of the same demagogic methods in her Democratic Party primary contest against Senator Obama.

Both Clinton and McCain have had to present their racist appeals in coded terms that most white mainstream journalists and academics have dutifully accepted as nonracist. This is a situation typical of the period that BAMN has characterized as the New Jim Crow, one of the features of which is a public, official stance of embarrassment over and opposition to open expressions of racism, while the coded and disguised racism that is actually on the rise is not only not confronted and opposed but in fact increasingly sanctioned and promoted.

History has shown that the toleration of coded, "respectable" appeals to racism from the mainstream has the most terrible of consequences. Once antisemitism was treated as a certain fashionable excess of nationalist zeal on the part of the German political and intellectual elite—an

unpleasantness, perhaps, but hardly a serious problem except among a few crazed, irrelevant fringe fanatics. Then the fringe was the Nazi government. Then Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Both Senators Clinton and McCain have stood before the tragic memorials and muttered, piously, "Never again." But their behavior in 2008 has declared, for all with ears to hear, the terrible message, "Again! Again!"

10. Even though most polls and most commentators agree in predicting the success of Obama and his Democratic Party in 2008, the role of race and racism in American history makes clear that it would be a mistake to take Obama's victory for granted.

Simply the fact that Senator Obama is a black American means that the usual predictors are more likely to be wrong than would be the case were he a white candidate. For millions of white Americans, it has always been difficult at historical moments such as this to set aside knee-jerk prejudices and paranoias, fearing steps in the direction of equality. Over and over again, many white Americans have allowed the exercise of their right to vote to be distorted by the racist appeals of demagogues urging them to defend what are actually unfair, irrational, and even imaginary elements of white privilege.

For this reason alone—the irrational factor of white racial prejudice—the usual political indicators are not as reliable as usual. Polls and surveys often fail to register this factor of white racism adequately, and journalists regularly avoid dealing with racism. Part of the reason for this failure to take account of racism is that pollsters do an inadequate job of looking for it and journalists are content to remain ignorant of it. Part of the reason for this failure is that those occasional efforts to get at the specific role of racism rest on a fallacious method of attempting to abstract racism from the overall reactionary and irrationalist prejudices with which racism has been inextricably bound up throughout American history. And in part racism is difficult for pollsters and journalists to take account of because many prejudiced white voters misrepresent their actual views to pollsters, because of embarrassment about the open expression of their racism.

11. This embarrassment is a revealing expression of the status today of one of the fundamental contradictions of American history.

In theory, our nation was founded on the principle of equality (Jefferson's "all men are created equal," Lincoln's "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"). Americans are taught that their history has centered on an inexorable process through which that principle has been increasingly made real. Yet, in reality, America has always been a profoundly unequal society—and unequal in a diversity of ways. Differing in different periods in degree, with some groups gaining and new groups assuming the role of primary targets of discrimination and scapegoating, the reality is that all of American history has been characterized by economic, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and other social inequalities.

And, in reality, the significant progress in the struggle for equality in the US has not occurred as a result of any automatic historical process. On the contrary. The great gains in equality have resulted from the struggles of great mass movements, vast social upheavals—struggles ordinarily opposed by the economic and political establishments of the time, elites that have opposed the movements for social equality in the very name of an elitist interpretation of the "founding principles" of the nation. It is the relative success of these mass upheavals in overcoming the opposition of the elite establishments of their time that has made the United States a more democratic and more egalitarian society—not any automatic realization of Jeffersonian or Constitutional principles and not any benign intentions on the part of the economic and political powers that be.

In the most recent of these periods of mass upheaval, the civil rights struggles of the 1960s created a sort of balance of power in American society that made open and explicit expressions of racism and the continued retailing of racist stereotypes a thing of the past, along with the de jure segregation and legally sanctioned discrimination of the Jim Crow era. But the forces of racism and reaction regrouped in the late 1960s and 1970s, fostering a New Jim Crow whose aim has been to halt and, to the extent possible, reverse the gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

It is the balance of power between the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the New Jim Crow that accounts for the strange, embarrassed character of the coded and camouflaged racism of the presidential election of 2008. To understand this strange, shamefaced racism and learn how to fight it, it is necessary to leave behind the myths and mysticism that surround and obscure the history of the struggle for equality in the United States.

## **5. How American History Has Really Changed for the Better**

12. After the first Revolution created the nation as an independent republic, three great mass social movements have altered American history fundamentally for the better.

From the 1830s through the 1870s, the mass radical abolitionist movement waged an intransigent struggle that culminated in the end of slavery through the Union victory in the Civil War and the strivings for racial equality expressed in Radical Reconstruction. Bold, courageous, and independent abolitionist leaders like Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and John Brown confronted the nation with new models of political action and new definitions of liberty, equality, and citizenship itself.

The great class struggle of the American labor movement that came to assume mighty proportions in the decades following the Civil War culminated in the collective victory of the CIO and the principle of industrial unionism during the Great Depression of the 1930s. With these victories of organized labor's collective struggle, new economic rights and expectations became de facto principles of the nation's historic social contract.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s resumed Frederick Douglass's fight against Jim Crow and the defense of the principles of Radical Reconstruction, forced the implementation of *Brown v. Board*, broke down the citadels of de jure racial segregation in the South, launched the assault on de facto segregation throughout the country, and forced the nation to adopt a policy of affirmative action to make real the promise of equality for its nonwhite citizens.

13. The most important question of American history today is whether there are leaders ready and able to build a fourth great social movement which can build on the great struggles of the past and renew the fight for equality in a way that can win. There are two important factors that favor the building of that leadership: the great Movement of 2006 for Immigrant Rights and the existence of BAMN.

There is also one rather complicated set of factors that, taken as a whole, sum up today's greatest obstacle to building a new, victorious struggle for equality. These factors can appropriately be referred to as the New Jim Crow.

Understanding the importance of the Obama campaign requires, more than anything else, assessing the Obama candidacy, the prospect of an Obama presidency, and, most important of all, the Obama movement, in relationship to those positive and negative factors facing the new struggle for equality.

## II. The New Jim Crow

### 6. A Balance Sheet: King's Dream vs. a New Jim Crow

14. The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement survives today in the conviction of most Americans that racism is one of the profound evils of American history. Because of the struggles initiated by the movement led by Martin Luther King, most Americans today believe racial discrimination, inequality, and bigotry should be eliminated from American political, economic, and social life.

Yet the reality is that today, in an America in which economic inequality is increasing, our society remains very racist and, in the current period, is becoming more so. This period of increasing racism is characterized by two tendencies.

First, certain key relations between racial and ethnic groups are becoming more unequal, more divided, and more strained.

Second, while the problems of racial inequality have been intensifying, the willingness of the established leaderships to address these problems has been diminishing dramatically.

On the political right, there is an increasingly consistent and frenzied opposition to any new positive measures and an increasingly determined attack on the gains of the past. Meanwhile, on the part of liberal leaders, there is a growing reluctance to advance new positive measures or even to defend the measures won by the civil rights struggles of the past. Liberal leaders endlessly bob and weave rather than defend past gains for racial equality (*Brown v. Board* and the entire perspective of integration and affirmative action) and tremble impotently before the prospect of advancing the necessary new progressive initiatives (that is, BAMN's program of integration, affirmative action, and immigrant rights). The right wing, on the other hand, has mounted a full-scale attack whose aim is to render *Brown v. Board* and its vision of America a dead letter and to stigmatize into silence any honest discussion of the issues of race and racism in American public life.

Examples of the myriad indications of these gains for racism and segregation include: the string of court decisions whose practical effect is the outlawing of desegregation and affirmative action, the success with a majority of white voters of ballot propositions aimed at banning affirmative action, the success of local and state ballot initiatives banning bilingual education and adopting "English-only" policies, the increasing difficulty of speaking the plain truth about racism throughout our society, the increasingly hostile climate for minority students on many of our nation's campuses, and, most recently, in the character of the primary campaign of Senator Clinton and the presidential campaign of Senator McCain and his running mate against Barack Obama.

## 7. "Racism without Racists" / "Racists without Racism"

15. The great majority of Americans condemn most explicit expressions of racism. It is true that, in the era of the New Jim Crow, even some open, explicit, and highly public expressions of racist bigotry are regaining a measure of toleration. In particular, both immigrant-bashing and anti-Muslim bigotry have become the stuff of mainstream political rallies and popular entertainment. However, by and large, explicit racism is regarded as uncivil and unacceptable behavior, at any rate in public. Except for a right-wing fringe, people in the public eye, from public officials to popular entertainers and other celebrities, treat explicit, public expressions of racism as wrong or at least as too likely to be the subject of controversy to be worth the risk.

Under these contradictory conditions, racist inequality and bigotry have been forced to assume new modes of operation and new forms of expression. This New Jim Crow (ironically termed "racism without racists" by some students of the phenomenon) is merely the latest example of what historian John Hope Franklin has called the extraordinarily "improvisatory" character of racism throughout American history.

16. So it has become well established that, in the period since the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, many white voters have misrepresented their positions on racial issues and nonwhite candidates in opinion polls to avoid appearing "insensitive" on racial issues, while casting their votes to defend white privilege in the secrecy of the voting booth—racist votes without any nasty evidence of actual racism: "racism without racists."

More than that. In the period of the New Jim Crow, political figures who head up racist campaigns like Ward Connerly's attack on affirmative action are obliged to improvise rhetoric and images which advance the cause of racism without being explicitly racist. Connerly's organizations call themselves "civil rights initiatives," claim to be opposing "racial preferences," and wrap themselves with shameless hypocrisy in the slogan of "equality."

In the era of the New Jim Crow, to appeal to and mobilize the "racism without racists" in American society, racist leaders must present themselves as "racists without racism," even using traditional slogans of the historical struggle against racism to advance the racist cause. Today's New Jim Crow-style racists even engage in the misleading quotation of Martin Luther King, giving new meaning to the old adage about the devil quoting scripture for his own evil purposes.

## 8. The Emergence of the New Jim Crow

17. The old Jim Crow developed in the period following the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction. It was the response of the white-supremacist leadership of the Old South to the abolition of slavery and the defeat of the secession of the Confederate states that had aimed at preserving and extending the Southern slave system. The purpose of the old Jim Crow was to prevent a new, more democratic society developing in the South, in which an alliance of the former black slaves with poor white people threatened to overturn the traditional relations of political and economic power and privilege.

In the face of the historic defeat of the slave system, the former white slavocracy and its successors developed the policies that came to be known as Jim Crow in an attempt to drive the black population of the South into a condition as close as possible to the stigmatized conditions of a race of slaves. The aim of the old Jim Crow was to reverse as many of the Civil War and Reconstruction gains of black people as possible, to severely delimit the exercise of those rights that could not be reversed, and to create new forms of degradation to replace the antebellum forms that had perished with slavery. Unable to return the black population of the South to slavery, the Jim Crow leadership would turn the freedpeople into a caste of aliens in their own land, cut off from rights and opportunities, segregated into a world of disadvantage, poverty, and official inferiority.

Jim Crow segregation divided black people from rights and opportunities and divided the white workers and poor from the black-white alliances that had fueled mass struggles for democratic and social progress after the Civil War. The victory of Jim Crow segregation meant equally the defeat of the black struggle for racial equality and the Southern labor and populist struggles for economic justice. Dr. King once remarked that, in exchange for their poverty and hunger, the segregationist leaders gave the Southern white poor Jim Crow to eat—an imaginary sense of racial superiority to fill the reality of empty stomachs.

18. The New Jim Crow has developed in the period following the victories of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Like its predecessor, it is essentially a countermovement of retrenchment and reaction launched against the successes of a great movement of human progress. Just as slavery was dead ("dead as their dead grandfathers" Sherman called it) after the Civil War, so the old Jim Crow was dead after the stunning victories of Dr. King's movement in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. Congress and the President ratified those victories won on the streets of struggle with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But, as we move into the new century, the New Jim Crow is increasingly, also like its predecessor, as much a countermovement directed against the possibility of a more just and democratic future as it is an attempt to reverse or delimit progressive gains of the past. For, in its deepest and most farseeing impulses, the New Jim Crow is a rearguard reaction counterposed to the demographic changes which, over the next few decades, will make the United States a truly diverse

and multinational "minority-majority"—and therefore white-minority—society. The New Jim Crow is an attempt to foster a mass national politics based on some white people's fears of that inevitable demographic development and its range of implications for the nature of American society.

Hidden, camouflaged, coded though it may be in public, the real slogan of the New Jim Crow is the same as the central principle of the old Jim Crow: Defense of White Privilege. To the white working people of the nation who are suffering from the increasing gap between the rich and everybody else, to the industrial workers whose jobs have been sacrificed on the altars of capitalist free trade, to the millions without private health insurance who cannot afford access to medical care, to the youth who cannot imagine how to pay for college, the powers that be have, in reality, little to offer. So, as Dr. King understood so well of the old racism, having nothing else to offer, the leaders promoting the new politics of racial scapegoating and discrimination offer an increasingly disaffected white population Jim Crow to eat.

19. The old Jim Crow centered on a divide-and-rule strategy of legal segregation. The body of segregationist legislation was supported by the falsehoods of the legal and social doctrine of "separate but equal." The old Jim Crow required, in fact, a whole intellectual arsenal of falsehoods: the revisionist Big Lie of the "Lost Cause Theory" of the Civil War; the spread of racist myths and stereotypes by the postwar white intelligentsia and academia, white newspapers, the white pulpit, and popular forms of entertainment; the myth of the idyllic antebellum plantation, with happy and pious black slaves rendering adoring service to their gentle white masters; a vicious parade of white-supremacy and black-inferiority theories, images, notions, superstitions. And, in the end, sustaining it all was the extralegal regime of lynchings, the real "legal system" of the Jim Crow South from the end of Reconstruction to the murder of Emmett Till; the bombing that killed the Four Little Girls in Birmingham, Alabama; and the martyrdom of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in the deadly heat of a racist Mississippi Summer.

20. The New Jim Crow starts by trying to draw a line around the ending of de jure (legal) segregation much as the old Jim Crow sought to draw a line around the ending of slavery. The New Jim Crow accepts the impossibility of returning to the days of legislated black-vs.-white segregation. But it wants to prohibit all efforts at ending discrimination that go beyond the elimination on paper of de jure segregation. Under the dogmas of the New Jim Crow, nothing must be done about the much vaster problems of the de facto segregation that irrationally divides Americans from each other and cuts off millions of still-ghettoized nonwhite people from the exercise of supposedly guaranteed rights and opportunities. The New Jim Crow seeks to do nothing less than destroy the entire body of laws and other policies developed in the 1960s and 1970s to address the malignant evils of de facto segregation (measures which came to be known as affirmative action).

Yet Martin Luther King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s recognized that little would be gained and much lost for millions of black people if the end of segregation meant nothing other than the formal prohibition of legal discrimination. Such a

limitation, the movement's leaders understood, would tend to degrade *Brown v. Board* and the civil rights laws from statements of living principle to dead letters on mere pieces of paper, historical artifacts with no relevance to the ongoing future of American society. In the South, the possibilities of uniting the white and black populations on the basis of fully equal rights and opportunities—the possibilities, that is, of the real integration that was the heart of Dr. King's vision for the redemption of the region—would be undermined. In the North, where the system of racial discrimination was overwhelmingly "de facto," the oppression of urban ghettos and barrios could never be addressed at all.

When Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis in 1968, he was still wrestling with the question of how to spread the civil rights struggles whose victories in Birmingham and Selma overthrew de jure segregation in the South, to the terrain of the northern-style racism of de facto discrimination. The essential correctness of his assessment of the dangers of a limitation of desegregation to the legal discrimination of the old Jim Crow is tragically confirmed today in the persistence of extraordinary extremes of racial polarization in the South and the failure to lift the suffocating oppression of life in the nation's impoverished urban minority communities.

## 9. Racism Today

21. Whereas the old Jim Crow was based on the legal (de jure) segregation of the former slave states of the South, the New Jim Crow is a national phenomenon based on countless forms of legally sanctioned and protected forms of segregation and discrimination. This de facto discrimination produces the same effects as de jure segregation but presents itself as something else.

That "something else" can be the false claim of standardized tests like the SAT to measure human intelligence or the aptitude to benefit from an education. It can be the supposedly sacrosanct character of the boundaries of school districts in one case, in another case the irrelevance of such boundaries in the face of a fictitious principle of parental "freedom of choice." It can be the assertion of state's rights in one case, of Federal authority in another. It can consist in an argument for the "strict construction" of the Constitution at one moment and a moment later require the wholesale rewriting of the plain words of the Constitution. In one case it is supposedly a question of the sacredness of voters' decisions at the ballot box. But when the voters have voted for desegregation plans, voters' decisions don't matter any more.

22. The old Jim Crow was openly defended with white-supremacist and segregationist theories, the openly racist demagoguery of white politicians, the pseudoscience and falsification of history of racist intellectuals, the racist populism of movies like *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. The New Jim Crow is wrapped in a pretty language of abstract equality and phony democratism. The apologists for the New Jim Crow retail a host of disingenuous racist code phrases—"concern for academic standards," "law and order," "racial preferences," the presumed

evils of "political correctness," "tough love" for racial minorities, "the problem isn't race, it's class," "I'm not racist, but....," "preserving American [meaning white and English-only] culture and values," "protecting our borders."

Both the Clinton and the McCain-Palin campaigns against Barack Obama have provided perfect examples of the methods and the vocabulary of the New Jim Crow. The candidates or their surrogates in both campaigns have, over and over, repeated insinuations that a man with an African father and a non-European name couldn't possibly be "as American" as his lily-white electoral rivals. This man named Obama, Americans were told by both campaigns, didn't share "American values," couldn't understand the experience of "real Americans like you." In the course of these campaigns, it has been shocking and depressing to witness, at the beginning of the 21st century, the number of times the word "American" has been used as if it meant "white." (It is arguable in this regard that the Clinton primary campaign was even worse than the fall campaign of McCain and Palin.)

Such coded vocabulary all has the value to the project of promoting acquiescence to racism of being transparent enough to convey their real racist meaning to the racist consciousness they are aimed at, but still passing muster with the news media and academia as legitimate and respectable expressions of "mainstream views."

The New Jim Crow presents itself as the hypocrisy of "racism without racists" and "racists without racism." At its most loathsomely hypocritical, the New Jim Crow uses a language of false solicitude for the members of the nation's minority groups whose long denied and fought-for rights it is seeking to take away and whose hard-won opportunities it is determined to eliminate. Here the New Jim Crow's language is entirely reminiscent of the false solicitude of certain white slaveowners over the dangers supposedly presented by freedom to their slaves.

23. The old Jim Crow victimized all racial minorities but focused its horrors with especial hatred on the nation's black communities. The New Jim Crow focuses its bigotry with equal bitterness and hatred on the black and rapidly growing Latina/o communities and promotes attacks on Latina and Latino immigrants with a special fury.

Over the first decades of the 20th century, the old Jim Crow branched out from its focus on attacks on black Americans to chauvinist attacks on the millions of immigrants to the US fleeing poverty and persecution in Southern and Eastern Europe. Racist currents, including the KKK, launched waves of both verbal and physical terror directed against the largely Catholic immigrants, along with anti-Semitic demagoguery and threats addressed to the growing communities of Jewish laborers and intellectuals in the nation's urban centers.

As the new century wears on, the New Jim Crow is increasingly about immigrant-bashing, its attacks focused on Mexican and other Latin American immigrants and the vital communities they have created throughout the US.

24. Both the old Jim Crow and the New Jim Crow must be understood as both national and international phenomena.

The white-supremacist practices of the old Jim Crow South required acceptance in the North, an acceptance gained through the spread throughout the country of a white-racist fear of the place the former black slaves would assume in American society after Emancipation. The determination to put a brake on progress for black people with the end of Reconstruction came to unite the white population of the nation on the basis of this racism. Belief in white superiority became a defining element of national consciousness, North and South.

For the generations after the great progressive act of the Civil War, these racist patterns would delimit or vitiate the gains of the war and undermine the struggles of the labor movement that grew explosively after the war. This white racism would also be turned against the Chinese, the Japanese, and other immigrants whose contributions were essential to the creation of the postwar society, denying Asian and other immigrants basic citizenship rights for generations. And it would shape the American republic's understanding of its relationship to the world, creating an American version of the ideology of the white man's burden, and help lay the basis for the acceptance of imperialist and militarist policies that emerged at the turn of the century. American white supremacy at home became a premise for American white supremacy around the world. It was this sort of linkage between white racism and imperialism that moved W.E.B. DuBois to declare that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."

The New Jim Crow also has its international aspects. The anti-Muslim paranoia of American foreign policy is echoed in the anti-Muslim racism in the 2008 presidential campaign. Domestic immigrant-bashing is not merely a domestic question, for immigration is today one of the most important, fundamental, and vast features of the global economy, global politics, and global culture. Chauvinist militarism abroad requires racism at home. Immigrant-bashing at home feeds national-chauvinist arrogance abroad. Imperialist policies abroad always have their roots in the conditions of inequality at home.

The New Jim Crow has already created the conditions in which the problem of the Twenty-first Century must also be the problem of an imperialist color line.

25. It is worth emphasizing the importance of one political characteristic that the New Jim Crow shares with the old Jim Crow. Like the old Jim Crow, the New Jim Crow has not only its right-wing but also its left-wing face.

In reality, the right-wing advocates of the New Jim Crow would stand no chance of success without the de facto cooperation of these left-wing pretend opponents but real allies.

Today, as in the days of the old Jim Crow, the left face of racism assumes two main forms. Both rest on the "left-wing" fallacy that progressive causes can advance if only the "distraction" of

issues of race and racism can be set aside. This perspective of a "white people's populism" has been a fundamental negative trend in American politics throughout our history.

In one aspect it is the attempt to build progressive struggle on the basis of abstracting from issues of race and racism. In its other aspect it is the claim of supposedly progressive forces to oppose racism, but never forcefully and never now.

The New Jim Crow has already produced its own 21st-century versions of the populist and Progressive currents of a century ago, who could take up any progressive banner except the banner of opposition to the regime of racism sustained by lynching in the South. The liberal and "radical" left of today has also already displayed a panoply of its own versions of the Southern white moderates and liberals of the 1960s whose timidity and hypocrisy Martin Luther King decried. On the electoral front, those who tried to portray Hillary Clinton as some sort of "populist" alternative to an "elitist" Obama have now taken their place in that long, disgraceful tradition of "left-wing" racism.

BAMN has always stood against this "white-populist" fallacy and its long consistent history of misleadership, cynicism, and defeat.

26. The old Jim Crow rested, in the end, on the reign of terror of the regime of lynchings throughout the South and the unwillingness of Northern white people to do anything about it. It took the struggle and suffering of the civil rights convulsions of the 1960s to bring an end to the regime of lynchings, including a heroic army of civil rights martyrs.

So far, at first glance, it may seem that the bullies of the New Jim Crow are violent mainly in occasional excesses of rhetoric, full-scale cowards in any real question of action. But a closer look should find real dangers in the right-wing militias that threaten to take immigrant-bashing into their own extralegal hands, in the images of lynching in Jena, Louisiana, and in the complacency with which the nation's leaders contemplated the hundreds of black bodies floating in Katrina's floodwaters over the streets of New Orleans. As civil-rights-veteran Congressman John Lewis's pained response to the character of the McCain-Palin rallies should have reminded his nation, in American history, racist politics have never been a nonviolent affair for very long.

27. The old Jim Crow sought to preserve a system of white privilege by reducing the black freedpeople to a condition that approximated as closely as possible the abolished status of slavery. The New Jim Crow seeks to preserve white privilege by keeping the disadvantaged nonwhite populations of the nation in conditions that approximate as closely as possible the supposedly eliminated conditions of the old Jim Crow.

The New Jim Crow, then, can be summed up as:

1. rendering *Brown v. Board* a dead letter: rolling back the gains of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s

(those political and legal policies whose aim is to block the measures necessary to rid American society of the discriminatory consequences of slavery and legal discrimination and to prevent the steps necessary to end the de facto discrimination that remains pervasive and is in certain respects increasing in our time)

2. immigrant-bashing: stigmatizing immigration and immigrants, opposing rational immigration policies and immigrant rights, making the lives of immigrants as difficult as possible, especially Mexican and other Latin American immigrants

(those political and legal policies aimed at protecting white privilege and preserving the norms of a "white man's republic" by blocking, delaying, and delimiting immigration and the demographic evolution of the United States into a more diverse society and, eventually, a "minority-majority" nation; implicitly defining citizenship itself as a question of preserving white privilege).

The New Jim Crow is characterized by a general acquiescence to the forms of racist discrimination and oppression that have survived and flourished in the wake of the closing down of the great civil rights struggles of the last Civil Rights Movement. The New Jim Crow's ostensible argument is that NOTHING ACCEPTABLE CAN BE DONE about today's pervasive forms of discrimination. Its real argument is that NOTHING SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT RACISM. This is joined with the argument that EVERYTHING POSSIBLE SHOULD BE DONE TO MINIMIZE LATINA/O IMMIGRATION AND TO BLOCK THE NORMALIZATION OF THE PLACE OF LATINA/O IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICAN LIFE. Undergirding the theory and practice of the New Jim Crow is a pessimistic mystical conviction that racism and national chauvinism will always be with us, along with their accompanying inequalities and paranoias, and the only question is which side of the inevitable mystical divide between advantage and disadvantage one happens to have been born on.

28. Like Dr. King before us, BAMN rejects both the divide-and-rule policies and the underlying pessimism of all racist and national-chauvinist theories and all acquiescence to racism. The New Jim Crow merely represents the latest form of these policies and these attitudes in American history.

### **III. The Obama Paradox**

#### **10. The Real Significance of the Obama Campaign: Redefining What National Leadership Means**

29. Inevitably the Obama presidential campaign presents unusual challenges to the United States in a period in which the inspiring power of the Civil Rights Movement is still alive but weakened and reeling in the face of the recent advances of the New Jim Crow.

In the first place, the Obama campaign itself is strong evidence that, despite many particular tactical gains against the cause of human progress, the strategy of the New Jim Crow is far from victorious. For the Obama campaign has made clear that most Americans, including millions of white Americans, just don't accept the logic (defense of white privilege) or share the base instincts (fear and hatred of nonwhite people and immigrants) of the purveyors of the New Jim Crow.

Even more than that, the actual election as president of a relatively progressive black politician would challenge, simply as an historical fact, the fundamental premises of white racism throughout American history. From the days when the first black slaves were set to labor for white masters in colonial Virginia to today's demagogic claims that Obama has "nothing to offer" other than his race, it has been an essential premise of white supremacy that black Americans were well suited to be white people's servants, but not to be leaders, and certainly not to be leaders of white people or of the nation as a whole.

30. Despite the widespread belief over the course of American history among certain white people in the inferiority of black and other nonwhite people, in actual American history there have been many extraordinary leaders who were not white. Above all, two black leaders have stood out in American history as leaders of national movements and of both black and white Americans.

Frederick Douglass was the greatest leader of the abolitionist and antiracist struggles of the nineteenth century. Douglass addressed himself to both white and black Americans and was, during the 20 years before the Civil War and during the War itself, both the effective spokesperson for black Americans, slave and free, and the most important leader of the national abolitionist movement, guiding and inspiring both the black and white masses in the struggle against slavery. Further, while leading what was in reality an integrated mass movement against slavery, Douglass always recognized and frequently spoke out against the racial prejudices to be found among white antislavery people.

To millions of people around the world, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the greatest American political leader of the 20th century. Like Frederick Douglass, Dr. King was the central spokesperson for black Americans in his lifetime. And, also like Frederick Douglass, Dr. King

presented himself to his fellow citizens of all races as inspirer and leader in the common national struggle for equality and justice. Also like Frederick Douglass, Dr. King saw it as one of his duties to speak out and fight against the prejudices and the discrimination practiced by even the white people—the white liberals—who declared themselves to be his allies.

The greatness in their own times of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King is indisputable. But, simply because they were great black leaders of the past, it has been too easy for historical treatments to turn them into figures of pious and boring irrelevance, not the powerful mass political leaders they actually were, leaders with practical lessons to teach us on the necessity of struggle and on the methods that can enable struggles to win. In our time, the truth of the lessons and life of Martin Luther King has been travestied, turning this courageous and unyielding fighter into a feeble and harmless stained-glass-window saint, who supposedly spoke and stood for nothing other than sanctimonious and patriotic platitudes.

31. Despite the subsequent historical falsification and belittling of the roles of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, in their lifetimes they redefined what it means to be a national leader in America. They were black leaders of interracial movements that transformed American history. In both cases, that they were black Americans was essential to the decisive role they played in making the nation a more democratic and just society for all. Their relationship to the black population of the country gave them their deep insight into what was most fundamental to the character of the nation as a whole and made them capable of being the decisive national leaders of the movements that steered the nation through successful radical change.

Because Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King redefined the meaning of national leadership in their lifetimes as the heads of powerful national mass movements, the nation itself was changed in ways that have made it possible for Barack Obama's presidential campaign to acquire the significance it has. The struggles of these great movements, led and educated by these great leaders, created the conditions in which the American people can say today, in their progressive majority, "national leadership" does not just mean "white leadership," and "black leadership can mean national leadership." Such a declaration on the question of national American leadership inevitably redefines as well what it means to be an American in the direction of inclusiveness, internationalism, and rationality. Therefore, even taking into account the severely limited character of the candidate's own progressive positions, the successes of the Obama campaign so far represent an historic setback for the forces of racism, national particularism and arrogance, and unreason.

## **11. The Meaning of an Obama Victory: The Political Maturity of the American People**

32. The election of Barack Obama as US president would send out a clear message against racism in ways that even the great struggles of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King have not.

In the first place, the election of Obama as president can only take place if millions of American voters, including white voters, repudiate some of the most important elements of the nation's history of white racism in order to elect him.

Were Obama a black conservative, white voters could elect him as a hypocritical means of defending white privilege, much as white racist politicians supported the elevation of Clarence Thomas to the US Supreme Court or pour adulation on Ward Connerly for leading the attack on affirmative action. But Obama supports his party's longstanding relatively progressive positions on issues of race and racism, including defense of certain affirmative action and integration policies and opposition to the most draconian attacks on immigrants. Support for Obama is not, then, a plausible ploy for New Jim Crow-era racists as a "nonracist" front for advancing the rollback of civil rights.

A vote for Barack Obama requires the recognition that a black citizen, committed to at least a minimal defense of the gains of the past Civil Rights Movement, is at least as qualified as any available white candidate to be the elected and legally constituted leader of the nation and the person treated internationally as the most powerful single individual in the world. To vote for Barack Obama, millions of white Americans will have to repudiate 400 years of racist mythology and demagoguery, even if only for the moment they are in the voting booth.

In that moment, they will have changed American history in a small but still important way for the better, because of the way in which they will have declared that the character of the American people has changed for the better.

It is in this sense, as an indication of the maturing antiracist consciousness of a mass electorate of millions of American citizens, that the Obama candidacy and the prospect of Obama's election as president matter profoundly to BAMN.

## **12. The Paradox of the Obama Candidacy**

33. While recognizing the progressive historical significance of the possibility of an Obama victory in 2008, BAMN must also recognize the contradictory significance of certain features of the way in which this situation has been achieved. For there has been a paradox in the Obama candidacy that is especially important to BAMN's project of building a new civil rights movement. That paradox is the difference between what the Obama candidacy means to his wealthiest financial backers

and what the Obama candidacy means to the progressive base of the Democratic Party whose candidate he became in the course of the presidential primary contests. This paradox became clear only in the course of the surprising development of the electoral struggle among the candidates for the Democratic Party nomination for president.

As of the first Democratic Party caucuses and primary elections of 2008, there was, hypothetically, a significant field of candidates, but only three of these candidates seemed to have any real chance of securing the presidential nomination: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards. Of these three "serious" candidates, Edwards, running as a "populist"—that is, as a candidate appealing to the party's left-wing base on issues of economic and social inequality—was regarded as a long shot in comparison with the two better funded frontrunners, Clinton and Obama.

All three leading candidates entered the primary contest as independently wealthy people with sufficient backing from other wealthy people to sustain their campaigns through the first weeks of 2008. Clinton and Obama, however, had substantially more financial resources and, specifically, the backing of both more very wealthy individuals and a substantially larger number of those wealthy individuals who could pull together ("bundle") contributions from groups of individuals to overcome the legal limitations on the amount of individual contributions.

This financial advantage convinced most political pundits that only Clinton and Obama were likely to survive the early primaries, and events proved the pundits' predictions correct.

But the pundits assumed something else that turned out very differently. Between Clinton and Obama, they assumed there was little reason to expect anything other than a Clinton victory. Senator Clinton appeared to be the clear favorite of the national party apparatus and a large number of state and local officeholders who, by early in 2008, seemed to be rushing to endorse her as the presumed presidential nominee. By the time the primary votes were well under way, Senator Clinton had gathered substantial numbers of pledges of support from the unelected convention delegates known as superdelegates, chosen by appointment by party leaders because of present or past positions as governmental officeholders or party officials.

As the wife of Bill Clinton, the last Democrat to be president, Hillary Clinton was viewed by many of her supporters—including her husband—and by many journalists, as the almost inevitable nominee of her party for president. Many seemed to view the primary process more as a sort of extended coronation ceremony, with presumptive Queen Hillary graciously going through the pretense of an electoral exercise.

Two early developments clouded but did not seem to disturb this essential complacency about the inevitability of a victory by Queen Hillary. First, Senator Obama seemed to be outstripping Senator Clinton in the early reports of donations from wealthy backers. Second, the launching of Senator Obama's campaign on the basis of vague promises of a "New Hope" for America somehow different from the established leaderships of both parties produced a surprisingly passionate response among the Democratic Party electorate as well as many people who call themselves "independents."

34. While these two sides of the Obama campaign had certain things in common—in particular, the view that it is time for the United States to elect a black president—they represented, overall, quite different aspects of the mass agglomeration that is the Democratic Party. Their support of Barack Obama represented quite different political trends and impulses in the Democratic Party.

To Obama's wealthy backers—liberal capitalists, professionals, intellectuals, and artists—Senator Obama has seemed to represent the safest option for using the Democratic Party to achieve their ends. These wealthy liberals want a break with the right-wing fanaticism, overreaching arrogance, and extreme divisiveness of President Bush's Republicans. But they want an extremely mild sort of break.

35. In foreign policy, for example, these wealthy liberals want an end to the overreaching neoconservative fanaticism that led to the invasion and endless occupation of Iraq. But they see no alternative to an essentially militarist policy in dealing with the Middle East or, for that matter, the world. Their criticisms of the Bush policy are largely technical and tactical, not fundamental. In their view, Bush has been arrogant and incompetent, not essentially wrong. They want not an end to American militarism abroad but a militarist policy conducted more pragmatically, with greater competence and more diplomatic finesse.

Endangering these wealthy liberals' aims is not only the continuing commitment of McCain's Republicans to Bush-type fanatical militarism but, even more, the very different opposition to the Bush policy coming from the progressive mass base of the Democratic Party.

The attitudes of the Democratic Party's progressive base—especially those elements of the party base most passionate about the Obama candidacy—are very different from those of most of the party's wealthy elite. The progressive base wants a real break with the Bush foreign policy, an end to the militarism and extreme, go-it-alone chauvinism of the Bush presidency. Though the left-wing mass base of the Democrats lacks an agreed-upon, clearly worked-out alternative to the Bush policy, they want a policy that is fundamentally different, a foreign policy in the Middle East and around the world that actually expresses the most progressive, democratic, and internationalist elements in American history, not the most authoritarian, bigoted, and chauvinist elements. They want a policy based on mutual respect and cooperation among peoples, not on endless slaughter and bullying by the American military—a policy actually based on democratic and humane values, not military terror.

36. With regard to domestic policies, the gap between the Democratic Party's progressive mass electoral base and its wealthy liberal funders is much the same. The actual, active, progressive voters of the party base want real reform, the defense of fundamental progressive principles, and the clear rejection of conservative Republican policies. In education, the Democratic Party's progressive base wants a clear defense of the principles of universal public education, not privatization and charter schools. In health care they want universal quality health care affordable for all, not the latest

insurance companies' scheme to protect and maximize their profits.

37. The Democrats' electorally crucial black and growing progressive Latina/o base support the party as the only realistic electoral alternative to the avalanche of racist attacks under the Republican aegis. Black Democratic voters want a real defense of affirmative action and a renewal of a meaningful effort to realize the democratic and egalitarian vision for America of *Brown v. Board* and the civil rights struggles of the 1960s led by Martin Luther King.

Most progressive Latina/o Democrats share this vision but also yearn for an end to immigrant-bashing and the cruel raids of the ICE marauders. Across the country, Latina/o communities want the establishment of a humane and realistic immigration policy that gives legal recognition to the de facto citizenship of millions of people without whose labor and talent entire American communities and economic sectors would collapse.

38. Certain important trade unions have been especially important in providing large sums of money and organizational resources to the Obama campaign. These unions have as their own aims legislation to clear certain roadblocks to organizing new unions and, more generally, reviving certain progressive aims from the period of the mighty class struggles of the American labor movement. These unions also have, in general, weighed in on the side of the overall agenda of the progressive mass base of the Democrats.

39. On most of these domestic policy issues, the actual policies of most of the Democrats' wealthy financial backers have a similar character to their attitudes on foreign policy: they want milder and more pragmatic versions of the conservative Republican policies, not a sharp, qualitative break with them and not authentically progressive policies of meaningful change.

### **13. Barack Obama and the Historic Struggle within the Democratic Party**

40. This gap between party base and wealthy funders is hardly new. For going on forty years, there have been few people in America more deserving of sympathy than the progressive base of the Democratic Party, because of the contempt with which they have been treated by their party's funders and the party tops tied to them.

To the economic and political czars of the Democratic Party, the party rank and file's vision of the party as an engine for realizing progressive ideals is not the life's blood of the party that gives it its only real reason for existing. To these behind-closed-door leaders, these backroom "insiders," the idealism of the party's base is its main problem, the primary obstacle that keeps the party from becoming the party of moderate conservatism the wealthy funders want and believe they have paid

for, as opposed to the party of progressive reform the rank and file yearn for.

For many years, the Clintons have been among the most important party leaders who have been trying to drag the party to the right, away from the ideals of the progressive party base, to convert the Democratic Party from a party of moderate reform into a party of moderate conservatism. It is therefore understandable if many left-wing Democrats have sought to find a way to derail Queen Hillary's presumed progress toward coronation as their party's presidential candidate. But this tendency does not even begin to explain the remarkable character of the Obama phenomenon.

For the paradox of the Obama candidacy is that Senator Obama emerged through the primary process as the preferred candidate of most of the activists on both sides of the historic division within the Democratic Party.

41. For the members of the party's progressive base who have passionately embraced Barack Obama as THEIR candidate, the irony is that Senator Obama, by and large, agrees with the party's wealthy funders and party tops, not with the progressive base who support him so ardently.

In fact, on most of the essential issues, Senator Obama and Senator Clinton agree. Among the original larger field of Democratic presidential primary candidates, Senator Obama and Senator Clinton were, in reality, closer to each other than they were to the other candidates. It was only after the February Super-Tuesday results left only Obama and Clinton standing, that the false polarization of a two-person contest created the illusion of serious policy differences between these two candidates.

On most of the most significant policy issues, Obama and Clinton were not to the right or left of each other, but merely tweedledum and tweedledee to each other. Only a few of their most overwrought supporters even suggested otherwise.

42. Between the February Super-Tuesday vote and the final spring primaries, Barack Obama's overall showing had reduced the possibility of Senator Clinton's overtaking him to negligible proportions. Traditional conventional wisdom at such a point usually dictates that the candidate who is plainly losing withdraw graciously in the name of party unity and the best interests of the nation. Many important figures in the party made clear they thought Senator Clinton should bow out. But most party leaders remained silent on the question. And Senator Clinton herself remained stubbornly in the race, apparently never doubting that she would find somewhere the millions of dollars necessary to do so.

To many Obama supporters, their candidate seemed to have won heroic victories against staggering odds and over against the preconceived notions of the Clintons and the elite party apparatus tied to them. If anyone had ever earned a presidential nomination, surely Barack Obama had done so. To them, the mere idea of depriving him of the presidential nomination after such an

achievement began to look like some indefensible behind-closed-door conspiracy against any black candidate, with no rational basis whatsoever.

If there was no significant policy difference between Obama and Clinton, if both historical factions of the party in actuality found Obama an easy candidate to embrace, then why did the contest continue? Why didn't Clinton's wealthy backers put her under more pressure to withdraw from the contest, in the name of the party unity all agreed was essential to defeating John McCain's Republicans in November?

And if Obama was in reality always in essential agreement with his party's moderate-conservative establishment, why did the party's left-wing base embrace him so passionately?

These are questions which seem to cry out for answers. Some observers have assumed that the apparent mystery here can be banished and the two questions be brushed aside by the mere assumption of a stance of cynicism. These cynics assume that the two apparent mysteries can be explained by Senator Clinton's insane ambition, on the one hand, and by the naive and desperate illusions of Senator Obama's rank-and-file supporters, on the other hand.

To BAMN it seems clear that here, as usual, cynics can offer facile answers but rarely true and useful ones. We are convinced that answering these two questions posed by the specific character of the Obama phenomenon requires recognizing that there are actually larger issues at stake than Senator Clinton's personal ambition or condescending allegations that Senator Obama's devoted and idealistic rank-and-file admirers are naive.

## **14. The Two Obamas**

43. The Democrats' wealthy liberal funders who have supported Obama in preference to the other Democratic candidates, including Hillary Clinton, support Obama from a somewhat complicated standpoint.

In the first place, they feel confident that Obama is on the Democrats' moderate-conservative wing, not the party's progressive left wing.

Eager as these rich liberals are to get the Republicans out of power, they are fearful of the fact that in order to do this they must risk emboldening and empowering the Democrats' left-wing mass base, which wants to travel much further down the road of progressive policies than the wealthy liberals and the party apparatus and which tends to oppose certain conservative policies favored by the liberal elite. The wealthy elitists therefore want to do whatever they can to ensure that the Democrats' presidential nominee will stand with them on certain key issues against the party's left wing.

In Barack Obama the moderate-conservative elite have been convinced they have such a candidate.

44. However, Hillary Clinton is also such a candidate. And in fact many leading figures of the Democratic moderate-conservative wing made clear their essential satisfaction with either Obama or Clinton. Why were so many of these wealthy liberals and party-apparatus people so deeply convinced of the superiority of Obama as to raise vast sums of money for him to defeat Clinton and risk the future wrath of the former First Lady, her former-president husband, and their many powerful backers?

Over the course of the campaign, it became evident that there were two main reasons for this somewhat surprising phenomenon.

The first reason is relatively straightforward and, at first glance, apparently admirable. These moderate-conservative members of the Democrats' financial and organizational elite believe that it is time for the United States to elect a black president, as long as that black president shares their moderate-conservative views.

The second reason is more complicated and casts the first reason in a less-than-admirable light.

These members of their party's elite must look ahead to the nature of the situation once the Democrats have taken the presidency from the Republicans, presumably while retaining control of both houses of Congress, perhaps with increased majorities. Once this has happened, this elite knows that they will be less frightened of the return to power of the despised Republicans and more frightened of the raised expectations of the Democrats' left-wing base. They cannot get rid of Republican arrogance, dogmatism, and incompetence without the assistance of their party's rank-and-file left-wing base. But they must have a way to keep that base from realizing the major elements of its own progressive aspirations.

This is especially true in foreign policy, where the party base views the Bush policy in Iraq as simply wrong. Rank-and-file Democrats are overwhelmingly committed to ending the US military occupation of Iraq and the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq as soon as possible. The party elite employs the rhetoric of reversing the Bush policy in Iraq, which it regards as badly motivated and badly executed, but is in reality committed to maintaining the essence of the Bush policy: altering the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of the US by maintaining as large as possible a US military presence there on a long-term basis.

For most Democratic voters the problem is how to get out of Iraq and end the policy of relying solely on military intimidation to influence developments in the Middle East. For the party elite the problem is how to make a show of withdrawing US troops from Iraq to appease popular opposition to the Bush policy, while actually maintaining or enlarging US military presence in the Middle East. This is no easy shell game. Yet the Democrats' party establishment is convinced that a

real withdrawal of US military forces, a genuine reduction of the US military presence in the Middle East, and an actual shift from the Bush emphasis on militarism, would place the US in the position of having to support or conciliate the genuine forces for progressive change, for democracy and egalitarianism, in the Middle East, forces the US government regards as too radical and far more dangerous over the long run than Islamic fundamentalism.

This party elite sees in Barack Obama a president with a much greater ability to play this shell game with the party's progressive base, to maintain a militarist policy while keeping the party base from rebelling. They think he can play this role qualitatively better than Hillary Clinton because he is not tied to the party leadership's failure to mount meaningful opposition to Bush's invasion of Iraq in the way Clinton is, because, more generally, he is not seen as a party-establishment insider in the way Clinton is, and because, as the nation's first black president, he would be much more likely than Clinton to receive the benefit of the doubt, at least for a time, of a party rank and file exhilarated by this historical achievement. In many ways Obama has presented himself in this light to the party elite in the course of winning their political support and financial backing.

On domestic issues, this party establishment views Obama as having the same qualitative advantages over Clinton as they do on foreign policy. They see him as a president far more able to co-opt the party's rank and file into swallowing policies they oppose and not taking advantage of their opportunities to advance the policies they believe in.

But this is not the end of the matter.

45. If the economic and political elite of the Democratic Party have their vision of Obama and their understanding of the significance of his campaign for president, the progressive rank and file of the Democrats have their rather different vision of Obama and a quite different set of aims for his campaign.

To the Democratic Party's rank and file who have taken up the Obama candidacy as their own cause, the somewhat surprising support of a section of the Party elite for Obama means that the progressive base of the party has a realistic opportunity to do things they very much want to do:

1. Elect the United States' first black president.
2. Take advantage of the increased hope and raised expectations of such a moment in American history to strengthen the forces committed to the progressive positions they believe in.

These progressive Democrats hope that Obama's election will result in a sufficient shakeup in the party establishment to weaken the hold the moderate-conservative elite have had on the party leadership for a generation.

46. In a very real sense, then, the support the two wings of the Democratic Party are giving to Obama stem from opposed aims and motives—from counterposed visions of the future of their party and the future of this nation.

For the moderate-conservatives, Obama represents the best means possible to co-opt the party base into accepting the conversion of a party of moderate reform into a party of moderate conservatism. To the party base, Obama represents the best available possibility for accomplishing the great progressive act of electing a relatively progressive black American as president and, in so doing, strengthening, overall, the progressive forces in the country to achieve a new period of meaningful progressive reforms.

To the Democratic Party's progressive base, electing Barack Obama President of the United States has become, essentially, a means of **EMPOWERING THEMSELVES AND THE FORCES OF PROGRESSIVE CHANGE IN AMERICA**.

To the moderate-conservative wealthy elite of the Democratic Party, electing Barack Obama has precisely the opposite purpose. The moderate-conservatives see an Obama presidency as their best bet for preventing the empowerment of the Democratic Party's progressive base.

47. In the course of the primary campaign, it became clear to both of these counterposed tendencies in the party that, given the actual nature of the American electoral system, for the time being, each needed the other in order to succeed. In effect, in 2008, the right and left wings of the Democratic Party emerged from the primary contests committed to parallel attempts to maneuver with and manipulate each other in order to achieve their counterposed aims. The Obama candidacy is itself the key policy for both these wings, the decisive tactic in their counterposed, mutual maneuvers and manipulation.

Obama himself was obliged to appeal to both wings of his party in order to achieve his victory in the primaries. His campaign had the character of an endless succession of vaguely worded compromises between the two tendencies, framed by abstract rhetoric about hope and change. Vagueness of this kind is typical of American politics in general and presidential politics in particular, but the Obama campaign has represented an unusually extreme and important example of it.

## **IV. Obama and the Struggle for the New Civil Rights Movement**

### **15. The New Jim Crow Clinton-Style**

48. As the primary electoral contest proceeded, the campaign of Hillary Clinton had no legitimate basis on which to defeat Obama's efforts. Senator Clinton had no honest way of appealing effectively either to the more conservative or more progressive wings of her party. She was herself in many ways the leading figure of the conservative wing. But, as of the beginning of the primary contest, much of that conservative elite was already convinced, for its own reasons, of the superior advantages of an Obama presidency. It was not possible for Senator Clinton to win on the basis of their support. Nor, precisely because of her and her husband's actual political record, did Senator Clinton have any plausible chance of grabbing the banner of the progressive forces in the party from Senator Obama.

Senator Clinton did, however, have one strategy in which she and her advisors seemed to believe for a period of time, which in fact did show some early signs of success. To the historic achievement of electing the nation's first black president she could counterpose the historic achievement of electing the nation's first woman president. She and her campaign organization accordingly crafted a strategy largely on this basis.

The election of Hillary Clinton as the nation's first woman president, taking into account her and her party's moderately progressive positions, would indeed represent an important historical gain for much the same reason as the election of Obama as the first black president. It would express the ability of the American people to overcome past prejudices against the leadership of women and to take a stand against the oppression and inequality of women.

Just as Senator Obama has faced inevitable right-wing racist attacks for seeking to be the nation's first black president, Senator Clinton has faced sexist attacks for seeking to be the nation's first woman president.

BAMN has unequivocally condemned and opposed and will unequivocally condemn and oppose both these racist and sexist attacks, starting from BAMN's fundamental principle that the different sections of the oppressed must unite in order to win.

49. This Clinton strategy, however, did not on its own show the ability to prevail over Obama's overwhelming advantages as a candidate.

By the aftermath of the February Super-Tuesday vote, it began to seem unlikely that Senator Clinton had a meaningful chance of overtaking Obama in the nominating process. A troubling shift seems to have taken place then in the Clinton approach to the primary contest.

Instead of focusing her appeal to primary election voters mainly on her political positions and record and her experience and on the importance of electing a woman president, Senator Clinton began using "surrogates"—prominent supporters who could say things on her behalf that were too controversial for her to say herself—to appeal to white racist voters, especially white racist women. These "surrogates" declared, in a series of public statements, in effect that Senator Obama had nothing to offer as a candidate other than his race.

These racist appeals seem to have had the desired effect: they drew many white women into voting in the Democratic primaries in order to vote for Senator Clinton, in part as an expression of support for electing a woman president and in part as an expression of opposition to the election of a black president—that is, in part on an arguably feminist basis, but definitely in part on a racist basis.

50. This policy has not been the subject of anything like the widespread public outrage it has deserved. On the contrary. Democratic Party leaders have publicly and privately rejoiced in Senator Clinton's success in drawing into the Democratic Party ranks millions of white racist (the code word is "conservative") voters, especially white racist women voters.

The danger of this policy is great. It tends to treat an appeal to racism as the key to rebuilding the Democratic Party—of the two major parties the relatively progressive party on issues of race. This would represent an important enlargement of the evils of the period of the New Jim Crow.

Under the old Jim Crow, the Democrats were, in the north, the party most black people came to vote for after the New Deal policies of the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the South, the Democrats were the very party of Jim Crow, the "Dixiecrats," who stood for "segregation forever" and maintained the policies of white supremacy. During the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Democratic Party felt compelled to take up the legislative banner of civil rights, and many of the hardcore Dixiecrats deserted the party for the Republicans.

The Clinton project for her party has the danger of becoming a New Jim Crow version of the pre-Civil Rights situation. The idea is not to drive black, Latina/o, and other nonwhite voters out of the party. The assumption is that the Republicans will remain so much worse that these voters will have nowhere else to go. But the success of the Clinton project and the racist basis on which it was carried out during the primaries could marginalize black and Latina/o voters within the party that many see as their only possible political home.

51. This is not only a partisan question. The two-party system has been, through most of American history, an extra-Constitutional institution at least as fundamental to how the nation is run and how it is—or is not—united as anything in the Constitution. The two-party system tends to define and delimit the fundamental terrain of the terms of all political discussion and debate.

The Clinton project for the Democratic Party creates the real danger that in the next generation doing anything about the real issues of race and racism will be off the agenda of both

parties and therefore off the agenda of American politics. Under these conditions, in reality, it would no longer be possible even to SPEAK THE PLAIN TRUTH about racism in a way that could influence American political life, because BOTH parties would be constituted on a racist basis, much as they were during the original Jim Crow era.

After Super-Tuesday, as the weeks of primary season went by, the Clinton campaign seemed to be less and less about the futile attempt to secure the presidential nomination for herself and more and more about presenting herself to white racist voters as a candidate who can "feel their [racist] pain"—that is, these white voters' irrational fears of black Americans' struggle for equality. Senator Clinton's strange decision to remain in the primary contest to the end seemed less about conducting a campaign to get herself elected and more about a project to restructure her party on an increasingly racist basis, New Jim Crow-style.

52. In order to conduct this dangerous campaign, Senator Clinton and her advisers were obliged to develop a very "New Jim Crow"-style rhetoric of racist innuendoes that aren't quite explicitly racist—of code words and phrases such as those we have listed above. By and large, both the news media and other politicians let her get away with the act. Overwhelmingly, however, black voters were not fooled.

It is worth reflecting somewhat further on the "racism without racists" in Senator Clinton's primary campaign in order to bring out its real meaning and so also be in a better position to understand the inevitable use of similar New Jim Crow devices by the Republicans in the fall presidential campaign.

Efforts to use Senator Clinton's longer tenure in Washington, D.C., as an argument for preferring her over Senator Obama were heard frequently in the course of the campaign. But, since the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Americans have tended to have little difficulty valuing other qualities more highly than experience alone. And the question of the actual quality of a given candidate's experience can actually be a liability. In its own terms, the "experience" argument counted for little and seemed often an easy cover for some other concern—what a white voter would talk about in public rather than the voter's actual anxiety about electing a black president.

From the beginning the Clinton campaign argued that she would be more electable than Obama in the November election. This "I'm more electable than you" argument is standard fare among candidates in primary elections. The problem with this argument in this case is that polls taken during the primaries repeatedly showed Senator Obama doing better than Senator Clinton in besting the Republicans in the fall election. Further, Clinton was hard-pressed to present ANY PARTICULAR CREDIBLE REASON WHY Clinton was supposedly more electable than Obama—other than race.

As the primary contest wore on, the real meaning of the electability argument seemed to many of Senator Obama's supporters to be merely the assertion that NO BLACK CANDIDATE

could be elected US President in 2008. This was, in fact, the explicit view stated inside the Clinton campaign by "chief strategist" Mark Penn in a cynical internal memo written in March 2007:

The right knows Obama is unelectable except perhaps against Attila the Hun,  
and a third party would come in then anyway.

Whatever Senator Clinton may have thought of her "chief strategist's" sentiment herself, it was an unacceptable argument for Senator Clinton or her surrogates to offer publicly. However, on the ground, below most news-media radar, and on the endless unaccountable grapevine of the Internet, this was the message loud and clear. This message joined with a crazed avalanche of inane and scurrilous slanders of Senator Obama that flooded Internet users' email accounts, nourishing paranoia with fat servings of racist spam. The orgy of anti-Obama spam was typically trivial, often patently stupid and false. What it revealed was not the cleverness or even the determination of the Obama-bashers—and certainly not any real political vulnerability on the part of Senator Obama—but the unsurprising fact that there was a certain segment of the white American public who were prepared to accept even the most ludicrous and irrelevant rumors as the pretext for prejudice against any prominent black political figure.

As Senator Obama racked up broad-based victories in the primaries and outshone his Democratic rivals in opinion polls on the fall elections, the "unelectability" argument lost any rational force it may seem to have had. But the temptation to appeal to that segment of the white American public that could be swayed by irrational appeals to racism seemed to have gained force.

In the end, Senator Clinton's surrogates suggested, in carefully coded phrases, that, in comparison with Senator Clinton's long list of official credentials, Senator Obama's relative youth as a national figure meant that he had "nothing to offer" other than his race. This distasteful sort of innuendo seemed to resonate with sufficient numbers of white voters to put some wind into the sails of Senator Clinton's lagging campaign. In other words, it was when racist innuendo was combined with the ineffective "experience" argument that the Clinton campaign seemed to gather strength. It was the tactical decision by the Clinton campaign to offer this innuendo to the primary electorate that ended up defining the political character and the historical significance of her campaign.

Along with this racist innuendo of the "nothing to offer [except his race]" argument against Barack Obama, the Clinton campaign increasingly questioned the "Americanness" of Senator Obama. This line of attack had been urged in March 2007 by Clinton's "chief strategist" Mark Penn in the "Attila the Hun" memo later leaked and published in the September 2008 *Atlantic Monthly*. Dripping with cynicism, the memo deals with the growing diversity of America as if it were merely a question of one candidate's electoral tactics:

All of these articles about his [Barack Obama's] boyhood in Indonesia and  
his life in Hawaii are geared towards showing his background is  
diverse, multicultural and putting that in a new light.  
Save it for 2050.

Penn argues for treating these patently positive qualities in Obama's life as negatives.

It also exposes a very strong weakness for him—his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot imagine America electing a president in time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values....

Penn urges Senator Clinton to center her campaign on the supposed contrast of her "American" qualities to Barack Obama's supposed lack of such qualities.

Every speech should contain the line you were born in the middle of America to the middle class in the middle of the last century. And talk about the basic bargain as about the deeply American values you grew up with, learned as a child and that drive you today. Values of fairness, compassion, responsibility, giving back.

Let's explicitly own "American" in our programs, the speeches and the values. He doesn't....

In March 2007, when the memo was first written, Senator Clinton did not accept this advice, according to Joshua Green, the author of the *Atlantic Monthly* article in which the Penn memo is published. We do not know whether Senator Clinton at this time rejected Penn's proposal merely out of fear of controversy or out of disgust with its cynicism, its racism, or the sheer stupidity of suggesting "fairness, compassion, responsibility, giving back" are somehow values unavailable to any American who spent part of "his boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii." What is clear is that, after her campaign reached its impasse in February 2008, she embraced the philosophy of the Penn "Attila the Hun" memo without any apparent evidence of any nagging scruples.

By the early March 2008 primaries in Ohio and Texas, the Clinton campaign had made the decision to run a notorious television ad questioning Obama's capacity to handle an international crisis. From then on, the Clinton campaign would be kept alive mainly because of its use of innuendo to appeal to racist voters and its implication, following the logic of the Penn memo, that a victory for Barack Obama amounted to "America electing a president in time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values." From this point on, Hillary Clinton seemed not so much trying to resuscitate her own hopeless campaign as to write a script for the Republicans' campaign in the fall. Mark Penn—and Senator Clinton herself—paved the way for the vile displays of hatred elicited by Sarah Palin's demagoguery.

53. As we look back over this history, it is important to remember that these shameful tactical decisions were not simply a matter of adapting to certain irrationalities in the American electorate. Senator Clinton and her surrogates were not only addressing themselves to voters who could be characterized as racist in a simple sense. In the era of the New Jim Crow, the typical target of this sort of innuendo is not a committed racist to whom voting for a black candidate is simply

unthinkable. Rather, the sort of voter to whom the Clinton campaign was addressing its carefully coded racist message was a white citizen torn between irrational racist fears and some real sense that setting aside those fears is the right thing to do. What Senator Clinton and her surrogates were doing was so reprehensible precisely because they, AS LEADERS, had an obligation to work hard to avoid exacerbating and rationalizing those irrational racist fears. They did the opposite: they exploited those fears as the key tactic of their campaign.

With Senator Clinton having set the precedent of bad leadership in the primaries, it could hardly be surprising that the Republicans followed suit in the fall. We have heard the same studied New Jim Crow phrases of Senator Clinton's primary-campaign surrogates in the mouths of Republican demagogues exploiting the same irrational fears to stigmatize Senator Obama in the fall campaign—the same idiotic, narrow-minded, bigoted suggestions that Americans should not elect a man named Barack Obama with a multinational background because such a man would be "a president in time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values."

54. Of course, Senator Clinton and most of her leading supporters would publicly deny any racist intentions. This is in keeping with the norms of the New Jim Crow: "racism without racists," "racists without racism." But why, then, did Senator Clinton not dissociate herself clearly from the scurrilous statements of her "surrogates" in playing the race card against Senator Obama? At least Senator Clinton should have publicly voiced her recognition of the danger and stated plainly how she intended to avoid it.

55. Democratic Party leaders should have rushed to condemn Hillary Clinton's New Jim Crow-style appeals to racism. Instead they gloated that Clinton's clever strategy—cynical though it might be—would draw into the party a block of (racist) voters who, once having voted Democratic in the primaries, would stay with the Democrats in the fall election, regardless of the candidate, because of revulsion at the Bush economic and foreign policies. This is merely a recent example of the same old "white-populist" fallacy that has always ended in long-run defeat for progressive causes.

The real significance of the Clinton strategy is suggested in a 27 October 2008 *New York Times* article by Michael Powell, just days before the November election, describing two kinds of Democratic voters in the Pennsylvania counties where Clinton had her most important electoral New Jim Crow success in the primaries:

1. those struggling with themselves to set aside their racism to vote for Obama
2. those intending to cast a (throwaway) write-in vote for Hillary Clinton rather than vote for a black candidate.

56. Surely the American people have a right to expect that a national leader running for

president understands that incitement of racist fears and hatred is a more important question than any politician's individual political career. Avoiding such incitement ought to involve an *ACTIVE COMMITMENT* by any real leader, including clear, active, public statements warning of these dangers and unequivocal repudiation of any tendencies in this direction in the course of the campaign.

Even viewed charitably, Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign failed this test of national leadership. Instead of treating the racist dangers in her own campaign with the "get thee behind me, Satan" attitude that responsible leadership required, Senator Clinton judged that it would be expedient to play footsy with the devils of American racism as long as they gained her some votes and she did not get caught.

## **16. The New Jim Crow McCain-Palin-Style**

57. Print and broadcast news reports on the two fall presidential campaigns have created two starkly contrasting images of American political life in the early 21st century.

Repeatedly during the primaries, Senator Obama's crowds, despite their candidate's own low-key manner, seemed almost ecstatic at the prospects they felt were being opened by the progress of his campaign. Throughout the fall presidential contest, the Obama-Biden crowds have seemed inspired, excited, happy, hopeful, and, sometimes, rather confidently combative over against the right wing.

Through the primaries McCain was generally seen as a candidate admired by many journalists as an independent-thinking conservative but not really able to inspire much enthusiasm in the Republican base. Once he had secured the nomination, McCain seemed to become an increasingly dour and rigid standard-bearer for the American right, without any notion at all of how to conduct an effective campaign for the presidency.

In the fall campaign the McCain-Palin crowds have not even been looking to their candidates or the Republican Party for inspiration. Rather, the Republican right-wing faithful seem to have been looking for opportunities to vent their frustration. The big public McCain-Palin events have been characterized by an anger apparently born of desperation. The Republican crowds have been hard pressed to display much enthusiasm for the apparently clueless conservatism of McCain, let alone the improbable prospect of the patently unqualified Palin being elected Vice President. Rather, confused, disoriented, bitter, and angry, the frustrated Republican crowds have wanted to blow off steam. Republican demagogues have fueled the anger with New Jim Crow-style rhetoric.

The *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich gives a sense of the ugly atmosphere at a typical rally for the Republican presidential ticket about a month before the November election in an article published 11 October 2008.

At McCain-Palin rallies, the raucous and insistent cries of "Treason!" and "Terrorist!" and "Kill him!" and "Off with his head!" as well as the uninhibited slinging of racial epithets, are actually something new in a campaign that has seen almost every conceivable twist....

What makes them different, and what has pumped up the Weimar-like rage at McCain-Palin rallies, is the violent escalation in rhetoric, especially (though not exclusively) by Palin. Obama....is "palling around with terrorists" (note the plural noun). Obama is "not a man who sees America the way you and I see America." Wielding a wildly out-of-context quote, Palin slurs him as an enemy of American troops.

By the time McCain asks the crowd, "Who is the real Barack Obama?," it's no surprise that someone cries out "Terrorist!" The rhetorical conflation of Obama with terrorism is complete. It is stoked further by repeated invocations of Obama's middle name by surrogates introducing McCain and Palin at these rallies....

It wasn't always thus with McCain. In February he loudly dissociated himself from a speaker who brayed "Barack Hussein Obama" when introducing him in Ohio. Now McCain either backpedals with tardy, pro forma expressions of respect for his opponent or lets second-tier campaign underlings release boilerplate disavowals after ugly incidents like the chilling Jim Crow-era flashback last week when a Florida sheriff ranted about "Barack Hussein Obama" at a Palin rally while in full uniform.

Rich goes on to explain McCain's change of policy as a matter of political desperation in the face of the success of Barack Obama's campaign.

McCain, who is no racist, turned to this desperate strategy only as Obama started to pull ahead.

The notion that carrying out racist policies "only" as a matter of political desperation makes a national political leader "not a racist" is itself a feature of the mentality of the New Jim Crow. Frank Rich, however, is right to be one of the few American journalists to point to the racial demographics of the Republican Party and the McCain-Palin rallies as a damning feature of the Republican presidential campaign.

There are no black faces high in the McCain hierarchy to object to these tactics. There hasn't been a single black Republican governor, senator, or House member in six years....There are indeed so few people of color at McCain events that a black senior writer from *The*

*Tallahassee Democrat* was mistakenly ejected by the Secret Service from a campaign rally in Panama City [Florida] in August, even though he was standing with other reporters and showed his credentials. His only apparent infraction was to look glaringly out of place.

58. Most leading Democrats remained silent about the racist character of the McCain-Palin campaign, apparently following the precedent of their silence in the face of the Clinton-style New Jim Crow of the primaries. However, in a statement posted to the *Politico Arena Forum* on 11 October, 1960s civil rights leader and now Georgia Congressman John Lewis spoke out in anguished and indignant tones:

As one who was a victim of violence and hate during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, I am deeply disturbed by the negative tone of the McCain-Palin campaign. What I am seeing reminds me too much of another destructive period in American history. Sen. McCain and Gov. Palin are sowing the seeds of hatred and division, and there is no need for this hostility in our political discourse.

During another period, in the not too distant past, there was a governor of the state of Alabama named George Wallace who also became a presidential candidate.

George Wallace never threw a bomb. He never fired a gun, but he created the climate and the conditions that encouraged vicious attacks against innocent Americans who were simply trying to exercise their constitutional rights. Because of this atmosphere of hate, four little girls were killed on Sunday morning when a church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama.

As public figures with the power to influence and persuade, Sen. McCain and Gov. Palin are playing with fire, and if they are not careful, that fire will consume us all. They are playing a very dangerous game that disregards the value of the political process and cheapens our entire democracy. We can do better. The American people deserve better.

In the midst of the silence of other leading Democrats, John Lewis's statement represented an act of courage. Shortly after Congressman Lewis issued his statement, the Obama campaign, without taking exception to the gist of his statement, disavowed any direct comparison of "segregation-forever" demagogue George Wallace with John McCain. Congressman Lewis himself seems to have backed off of some of the implications of a one-to-one comparison. But, quite rightly, neither Lewis nor Obama have taken back the substance of John Lewis's warning about the dangers of racially in-

flammatory rhetoric inspiring very real racist violence.

In fact, in the final days of the fall campaign, Federal authorities announced the breaking up of the latest of three assassination plots against Senator Obama (one also a plot against President Bush). All three appear to be relatively amateurish affairs by unbalanced people not especially competent at handling the day-to-day affairs of their own lives, let alone actually carrying out an assassination plot against a well-protected presidential candidate. But the thugs who murdered the four little girls in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 were not particularly stable or competent members of their communities—nor, for that matter, was the assassin of Martin Luther King in 1968.

John Lewis's strong words rightly reminded his fellow citizens that there is a terribly real connection between the demagoguery of racist hatred and the violent acts of the desperate unhinged assassin emboldened by seeing apparently respected leaders seeming to speak directly to his obsessions. On the basis of his experience, Lewis rightly posed the moral question, "Who is responsible?" and rightly pointed his finger at John McCain and Sarah Palin.

It is no accident that, while other leaders of his own party remained silent on the dangers of the McCain-Palin demagoguery, it would be a veteran of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s—one of the early leaders of the heroic youth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—who broke the silence and defended the rule of reason against the McCain-Palin orgy of hatemongering and division.

Congressman Lewis rightly pointed out that the McCain-Palin-style New Jim Crow ran the same danger as the old-Jim Crow demagoguery of George Wallace that "created the climate and the conditions that encouraged vicious attacks on innocent people." But even he was not about to remind us that the Hillary Clinton-style New Jim Crow "created the climate and the conditions that encouraged" McCain and Palin.

59. Nor, until late in the campaign, was any national figure of either party prepared to condemn outright the central feature of McCain-Palin demagoguery: anti-Muslim racism. And it was also no accident that, when that condemnation was finally offered, it came not from any Democrat but from a former Republican Secretary of State and not from a liberal but from one of the leading figures of the center-right, Colin Powell, in his endorsement of Barack Obama on the NBC program *Meet the Press* on Sunday 19 October.

I'm also troubled by, not what Senator McCain says, but what members of the [Republican] party say. And it is permitted to be said such things as, "Well, you know that Mr. Obama is a Muslim."

Well, the correct answer is, he is not a Muslim, he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian.

But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president? Yet, I have heard senior members of my own [Republican] party drop the suggestion, "He's a Muslim and he might be associated [with] terrorists."

This is not the way we should be doing it in America.

I feel strongly about this particular point because of a picture I saw in a magazine. It was a photo essay about troops who are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. And one picture at the tail end of this photo essay was of a mother in Arlington Cemetery, and that she had her head on the headstone of her son's grave. And as the picture focused in, you could see the writing on the headstone. And it gave his awards—Purple Heart, Bronze Star—showed that he died in Iraq, gave his date of birth, date of death. He was 20 years old. And then, at the very top of the headstone, it didn't have a Christian cross, it didn't have a Star of David, it had [a] crescent and a star of the Islamic faith. And his name was Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan, and he was an American. He was born in New Jersey. He was 14 years old at the time of 9/11. And he waited until he could go serve his country, and he gave his life.

Now, we have got to stop polarizing ourself in this way.

60. Seeing that the worst of their demagoguery did not seem to be drawing new voters to the hapless McCain candidacy and knowing that the base had already gotten the demagogic message, McCain and Palin seem to have reacted to John Lewis's and Colin Powell's criticism and the support it received by toning things down in the final days of the campaign. But they have not accepted the criticism or condemned the lynch-mob atmosphere at their rallies that prompted it.

For them, as for Hillary Clinton in the primaries, there would be no "get thee behind me Satan" addressed to the devils of American racism as long as there were votes to be had and the devils could be dressed up in some fancy New Jim Crow-style clothes.

## **17. The Importance of Defending Obama against Racism; Fighting Racism in the Era of the New Jim Crow**

61. What we have termed the Obama paradox is only one facet of an emerging period of history that is going to be extremely contradictory. Both the economic crisis and certain responses to it, including especially the election of Barack Obama as the American president and the likely modest but real shift to the left in the policies of the American government that will accompany that election, favor certain progressive developments. But they do not do so in any automatic fashion. And these shifts in the American and world economic and political situation also are certain to favor the development of strong right-wing reactions.

In particular, the economic crisis and the economic and political measures being taken to deal with it create conditions for a more powerful fight for equality, the fight that BAMN exists to build and lead to victory. However, these same developments also create conditions for the development of powerful reactionary currents. In other words, the Obama era will not be a period of automatic progressive gains but rather a period of intensified polarization.

It must be emphasized that this is not the view of Barack Obama himself or his wealthy backers. In fact, candidate Obama has presented himself as the sort of figure who could advance progressive forces in so safely delimited and minimized a way that polarization could be prevented. His wealthy supporters have funded his campaign precisely because they expect him to be such a figure. Whether one might regard this point of view on the part of Obama and his wealthy funders as in some sense desirable or not, it is based on a grossly naive misunderstanding of the character of the right-wing forces in the US and the world today. Neither the failure of the extreme "neoliberal" economic policies of the past generation nor even a landslide victory for Barack Obama and his Democratic Party will produce the wave of reconciliation and cooperation between left and right that Mr. Obama's wealthy backers clearly want and that candidate Obama himself seems quite genuinely to believe in.

We have already had a foretaste of the reactionary mobilization that an Obama victory will provoke, in the McCain-Palin campaign, with its rhetorical excesses and hatemongering. That McCain is generally regarded as a relatively moderate and honorable sort of reactionary only gives us more reason to dread what is to come in the future. Even the most modest and patently pro-capitalist of Mr. Obama's policies are being denounced from the McCain-Palin platforms as "radical" and "redistribute-the-wealth" socialism.

For the most powerful and wealthy forces in American society that remain utterly opposed to Barack Obama and his Democrats—including especially the forces committed to the defense of white privilege—the issue is not the particular policies in dispute today. It is the long-term preservation in history of their power and privileges. For these right-wing forces the question is their prerogative of accumulating wealth without any fettering by a political process sufficiently open to democratic pressures to hinder the realization of their view of themselves as the only legitimate ru-

lers of modern society.

Mr. Obama and the liberal and moderate capitalists who support him undoubtedly have a more nuanced and rational view of the place of wealth and power in the world and its relationship to the rest of society. But neither the electoral victory of the Democrats nor the presumable moderation of a President Obama's policies can prevent the intensification of a rear-guard struggle against him and virtually any progressive measures he seeks to advance, however "moderate." As the economic crisis continues and in certain respects intensifies, bringing with it more mass pressures for movement to the left, the right wing in its very desperation can be counted on to intensify struggle in defense of the old inequalities, relations of power, and prejudices. And this right-wing reaction will command considerable levers of opposition, even in the face of an electoral landslide for Barack Obama and his party. The divide-and-rule demagoguery of racism and national-chauvinism will be one of this right wing's most powerful weapons, as it has been in such periods of crisis throughout modern history.

62. This contradictory period of polarization will play out in a very particular way in an Obama presidency.

First, there is the strange phenomenon of the Two Obamas. The uniting of substantial elements of his party's two factions around him has been the key to Obama's ability to win its nomination. But the actual decisions he will be obliged to make as president will tend to pull that coalition of relative opposites apart. Over time, if President Obama tends to remain loyal to the aspirations of the progressive base of the party whose work and devotion enabled him to defeat Clinton and without whose continuing active support he could not have won the presidential contest, he will tend to come into conflict with his wealthy-elite funders. If he remains as conservative as his wealthy-elite funders expect him to be, he will be seen increasingly as betraying the hopes placed in him by his party's progressive base.

We may assume Obama himself will attempt to balance between these factions, as he has managed to do rather successfully over the course of 2008. We may also assume a more protracted than usual honeymoon period for a newly elected President Obama, as elation over electing the nation's first black president inclines many of his supporters to give him an unusually extended benefit of the doubt.

However, the evolution of the economic crisis will tend to intensify the pressures on the new president's balancing act. Eventually these pressures will force either a move to left that will alienate certain elements of the wealthy elite or a move to the right that will disillusion key sections of the mass progressive base. A move to the left will tend to move disaffected wealthy backers to the right, into the waiting arms of sections of the right-wing opposition. A move to the right will tend to move sections of the progressive base of the Democratic Party to more left-wing independent mass organization and action.

Second, there is the certainty of determined right-wing opposition to an Obama presidency.

Initially the most racist elements of the American right wing will be traumatized by the mere fact of a black president, since that mere fact itself flies so fundamentally in the face of the racists' view of the world. Barack Obama's election as president, combined with decisive electoral victories by the Democrats, will tend initially to throw the entire American right into disarray. In part the American right will be in shock simply because these electoral events would represent a sweeping popular rejection of the long-dominant dogmas of conservative ideology. But the initial demoralization and disorientation of the American right will also involve a particular response to the Obama victory, because the assumption that white Americans will always be racist enough to support conservatism regardless of their own rational economic and political interests has been a fundamental lynchpin of Republican and conservative strategy and right-wing arrogance for generations. The failure of that conservative strategy in 2008 will deal a painful blow to that right-wing arrogance.

However, the power of the American right in American politics cannot be permanently broken by even the most sweeping electoral victory by the Democrats. The place of the right wing in the US has been determined by long-range historical processes, and these processes will continue to operate even after a Democratic electoral victory of historic proportions. Indeed, the policies of the Democrats themselves will guarantee an eventual resurgence of the right wing. After its initial state of shock, the American right wing will lick its wounds and regroup to resume its historical project of resisting human progress. Dazed for a moment, the American right will not take long to seize the powerful levers at their disposal to hurl effective obstacles in the path of President Obama and his Democrats.

Judging from his record so far, Obama will attempt to deal with this dual polarization by bridging the gap, on the one hand by attempting to find some lowest common denominator, on the other hand by attempting to fulfill the progressive expectations of his party base in a sufficiently meek-and-mild manner to reassure the party's wealthy elite funders.

To the determined right-wing opponents, Obama's stance of moderation will merely be seen as vulnerability. While he balances and wavers, they will mobilize and undermine. And the New Jim Crow will be the right-wing reaction's best friend.

63. BAMN does not present this prospect of polarization to spread any sort of pessimism or defeatism. On the contrary. Our point is that the defense of Barack Obama against racist demagoguery is not merely a question of defending one electoral candidate or one president against lies and threats. It is part and parcel of the conditions necessary for winning the progressive struggles of the next period in history against the destructive dangers of the right-wing mobilization certain to rise up against us.

Yet, with the brave exceptions we have cited, neither the Republican nor Democratic Party

leadership nor candidate Obama himself have been prepared to call the racist attacks what they are or condemn them plainly and forcefully. For Obama's party leadership, this is a matter of its own ambivalent and too-cozy relationship with the sections of American society drawn to the New Jim Crow or easily disoriented by its appeals, as seen in the Clinton primary strategy and her party's easy toleration of it. For Obama himself, it seems to be a particular instance of the policy of extreme moderation in all things that he continues to regard as the key to his success.

64. But, from the essential standpoint of the struggle for a progressive future, today's successful electoral policy of moderation is merely tomorrow's vulnerability to defeat. Failure to fight racism today means leaving the road open to a resurgent right wing tomorrow. When John Lewis and Colin Powell spoke out against the Republican ticket's racist demagoguery, the Republicans had no response they could offer in public other than to try to change the subject and were thrown on to the defensive. Yet no section of the established national liberal leadership drew the obvious lesson: fighting racism is the only option. This is the curious balance sheet of the New Jim Crow.

65. Fighting racism in the era of the New Jim Crow begins today with the defense of Barack Obama against racist attacks.

In the first place, this is a matter of being convinced of the ability of the majority of the American people, given strong, truth-telling leadership, to leave behind the racism in the nation's past and commit the country to a new development. It is a matter of being convinced that most Americans no longer need to cling to the prejudices of the "white man's republic" and the defense of white privilege.

In other words, the defense of Barack Obama against racist attacks is, at the same time, a defense, without sentimentality or flattery, of the American people's political maturity and rational consciousness. It is a rejection of the trendy cynicism—of which there are both right-wing and left-wing varieties—that assumes white Americans always have been and always will be both too racist and too national-chauvinist to act politically in their own rational interests—or indeed to think straight at all.

This statement itself expresses BAMN's consistent and systematic contribution to that defense of Barack Obama against racism.

66. BAMN's methods for fighting racism in the era of the New Jim Crow are treated by the right-wing defenders of white privilege as scandalous radicalism. There is no surprise in their attacks, which we regard as high praise. Our liberal opponents treat our methods either as vestiges of nostalgia for a long-bygone era when idealists like Dr. King fought to raise the nation's consciousness to its full potential for good in the world, or as utopian dreams of an impossible future.

BAMN's policies are neither nostalgia nor utopianism. They are the necessary basis for any successful practical struggle for progressive change. Without these policies, all aspirations for fundamental progressive change are, indeed, illusory.

In a period in which it is a matter of principle for the established liberal organizations and leaderships NOT to fight racism or to do so only weakly and inconsistently, it is clear that independent organization is essential—independent not only from the Democratic and Republican parties, but from the civil rights and other organizations tied to and subordinated to the Democrats and the existing two-party electoral system.

To fight racism it is necessary to speak the plain truth about racism, without fear or favor. In this practice we can have no better example than Frederick Douglass, who spoke out not only against the racism of the slaveholders and their northern apologists but also against the racism in the abolitionist movement itself, whose greatest leader he was.

To fight racism it is necessary to expose ALL the different forms of right-wing demagoguery aimed at pitting one group against another, ALL scapegoating, and ALL stereotyping.

Fighting racism requires not only rejecting and exposing the demagoguery of the right wing but also rejecting demagoguery ourselves. Speaking the plain truth about racism should speak for itself and admit of no demagoguery. The demagogue's appeal to hate and fear should be alien to us. We aim to lead and rebuild our nation on the basis of its most progressive, humane, and rational aspirations. Inspirers need no demagoguery.

To defeat racism requires fighting racism whole, in its entirety, opposing all bigotry in all its forms. There are no fashionable or "understandable" prejudices to be indulged today and perhaps criticized in some future when prejudice is no longer expedient. The diversity of oppressed peoples can only win by uniting their struggles, not competing with and cultivating their respective prejudices against each other.

The fight against racism cannot be subordinated to any party or candidate's electoral strategy or set aside or postponed to some convenient time. As Dr. King declared in ringing tones in the "I Have a Dream" speech, though the powers that be will always opine that "now is not the time" for the fight for equality, a real movement for progressive change knows that now is always the time to oppose racism and fight for justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot [the Lincoln Memorial] to remind our nation of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of

brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

Today millions of Americans remain trapped in "the dark and desolate valley of segregation," segregation New Jim Crow-style, de facto segregation. It is fundamental to the intentions and mentality of the New Jim Crow, in both its right-wing and its left-wing versions, that this segregation is inevitable and must get worse. Over against this cynicism BAMN maintains the perspective and the call to action of Dr. King: Now is the time.

67. The greatest danger for the progressive forces in American society today—and, above all, for the dedicated activists of the great Obama movement of 2008—is any tendency to take progressive change for granted on the basis of the undeniably remarkable character of the economic and political developments taking place before our eyes. Not the election of the nation's first black president—remarkable as that achievement must be—nor even a landslide victory for the Democrats in congressional and other contests, will guarantee the accomplishment of the progressive aspirations of the Obama movement. Nor is a progressive outcome in any way automatically guaranteed as a consequence of any supposedly progressive (or even "radical") tendencies in the economic crisis or the measures being taken to address it.

Rather, the next period of American and world history will be highly contradictory, even convulsive, as important steps forward are accompanied and countered by acute threats of backward movement. The outcome will be determined, not by automatic economic developments or even by the election of a new president and government, but by whether or not a new movement for equality and social justice develops in time—a movement that is worthy of the historical challenge facing us.

The mass progressive movement to elect Barack Obama as the nation's first black president stands now on the front lines of that challenge. If that movement can develop its own independent leadership, organization, and methods of political action to remain faithful to its progressive program and commitments, all indeed can be well. In order to meet this historical challenge, this movement will have to reject the siren song of "white populism" and place the fight for equality and the fight against racism at the center of its understanding and activity.

## 18. Why BAMN Cannot Endorse Barack Obama

68. The principles that govern BAMN's electoral policies are stated plainly in BAMN's founding program.

9. BAMN will be independent of the Democrats and Republicans and of governments and school and university administrations. In any elections, BAMN will consider supporting only those candidates, slates, and parties whose support for affirmative action and the struggle of the new movement for equality is explicit and unequivocal.

[*Principles of BAMN*, 19 October 2000]

The sordid and cynical maneuvers of the 2008 elections confirm the importance of BAMN's policy of independence from the Democrats and Republicans and from the methods and priorities of today's American electoral politics. The fact that his apparent view of the exigencies of electoral tactics has delimited even Senator Obama's ability to defend himself against certain racist attacks dramatizes the necessity of BAMN's independence. BAMN has no electoralist shoulders to look over in its defense of Barack Obama against racist attacks.

69. It is certain that many supporters of BAMN around the country will vote for Barack Obama in November 2008, in order to be part of the moment in which the United States elects its first black president and in order to help make sure that this moment actually happens. They will cast their vote in this way both as an expression of support for progress in the struggle for racial equality and as an expression of opposition to the racist attacks against Barack Obama. BAMN understands and respects this attitude, rooted as it is in the centrality of the issues of race and racism throughout American history. BAMN rejects any argument that in recent history these issues have been transcended in some way that means the election of a black president is no longer an important question. More than that. We look forward with hope and a certain cautious confidence that the American people will find the political maturity to take this important historic step, defying bad leadership and displaying before the world some of the most democratic and progressive aspects of American history.

But the question of BAMN as an organization endorsing a presidential candidate or a political party is a separate and different question. As our founding principles indicate, for BAMN to endorse any political candidate requires that that candidate's "support for affirmative action and the struggle of the new movement for equality is explicit and unequivocal." In the aftermath of the mass Movement of 2006 for Immigrant Rights and BAMN's commitment to build that movement, it is obvious that explicit and unequivocal support for BAMN's progressive and democratic vision of immigrant rights is also required.

70. Unfortunately, Senator Obama has not offered anything like such an explicit and unequivocal declaration of his support for these principles. We may assume that Senator Obama maintains the historic if weak and ambiguous policies of his party on these questions. But the weak and ambiguous character of that support has always been a reason why BAMN could NOT automatically endorse Democrats.

Still, given the historic importance of an Obama victory in November, for the reasons we have laid out, some BAMN supporters will understandably be disappointed in BAMN's decision not to endorse him. Should Obama lose in November, some BAMN supporters may be angry at BAMN. This anger may be mitigated by the knowledge that BAMN's limited resources at present make the contribution BAMN could make to his election rather meager. But, of course, in a close election, even very limited resources could make a difference, and the issue, in any case, is a matter of principle. Whatever BAMN's resources, we should use them to do whatever is right.

Therefore, it is essential to make clear that BAMN's position in this election is very much a matter of principle. From its founding, BAMN has seen the key to understanding the inability of the established civil rights organizations to defend the gains of the last civil rights movement in the subordination of these organizations' efforts to the electoral methods and priorities of the Democrats. BAMN was created because of the necessity of civil rights struggle conducted on a basis independent from Democratic Party electoralism. The subordination of other groups to the Democrats' electoral policies stems from an illusion that tying themselves to the Democrats connects them somehow "to the real power." But the policies of subordination based on this illusion of power merely render these organizations and leaderships impotent. BAMN's experience in recent years has only confirmed more deeply and more painfully how deadly it is to any meaningful defense of civil rights to be gripped by this sort of illusion of power.

For BAMN to place itself on the terrain of Democratic Party electoralism would merely make BAMN politically impotent, too. BAMN would be obliged to abandon its policies of consistent truth-telling and independent mass action for the endless regime of false diplomacy and timid maneuverism that characterizes American partisan electoralism. The corrupting power of money in American electoral politics would quickly lead to the corruption of BAMN. Protecting the Democrats' ability to win white racist ("conservative") votes would take precedence over speaking the plain truth about racism.

These are not abstract concerns. BAMN leaders have faced repeated pressures—even threats—from certain Democratic politicians and government officials when our mass struggles and legal strategies have seemed to them to impinge on their electoral tactics. BAMN's ability to resist such pressures and the electoralist conceptions that justify them has been essential to everything we have been able to achieve since BAMN was created. Just recently, in carrying out policies that defeated Connerly's latest ballot-initiative attack on affirmative action in Arizona, BAMN was instructed by certain of our liberal-Democratic allies that we were not to use the term "affirmative action" and that we must not say anything against the anti-immigrant petitions being circulated along with the Connerly petitions. BAMN, of course, simply rejected these counsels of division, timidity,

despair, and defeat, as we have rejected numberless such pieces of advice from liberals to whom no principle is as important as getting some Democrat elected.

It is this question of priorities and methods of work that is the essential reason BAMN cannot place itself on the same terrain as the Democrats' electoral efforts in 2008, even to be part of the election of the nation's first black president. For it is evident that the Obama campaign has, overall, been conducted with the same priorities and the same methods as prior Democratic Party presidential campaigns: no progressive principle is worth defending if it would mean jeopardizing large campaign donations or the scramble for "white conservative" votes. For BAMN to place itself on the terrain of this sort of electoral politics would be for BAMN to commit political and moral suicide.

BAMN's policy in this election is not a matter of moralistic perfectionism or utopian purity. On the contrary. Our concerns are entirely practical. We have argued that there are two Obamas, an Obama for the moderate-conservative party elite and an Obama for the progressive base of the party. Only if there is a continuing commitment to building independent struggle for progressive aims—struggle, that is, independent of the two parties—is there a possibility that the perspective of Senator Obama's progressive supporters could be realized.

Nor is BAMN's policy conceived in any spirit of sectarian disdain for Senator Obama's impassioned and idealistic rank-and-file supporters. They are in many ways the hope of the nation. We share what is most important and dynamic in their vision of the country. We share their hopes and their fears. We hope to work side by side with the most committed of the Obama progressive activists in the decisive struggles of the years to come.

Where BAMN differs from other organizations is in our refusal to see the most important event of our time as the election of the American president. The most important aspect of the Obama campaign is the democratic potential in the rank-and-file movement that has organized to secure his election, not Senator Obama himself and not even his election as president.

We do not look to the next change in personnel in the cast of characters that make up the powers that be to accomplish the fundamental changes our nation and the world desperately need. All American history speaks against the plausibility of that theory of change. We look to the democratic mobilization of the progressive masses of American society, to their increased consciousness of their role in history and their ability to take hold of that history to change it for the better. There is indeed something more important than who the next president is.

BAMN could consider endorsing Barack Obama only if, as the *BAMN Principles* declare, his "support for affirmative action [and immigrant rights] and the struggle of the new movement for equality is explicit and unequivocal." Not only is Senator Obama's support for affirmative action and immigrant rights ambiguous and equivocal—it is a tactical principle of his campaign that his support for any important measures that advance racial equality be not only ambiguous and equivocal but, insofar as possible, hidden and silent. As for the question of whether he supports "the struggle of the

new movement for equality"—we will have to take up this question separately by examining the famous March 2008 Philadelphia speech.

There will be plenty of people this year to tell us that the most important question is the election of the next president and that concerns like fighting for equality should be set aside or submerged into that all-important electoral process. BAMN must not and will not set aside the fight for equality. BAMN must not and will not submerge the fight for equality into the Democrats' electoral process. Our troubled and suffering nation has more than enough organizations and leaderships prepared to make the convenient compromises of an era of little courage and no principles. America needs BAMN.

### **19. Obama's Philadelphia Speech: "A More Perfect Union"— The New Atlanta Compromise and the New Jim Crow**

71. There has been a more specific problem for BAMN in endorsing Senator Obama that goes beyond his sharing the equivocal character of his party's positions on the struggle for equality. For Senator Obama presented his own views on these questions in the most important speech of his presidential campaign, the speech titled "A More Perfect Union," delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 18 March.

This speech was Senator Obama's electoral response to two sets of attacks on him in the preceding weeks of the primary campaign: "guilt-by-association" attacks on him making use of supposedly inflammatory statements by his long-time pastor (now retired) at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, and the racist attacks of Senator Clinton's surrogates.

However, "A More Perfect Union" is much more than a typical election-campaign speech. It is Barack Obama's manifesto on the issues of race and racism in American history. As such, the Philadelphia speech requires BAMN's careful attention, especially since it contains a number of very troubling elements.

72. In what we have termed the era of the New Jim Crow, in the middle of a presidential primary campaign, Senator Obama's decision to speak openly in a major public statement on issues of race and racism required him to defy the political common wisdom of recent years. It also required him to defy the general policy of his own campaign up to that point of minimizing any references to his own race. In effect, Senator Obama chose to go beyond the minimal requirements of his election campaign to make a larger statement on issues of race in America. This decision itself showed a certain courage on Senator Obama's part and earned the speech enormous media attention and general public praise. For black Americans in particular, in an era so starved of the courage to deal with issues of race at all, there was a sense of pride in Barack Obama and a sense of vindication in his decision to speak out.

Further, the fact of the speech itself as well as certain statements in it constituted a serious defense of himself against both the lines of attack on him as of that point in the campaign. In choosing to rise to his own defense at all Senator Obama was displaying more courage than many politicians in recent years, who have not been prepared to defend themselves against scurrilous attacks until after consultation with an entourage of pollsters and advisers determined whether or not it was politically expedient to have any self-respect.

73. Much of "A More Perfect Union" is taken up with the question of Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Obama attempts to offer a relatively balanced statement. He reminds his audience that "I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms" what Obama calls Wright's "incendiary language." Obama repeatedly refers to the attitude of Wright's controversial statements as a negative example of a certain kind of supposedly extremist criticism of white racism and the chauvinism and militarism of American foreign policy. But Obama also praises Wright's role as his pastor and, in the course of doing this, tries to convey some sense of what a black church can express of the contradictions of an American black community:

The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a US marine, who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth—by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing daycare services and scholarships and prison ministries and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS....

... Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety....The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, and, yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he might be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community....

It is unlikely that there has ever been another American political candidate who has dissociated himself so vigorously from the views of a controversial figure while at the same time explaining, championing, even verbally embracing the controversial figure in such moving terms. Obama's basic stance here of condemning Rev. Wright's supposedly "incendiary" positions while remaining loyal to Wright's role in his and his family's life has a ring of genuineness that is unusual in American politics. And in the course of maintaining his personal loyalty to Rev. Wright, he implies a refusal to distance himself from his roots in America's black communities that also seems to transcend the ordinary expectations of what is expedient in an election campaign—especially coming from a black candidate in the midst of a struggle for white votes. In effect, in his personal defense of Rev. Wright, despite the condemnations of Wright's controversial views, there is an element of loyalty not only to Wright but to the American black community and its historic struggle for equality. In the Philadelphia speech, Obama's defense of the black community's struggle is more felt by the attentive viewer or reader than heard or seen in the plain words of the speech, but it is there nevertheless.

74. The problem in the speech emerges, however, as Obama continues his method of making political points by talking in emotional terms about his own personal history. He compares the contradictions of Rev. Wright's anger as a black man in America with the racist reactions of his white grandmother (Madelyn Dunham, who would pass away in Hawaii at age 86 on 3 November, the day before Election Day), feelingly expressing sympathetic understanding of her contradictions as well.

... I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

If this were only a matter of personal understanding of the problems of a family member, the comparison might be harmless enough. Most of us have had grandparents who have said something we disagreed with but, out of sensitivity to their age or family diplomacy have chosen to ignore the remark rather than cause personal hurt. But in fact, this equation of black anger and resentment towards racism with white racist fears of black struggle becomes a key element in the method of the entire speech. It is almost as if Obama is trying to compete with his rival Senator Clinton in convincing white racist voters that he can "feel their [racist] pain."

As the speech goes on, the point of Obama's story about his white grandmother turns out to be thoroughly political, like most such biographical anecdotes in recent presidential campaigns. But even accepting Obama's story about his grandmother in the personal terms in which he presents it, a critically minded person might wonder if it is really unreasonable to ask the white grandmother of a

black child to come to grips with her own racism in order to avoid hurting the grandchild she loves so much. But, of course, no one is supposed to think critically about a story like this in a speech like Obama's "A More Perfect Union."

Unfortunately, the moral equation of white-racist fear with black anger against racism, introduced in the touching story of Obama's white grandmother, becomes a major political theme of the speech.

These people [Rev. Wright and Obama's white grandmother] are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Some will see this as an attempt to excuse or justify comments that are simply inexcusable. I can assure you it is not. I suppose the politically safe thing would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. We can dismiss Reverend Wright as a crank or a demagogue, just as some have dismissed Geraldine Ferraro [Hillary Clinton's most prominent racist attack-dog surrogate] in the aftermath of her recent statements as harboring some deep-seated racial bias....

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today's urban and rural communities....

...That anger [that many black people feel over the heritage of racism] may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in Rev. Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning....

In fact a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have

been particularly privileged by their race....as far as they're concerned, no one's ever handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear that an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed, when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger in the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Obama's systematic equation of black resentment of racism with white-racist fears of black people rests on historical fallacy and logical error. But the problem is worse than that. For these are mistakes that can have terrible practical consequences. And Obama at some points in "A Perfect Union" seems to embrace precisely those terrible practical conclusions.

For Obama treats black indignation against racism as an irrational, if understandable, holdover from the old-Jim Crow past.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was still systematically constricted.....

... For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and bitterness of those years....

Obama treats indignation against racism as a sort of political senility characterizing only older black people. This is a notion that would come as quite a surprise to the youth activists of BAMN, a notion

utterly incompatible with their entire life experience.

Obama's idea of even-handedness is to treat both black indignation against racism and white-racist anger toward black people as similarly irrational and "counterproductive."

... That [black] anger is not always productive, indeed all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change....

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle-class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests, economic policies that favor the few over the many....

In "A More Perfect Union," Obama's attitude toward what he treats as the irrational anger of both black people and white people is in some vague sense sympathetic, but his attitude is certainly profoundly condescending and patronizing.

... But the anger [of black people like Reverend Wright] is real, it is powerful, and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races....

... And yet to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns—this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.

75. As for what we should do about racism—other than, presumably, vote for him—Obama seems to call on black people—and by extension other minority Americans—to limit their struggles to questions on which white people are already prepared to struggle themselves.

For the African-American community, that path [of "a more perfect union"] means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white

woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family....

That is, Obama seems to present as a condition of participation in American political life nonwhite Americans' suppression of their own historical struggles against racist inequality and discrimination, in favor of an abstract unity with white people on issues on which everybody can just get along. The implication of this seems to be that the reason for the historical difficulty of white and black people working together is not racism, but the "excessive" insistence of black people on raising issues of race and racism. The same logic would naturally imply the same criticism of Latina/o and all other nonwhite Americans.

It is inevitable, however, in a speech so carefully structured as a set of parallelisms that there is a "white-people" passage to balance this "black-people" passage:

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams, that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

The call on white people to acknowledge the reality of discrimination against black Americans is indeed remarkable in an electoral speech whose principle concern is to persuade white voters to vote for a black candidate. But the call is left at the level of vague generalization.

It is difficult to tell exactly what this "acknowledging" is supposed to accomplish, since black Americans are apparently called on not to raise any antiracist issues of their own that might distinguish their struggle from the common-denominator issues agreeable to white Americans. And what does it mean for Obama to ask white Americans to "acknowledge" discrimination if they are not being called on to support measures of affirmative action and desegregation?

76. The rhetoric of the Obama Philadelphia speech is often progressive-sounding. Obama makes certain profoundly true points that are rarely uttered in mainstream American political discourse. But when one looks at the speech seriously for anything concrete to do about racism, one can only look in vain. The speech repeatedly insists on the importance of "understanding" the

problems it refers to, rather than clinging to divisive stereotypes about them. But the speech itself offers no real understanding, merely Obama's own simplistic, condescending stereotypes of both black and white Americans. The often moving progressive poetry of the speech is never matched by any progressive substance—or indeed by much substance of any kind at all.

Taken seriously and taken to its logical conclusions, Obama's Philadelphia speech is a call for an America in which it is possible to talk (condescendingly) about race and racism but not possible to do anything about racism, certainly not possible to struggle seriously against racism. In reality, such a situation would also mean it would be hardly possible to talk truthfully and plainly about issues of racism either.

If Barack Obama really believes indignation about racism is an anachronistic attitude only appropriate to the black Americans of Rev. Wright's now out-of-date generation, the implication is that there is no longer the "fierce urgency of now" Dr. King insisted on. If Barack Obama really believes black people and other minorities should confine their struggles to those issues—and presumably those methods of struggle—that white people are taking up on their own, he is in reality opposed to any renewal of mass struggle against racism. If this is Barack Obama's America, it is an America in which all discussion of questions of race must be of a sort acceptable to white people, reassuring to white people, subordinated to white people.

If statements such as these from the Philadelphia speech define the America Barack Obama is trying to foster, it is an America without civil rights struggle and surely without a real civil rights movement, new, old, or any other kind.

Obama's dialogue on race is a dialogue in which one side must read from a script approved ahead of time by the other side. It is a monologue pretending to be a dialogue. It is a dialogue in which one side is allowed to be deaf and the other is presumed to have nothing to say that is not too controversial and irrational to be heard, let only heeded. In reality, a dialogue of this kind could not develop the real dialogue begun by the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 and raised to high levels of real mutual understanding over the course of the 1960s, since Obama's dialogue seems to be premised utterly on the absence of the sort of struggle which that real dialogue required. It is the dialogue, not of a new United States truly united at a higher level, but of the New Jim Crow—in its essence a dialogue of white people with themselves, telling themselves essentially the sort of things they have always wanted to hear in American history. In reality, it is a dialogue that can only take place among the dead, inside the grave of the Civil Rights Movement, or perhaps between mourners standing over the grave and the ever-so-conveniently dearly departed.

77. If these actually are Obama's views, then they are, in reality, quite compatible with the Clinton project of making the Democrats a party more habitable to white racist voters. Of course it could be argued that, since this was an election campaign speech, it may well be a mistake to take it very seriously. But it is consistent with Obama's other statements on issues of race in recent years and, in the absence of any clear countervailing evidence, has to be taken seriously.

78. Reading Obama's Philadelphia speech closely, we can say that his intended white audience is not the same as Senator Clinton's and her surrogates'. They were trying to get ambivalently racist white women to vote for Hillary Clinton on a racist and national-chauvinist basis. Barack Obama seems to be speaking to white people already wrestling seriously with their own racial prejudices in order to consider voting for him. He's saying, "Come on board, there's no problem; I understand you've got some prejudices, and that's okay. We can get along and work together on a set of issues."

This sort of patient, understanding attitude toward white people already seriously wrestling with their prejudices is fine, not only as an electoral strategy but as a way of understanding the actual process through which millions of white Americans may actually have to go in order to leave behind age-old prejudices and take a step into a more rational and equal world. But Obama, in the Philadelphia speech, assumes these Americans are capable of much less than they really are, asks too little of Americans who, in going through a profound personal revolution in their own consciousness, need to do more than merely cast one vote the right way. They need leadership to help them understand the full positive significance of what they are doing for themselves and for their country. That leadership "A More Perfect Union" does not give them. But personal revolutions, like political revolutions, that do not go far enough are more likely to be defeated and reversed. Obama repeatedly declares his "belief in the goodness of the American people." But here as elsewhere, he reveals his real pessimism, his real underestimation of the ability of white Americans to change for the better.

79. The reasoning underlying the positions implied in these troubling statements in "A More Perfect Union" may not be exactly the same as a general opposition to fighting racism. But it is certainly not the "explicit and unequivocal" "support for...the struggle of the new movement for equality" required for a BAMN endorsement. At best, these arguments are based on the familiar view that now is not the time to fight racism, that the fight against racism has already gone far enough if not too far, and it is now time to shut it down.

80. When it was delivered, Obama's Philadelphia speech was widely compared to Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. Yet it is in the "I Have a Dream" speech that Dr. King himself provided the decisive rebuke to this "now is not the time" argument.

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by a sign stating "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a

Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."  
(Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," 28 August 1963)

81. If it is ludicrous to treat Obama's "More Perfect Union" as a 2008 version of Dr. King's great "I Have a Dream," there is another very important and famous speech by a black American leader that all too readily comes to mind, given the apparent opposition to any meaningful struggle against racism in Senator Obama's speech.

On September 18, 1895, Booker T. Washington delivered a speech at the Atlanta Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, a speech that came to be known as the "Atlanta Compromise." In American history it has come to be regarded as a notorious speech. In the Atlanta Exposition Address, Booker T. Washington declares that all black struggle for equality is irrational and formulates every question of importance to the future of black people in America in a manner designed to be completely acceptable to the white Jim Crow political establishment in the South.

Washington words his counsel of submission and accommodation by black people in self-evident-sounding platitudes and other deceptive phrases, but the meaning has been clear enough so that the "Atlantic Exposition Address" has become an odious symbol of misleadership in American history. Like Obama, Booker T. Washington had parallel words for black and white people.

... To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land [that is, leaving the American South] or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door-neighbor, I would say, "Cast down your bucket where you are"—cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded....

... It is at the bottom of life we must begin and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities....

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes, whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast your bucket among those people who have, without strikes and labor wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought treasures from the bowels of the earth....While doing this, you can be sure in the future,

as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen....

Frederick Douglass had died only months before Booker T. Washington delivered the "Atlantic Exposition Address." Through his final days, Frederick Douglass had fought against the regime of lynchings endemic to the American South, joining with Ida B. Wells in a crusade to awaken the people of the North to the horrors that had come to define race relations in the society of their Southern fellow citizens. Douglass's last writings for a national audience declared the essential purpose of the regime of lynchings was to terrorize black people out of exercising their right to vote, or indeed any rights at all.

Booker T. Washington, however, had nothing to say or even imply about lynchings at his greatest historic moment—nothing at all to disturb the self-satisfaction of his white listeners. His only "demand" on his white audience was that they use (and train) the black population of the South as their hired servants and laborers. On the assumption of the fixed character of that hierarchy, Washington summed up his peculiar vision of a white-dominated Southern utopia:

... In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress....

The wisest of my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing....

... I pledge that in your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race....This, this, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.

With Frederick Douglass, the lion of equality, safely dead, the mouse of accommodation and submission could be anointed as the national spokesperson for black people by a white establishment eager to put "the agitation for social equality" behind it once and for all. Across the country, the press reprinted and praised the speech and paid tribute to Washington himself as a wise statesman of his people. Rich white people would pour large sums of money into Washington's Tuskegee Institute. The Atlanta Compromise worked well for Booker T. Washington, but for generations it suffocated struggle against Jim Crow racism. The Atlanta Compromise was not dismantled until the Montgomery bus boycott put an end to it and a real struggle for a new South was launched on the leadership of Martin Luther King.

82. "A More Perfect Union" is not a new "Atlanta Exposition Address" nor is its perspective exactly a new Atlanta Compromise. But certain statements in Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech all too readily invite comparison with the "Atlanta Exposition Address" and its philosophy of accommodationism. It is these deeply troubling statements, including those we have quoted, which BAMN has emphasized, because it is so important to clarify what Barack Obama and his supporters really mean.

For the real problem with Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech is not that it presents a simple, Booker T. Washington-like, opposition to civil rights struggle and call for accommodation. The problem with "A More Perfect Union" is that, with its studied vagueness, its carefully balanced equations of black and white experience, its preference for poetic abstraction and personalistic anecdote over concrete assertion, it is like a house of mirrors. Hold it up in front a right-wing mirror and you will see a placid conservative reflection. Hold it up in front of a left-wing mirror and you will see a lively progressive reflection. Not only the speech as a whole but some of its most important sentences can be heard or read as one thing or its opposite. It is an exquisite expression of the phenomenon BAMN has called the Two Obamas.

Two examples can serve to illustrate this house-of-mirrors quality of "A More Perfect Union." The speech is full of many more, for this is the main quality of the speech as a whole.

The first example comes from a passage we have already quoted.

... what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; ... the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds....

The second example comes a little later in the speech.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the OJ trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news.

Every word of the first example is house-of-mirrors material. We will focus on the statement that "current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past" "are real and must be addressed." BAMN would naturally understand this language as a recognition of the reality of the New Jim Crow and the necessity of positive measures to fight it. But the phrase "less overt than in the past" manages both to sound like an attempt to capture the difference between the old Jim Crow and the New Jim Crow while rather remarkably avoiding the mark.

The problem of the New Jim Crow is not essentially that it is "less overt" than old-style segregation. There is nothing covert about the court decisions that ban desegregation or the ballot

initiatives that prohibit affirmative action. The Katrina catastrophe for the black population of New Orleans was plenty "overt." So was the lynch-mob atmosphere in Jena, Louisiana. Nor has immigrant-bashing lacked in "overtness." The phrase "while less overt than in the past...[still real]" has the advantage for the Two Obamas of sounding equally like a recognition and a belittling of today's form of racism in the US. Hold the phrase up to a BAMN mirror, and you see a declaration of the reality of the New Jim Crow. Hold it to up a white Clinton supporter's mirror, and you see (or rather, don't see) "less overt" discrimination, which you can safely assume means "less important" discrimination.

The house-of-mirrors quality of the second example is especially troubling because it applies the method of studied ambiguity to the speech's only reference to the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on 29 August 2005, more than 1400 people died, the great majority black residents of the city—and the great majority of those, people who were too poor, too infirm, too young, or too old to evacuate. The nation watched in horror as the Bush administration's Federal disaster authorities shuffled papers, dithered, and postured for the news media—not unlike the behavior of the President himself. The Federal government seemed unconcerned about, oblivious to the urgent needs of thousands of desperate black Americans struggling to survive the nation's worst natural disaster in decades. Millions of Americans of all races were appalled by what appeared to be the blatant racism of the government's attitude. Rap artist Kanye West spoke for millions when he declared on national television on 2 September 2005, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." As all Americans watched the Katrina tragedy unfold on broadcast news, one of the few hopeful consequences was the beginning of the first candid discussion of race and racism in many years.

In Barack Obama's house-of-mirrors reference to Katrina, it is impossible to know whether the candidate is echoing that discussion or decrying it. Was Kanye West's declaration an example of long-overdue truth-telling or "a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism." Held up to a BAMN mirror, Obama's reference to Katrina reflects back as a reminder of the tragedy as one of the most damning moments in race relations in recent years. But inserted in a list of examples of "a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism" between the "spectacle" of the OJ trial and "fodder for the nightly news," it seems that the discussion opened up by Katrina was harmful, that there was something wrong with a nation learning something about race relations from such a tragedy. Held up to a right-wing mirror the statement would read that way: the anger over Katrina was an unfortunate overreaction.

Surely there is something not only wrong but shameful in treating the Katrina horrors in this light-minded, house-of-mirrors manner, as a pop reference for a bit of trendy, clever electioneering, demonstrating for the nth time the ability of the candidate to sound good to different audiences. If the American people cannot expect the simple truth out of Mr. Obama with regard to the Katrina tragedy, on what question CAN we expect the clarity of simple truth-telling. The people of New Orleans can be counted on to do their part to elect Barack Obama President of the United States, and full of hope and with love in their hearts as they vote for him. Candidate Obama owed them far better than this in his "manifesto on race in America." Telling the truth about the tragedy of Katrina

would have been worth losing a few white votes—indeed it is not likely to have cost even that much.

83. We hope Senator Obama and his supporters would reject the comparison of the sentiments of his Philadelphia speech with the Atlanta Compromise. But, held up to a right-wing mirror, at many points the comparison is obvious. In its right-wing-mirror reflection, "A More Perfect Union," in its logic and in its tone, sounds and reads like a more clever and more evasive version of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address, recalibrated for a "post- civil-rights-struggle" era. In its apparent unconcern with fighting racism, in its trendy vagueness and personalism, and in its platitudinous patriotism, it has all the earmarks of an Atlanta Compromise for the New Jim Crow. A black American president espousing such views could do extraordinary harm to the struggle for equality.

Fortunately the speech also can be read in a left-wing mirror, and there are particular points in the speech and, more importantly, in Barack Obama's subsequent behavior, that provide hope for the validity of the progressive reading. Obama rushed to defend affirmative action when Senator McCain disgracefully endorsed a proposed ban on affirmative action in his home state of Arizona this summer. Obama has maintained his support for the Dream Act, issuing drivers' licenses to undocumented people, and other measures aimed at incorporating the nation's millions of undocumented foreign workers and students into a united society.

It will be the obligation of Senator Obama and his leading supporters to show in action that the comparison of the sentiments of "A More Perfect Union" with the Atlanta Compromise is untrue and unjust. BAMN hopes they will accept this challenge and meet the necessary tests in action.

84. BAMN exists precisely for the purpose Obama appears at times so serenely to disdain—building a new movement for equality in America. From the standpoint of this movement, the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first black president is in itself more important than the question of any particular statement Mr. Obama may or may not have made in this 2008 campaign. But the character of that campaign makes clear the importance of the challenge we face in the next period of American history. Which of the Two Obamas is the real one, the progressive reformer with deep roots in the struggle for equality of America's black communities or the conservative moderator committed to minimize progressive change out of loyalty to the deep pockets of his wealthy funders?

Despite our criticisms, we think history does not yet have an answer to the question of the Two Obamas. More importantly, we do not think this is the decisive question. The decisive question is the ability of the progressive forces in this country—especially the forces of the Obama movement—to respond to the prospect opened up by the economic crisis and the Obama campaign by building the urgently needed independent movement for equality and social justice.

## **20. Renewing the Struggle for Equality in the Obama Era**

85. BAMN salutes the movement that has developed within the Democratic Party's presidential primary process and the fall presidential campaign among a rank and file committed to electing America's first black president and launching a new period of progressive change in American history.

BAMN calls on Senator Barack Obama to honor his promise to bring new hope to the American people and to fulfill the confidence placed in him by his progressive supporters by making clear his commitment to the progressive aspirations they have brought to his campaign.

Particularly in the light of the ambiguities in Senator Obama's positions and especially the views expressed in his March 2008 speech, "A More Perfect Union," which seem to suggest that the time for the independent struggle for civil rights and equal justice by black, Latina/o, and other minority people and their white supporters has passed and that such struggle today is harmful, BAMN cannot endorse Mr. Obama's candidacy. But this does not mean that we fail to recognize the historical importance of his election as president. We welcome the progressive movement that has formed around his candidacy and pledge ourselves to do all in our power to make real the democratic and egalitarian hopes this movement has brought to the foreground of American politics.

As a civil rights organization created to build a new civil rights movement in America, BAMN has been obliged to maintain a strict independence from both the Democratic and Republican parties. It is essential to everything BAMN is trying to do to reject in their entirety the methods that are completely characteristic of the American two-party system as it has actually developed in American history:

1. the domination of the electoral process by money
2. cynical maneuvering with and deceptive manipulation of the electorate.

BAMN has been created because of the crying need in American political life for a force whose aims and methods are not defined or delimited by the priorities of an electoral system corrupted by money and deformed by petty ambition. BAMN's aims and methods are determined by BAMN's publicly stated principles. Its organization is based on open and democratic discussion and decision-making and a leadership always accountable to its rank and file. BAMN's norms are determined by the direct and honest relationship of activist members to the oppressed and disadvantaged communities which BAMN organizes, mobilizes, educates, and constantly learns from. BAMN has and seeks to have no ambitions and in fact no future apart from the future of these communities.

Above all, BAMN's character is the character of the youth whose leadership BAMN was created to build. It is the hope of these youth for the future of their society and the world in which their nation plays so decisive a role that is the basis of BAMN's hope.

86. BAMN looks forward to working with the rank-and-file supporters of Senator Obama, now and in the future, on the basis of our appreciation of the importance of their aims and efforts. We hope to walk together with them on the road that leads to a far more rational, far more just, far more democratic, far more honest, far more humane, and far more egalitarian society.

We urge, as a partial basis for the discussions we should be having in the course of our joint struggles, the following principles, among others:

1. A just American foreign policy would have to consist of the concrete application of the principles declared in Martin Luther King's Riverside Church Speech delivered in April 1967, one year before Dr. King was assassinated.
2. Real hope for America's future must be based on the plain truth about American society and the actual truths of the lives of all its people, not the endless repetition of patriotic myths and high-sounding platitudes without substance. A movement for progressive change in America can win only on the basis of telling the truth, not by replacing a no-longer-fashionable right-wing demagoguery with a more eloquent, newly trendy left-wing demagoguery.
3. If a progressive movement is to offer real hope for solving the long-standing and most important problems of our history, it must develop over time on the basis of clear principles, determined and tested concretely in the course of its struggles, not blind loyalty to a particular leader or a confused adherence to ill-defined slogans. In their origins, all progressive movements in history, like all human beings, have started life with a certain lack of clarity. What is important is that no obstacles prevent achieving the clarity needed to win in the course of actual experience over time.

In order to achieve that needed clarity on the basis of concrete experience, it is imperative that any progressive movement be essentially democratic, diverse, dynamic, and free of any uncritical fealty to dogmas of the past.

4. If a progressive movement is to make a meaningful contribution to solving our nation's most important problems, it must attend with special care to the truths to be told by those Americans who have been the victims of those most important problems. In particular it should be a sacred principle to respect the right to speak the plain truth about racism, sexism, and the other fundamental inequalities and injustices of our nation.

5. In our nation's history, abstract concepts of equality have always played the role of distracting attention from the real concrete inequalities all about us. It seems that once we Americans were all created equal, the powers that be have expected us to take for granted that nothing but inequalities were to be expected after that brief initial moment of creation.

Real hope for progressive change cannot be fulfilled by mere repetition of the abstract equalities of a banal patriotism whose real aim is not progressive at all but is rather aimed at promoting a deceptive complacency and the sort of lulled and dulled conservatism that is the enemy of all progressive and creative change.

What America needs is not more lulling and dulling by the repetition of abstract ideas of equality and justice, but real, concrete, positive change based on the frank recognition of the concrete inequalities and injustices that engulf us.

The economic crisis will itself tend to foster more illusions that there is some sort of abstract equal basis for progressive struggle—an economic basis—for the sake of which the particular struggles against racism and sexism should be suppressed or at least delayed. This is merely the latest form of the old "white-populist" fallacy in its New Jim Crow trappings. On the contrary, the economic crisis will raise to new levels the urgency of fighting against racism and sexism and with that rising urgency increase the potential power of these struggles for equality, especially as part of a larger movement for social justice.

6. The Obama movement must learn to recognize and reject all the deceptive and seductive appeals of the New Jim Crow. To fail to do this would be a fatal mistake which would undermine the ability of this movement to realize any of its larger aims.
7. In order to have any chance of victory, a progressive mass movement must unite all the different disadvantaged and oppressed groups in struggle, not divide them up into separate constituencies or competing interest groups. This requires the full solidarity of all groups in support of each other's respective concrete demands for equal rights and opportunities, as well as the common struggle for basic economic and political rights for all.

This perspective is entirely different from a strategy—such as that

apparently proposed in Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech—of the limitation of historically disadvantaged groups' struggles to those lowest-common-denominator demands acceptable to more privileged groups. In real American history such a policy would have meant that both black Americans and women would never have won the right to vote.

To any progressive mass movement fighting to win, any counterposing, any deliberate policy of throwing oppressed groups into conflict or competition with each other, must be anathema. Such competition merely means importing into the mass movement itself the divide-and-rule policies of the rich and powerful that have always been and always will be the certain road to defeat for fighters for progressive change.

8. In particular, the policy pursued by Hillary Clinton of attempting to court white women's votes on a racist basis must be condemned and all similar policies rejected. For white women to win their own struggle for equal rights, opportunities, and dignity in American society, they need the support of their black and Latina sisters and those progressive men who support the overall fight for equality and human progress, who must be repelled by a false feminism that mingles women's aspirations with racist fears and demagoguery. Senator Clinton's racist "feminism"—real racism and phony feminism—undermines the real struggle for women's equality, weakening and isolating women from each other and demeaning and degrading the women to whom her and her surrogates' appeals were directed. In the Clinton primary campaign of 2008, any sincere movement for progressive change will find an invaluable negative lesson to be taken deeply to heart: THIS IS WHAT WE MUST NOT DO.
9. Especially since the Obama movement has developed as an electoral movement, it is especially important for the rank-and-file supporters of Senator Obama's quest for the presidency to recognize the critical importance of progressive youth leadership in the next period of history, including youth who are too young to vote. Young activists untainted and uncorrupted by the cynicism of the last period of political history—youth leaders not infected with the sense of futility and despair of an older generation that feels itself to have been defeated—are essential if any hope is to be made real.
10. In all effective movements for progressive change, the leadership is as true to the progressive aims of the movement as it is genuinely

accountable to the ranks of the movement that have grouped themselves around that leadership. The movement for Barack Obama can be no different. BAMN urges the ranks of the Obama movement to remember this great lesson of the history of all mass struggles, a lesson all too often tragically forgotten as millions of people come to substitute faith in a particular leader for consciousness and confidence in their own collective importance in history. The invariable consequence is betrayal.

11. The ranks of the Obama movement are making history themselves. Their designated leader has never had any chance of success without them. They must not forget that. They should begin now determining among themselves how they are going to preserve the accountability of Mr. Obama to them, after they have succeeded in their project of making him president. They should remember that all arguments against this consciousness of their own role are merely arguments that Mr. Obama, as president, should only be accountable to the wealthy elite whose money fueled his entry into the primaries but could not have advanced him one practical step toward the presidency without the passionate response of rank-and-file progressive Democrats to his message of new hope for America.

The party elite will take for granted President Obama's accountability TO THEM, especially his wealthy funders. But it will be up to the mass base of the Obama movement, the rank-and-file voter activists who will have actually made him president, to remember why they adopted and embraced the Obama candidacy in the first place. Their quiet rebellion against the priorities and ideology of that wealthy elite can change history for the better, but only if they remember the larger issues they are fighting for after Barack Obama is president.

12. To the ranks of the Obama movement for New Hope in America, with respect and admiration for their progressive hopes and democratic dedication, we declare:

What is most important is that you recognize your own importance in history more than the importance of the particular candidate whose electoral cause you have embraced. You already know that your aims extend beyond the abilities and limitations of one man, however talented and inspiring. You already know that your efforts for your aspirations will inevitably extend beyond one president's term of office.

What is most vital now is for you to understand that what is really important is what you have done, collectively, with your passion and commitment, to create a better country. In this sense, we urge you to regard the day on which Barack Obama is inaugurated President of the United States as, more importantly, your day of empowerment. We suggest you celebrate yourselves and your own accomplishments that day, with ceremonies and festivities appropriate to the launching of a new movement for social change and a declaration of your expectations on how the new president needs to go about the business of keeping his promises to you.

87. In 1857, Frederick Douglass declared the fundamental truth that "without struggle there is no progress." We suggest that the Obama movement is the latest example of that truth. Of course some will find it bizarre to compare today's Obama movement with the great social struggles of the American past, beginning with the original Revolution of 1776. Surely the Obama movement, these skeptics would assert, is too mild, too electoral, too amorphous, too respectable to be placed under the same heading as the great convulsive social struggles of American history.

Perhaps. But every new social struggle at first seems mainly different from the social struggles of the past. The activists of a new generation often have a great difficulty recognizing themselves in the last generation of fighters for justice, especially when a long period of time has passed between two generations in struggle.

We think it would be a mistake to underestimate the passion and the sincerity of commitment of many of the Obama movement's voter-activists and their determination to change history. And the rank-and-file Obama movement has developed in the wake of the great Movement for Immigrant Rights of 2006, in which tens of millions of people marched in the streets, left their jobs, walked out of their schools, and shut down business as usual in their communities, defeating a draconian attack and demanding a new, more rational, just, and humane definition of citizenship—truly a new civil rights movement.

If even only a modest number of the Obama voter-activists can appreciate the real boldness and the full potential for positive change in what they have accomplished, they could indeed make their aspirations real. It is what that rank and file has done that has already brought renewed hope to millions of Americans far more than the particular political figure who has come to symbolize it.

If the best of the youth and community activists of the Movement of 2006 can link up with the most sincere and impassioned of the voter-activists of the Obama movement to work together to

build an independent movement for progressive change, there would indeed be New Hope for America. BAMN looks forward to marching arm-in-arm with these activists in what would truly be nothing less than the renewal of the struggle for human liberation in America.

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