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Some Thoughts on Obama

Chris Hobson

August 18, 2008

These thoughts will focus on what I think is unique about Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency, as well as on why I don't plan to change my long-standing practice of not voting in order to vote for him. I will pay the most attention to Obama's significance as an African American candidate and to what are for me three defining moments that best put in perspective his approach to race as a political issue and his relation to the U.S. political system. These are his speech on race in Philadelphia, March 18; his response to Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright's speech on April 28; and his Father's Day homily, June 15, at Chicago's Apostolic Church of God.

First, the hype is true: the fact that an African American is poised to be nominated for president by one of the two major U.S. parties, and stands a good chance of being elected, is an enormous, historic shift in U.S. politics and the consciousness of the U.S. citizenry. This is so despite some obvious qualifications. For example, as the son of an actual African rather than a descendant of slaves, Obama doesn't stir up the full combination of denied guilt and defensive hostility in some white voters, nor bring with him the same potentially "polarizing" agenda of racial justice, that a candidate from the latter group

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might. Further, as detailed below, Obama has made real compromises in his willingness to articulate African American concerns. These points admitted, in endorsing Obama's candidacy primary voters have done—and U.S. voters as a whole may do in November—something unthinkable as recently as the date of Obama's own birth in August 1961.

For all the tragic the tragic costs and with all the limitations in what has been achieved, what a difference less than half a century has made! In 1962, a group of college friends and I made a summer trip to Mexico, passing through most of the old Confederate states on the way. White boys from the North, we bought take-out food and slept in our car to avoid dealing with white-only restaurants and motels—a cheap gesture but one we cared about. In those states and in the North and West as well, signs in stores, hotels, and restaurants routinely warned, “We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone”—as if there were doubt about who that might be. The segregation system was intact! No one could have guessed that in 46 years a Black man would be seriously positioned to become president. For a while, in the glorious decade of struggle, the Sixties, we thought such a day might come sooner; later we learned how little had changed and how distant the day still seemed. Out of the intersection of those views, a lesson: historical change, when it comes, comes quickly. For example, Africa, four-fifths colonial in 1956, was four-fifths independent by 1964; the Soviet empire, palsied but mighty in 1988, was gone by 1991. The United States I grew up in, the United States of open racial exclusion, is gone—I hope never to return.

An even longer perspective: in 1911 A.M.E. minister Reverdy C. Ransom, one of the turn of the century African American ministers I have been studying and writing about recently, stated, “The sun of the 20th century is rising to banish the age-long darkness that has so long obscured the recognition of brotherhood between man and his brother man; it will not set until it has gilded with gold the steeples of a new civilization.”

Source: *Chicago Tribune* Web Edition, April 28, 2008.

Now, eight years after the end of that century, 20 million U.S. voters have nominated a Black man for president. Is it any wonder that some can see a new world coming? A new world—one in which this much is possible—is here. All this, in my view, is cause for rejoicing.

In spite of the real, and truly historic, change that Obama's candidacy and possible election represent, I for one do not intend to vote for him or alter my long practice of not voting. (As a personal aside, I last voted in 1968, when I wrote in Dick Gregory for president and voted "no" on a proposed new Illinois constitution, feeling that whatever it said, it was likely to be worse than the existing one.) The rest of these notes will discuss my reasons, which can be summed up by saying that while Obama's candidacy does represent a limited change in the U.S. voting public, it doesn't represent a change in the political system, in the nature of the Democratic Party, or in the processes necessary to become a viable candidate in that party and system.

The issue of the political system doesn't need much discussion. The United States political system has obviously not changed or become structurally more equal or democratic; rather, Obama has succeeded (so far) within the system as it is. Anarchists, in general, don't believe participating in this system can change it; and our goal, after all, is to get rid of the state altogether. On the other hand, those who support Obama don't necessarily disagree about the limits of change within the system. They feel that marginal differences (for example who will name the next Supreme Court justices) are worth pursuing; and some feel that in a hard-to-specify way electing a Black president will open up the system and bring it and U.S. society closer to real equality. I don't necessarily disagree with the point about marginal differences; I just think other considerations are more important, notably, explaining what I see as the system's closed and elitist nature, which would be hard to do if I were supporting (and putting my hopes in) one

of the limited alternatives within it. I do disagree that electing Obama could democratize and equalize the political system and the country in any important way, as I hope to explain.

The second and third issues mentioned above are related. While most people probably think of the Democratic Party simply as a somewhat liberal political bloc, “the American party of progressive change” according to a recent article by Hendrik Hertzberg, it has at least two other functions that in my view are more important. One is to act as a centripetal force pulling discontented people on the edges of the political system back into its center. This function is most important when large numbers are active in various bottom up protests and direct action campaign, as in 1968, when the presidential campaigns of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy pulled thousands of quite radical young people back into approved political channels as foot soldiers for these candidates. There has been a similar upsurge of young and older people getting active for Obama this year but it hasn’t had the same deradicalizing effect simply because there is much less street level activism going on in the first place.

The other function of the Democratic Party is to act as a filter or vetting mechanism ensuring that whatever candidate is selected will be thoroughly safe from the standpoint of entrenched U.S. interests and the standard rules of political life, and will not offer a chance of substantially democratizing political life in the way some people think Obama may. One can get an idea of how this process works from a quite trivial episode in the 2004 presidential primaries, the “Dean Yell.” In 2004, liberal media and political figures apparently began thinking at some point that the then-leading Democratic primary candidate, Howard Dean, wouldn’t be an ideal nominee. Personally, I think this wasn’t because Dean was overly radical (he wasn’t and isn’t) but because these figures thought his antiwar focus was too narrow to attract a wide base and defeat Bush, which was the liberals’ main priority. As a result, the media trans-

REV. WRIGHT: No, no, the whole sermon. That’s—yes or no. No, you haven’t heard the whole sermon? That nullifies that question.

Well, let me try to respond in a non-bombastic way. (Applause.) If you heard the whole sermon, first of all, you heard that I was quoting the ambassador from Iraq. That’s number one. But number two, to quote the Bible, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever you sow that you also shall”—

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: “Reap.”

REV. WRIGHT: Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you. Those are biblical principles, not Jeremiah Wright bombastic divisive principles. (Applause.)

[...] MS. LEINWAND: In light of your—in light of your widely quoted comment damning America, do you think you owe the American people an apology?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No!

MS. LEINWAND: If not, do you think that America is still damned in the eyes of God?

REV. WRIGHT: The government of leaders, those—as I said to Barack Obama, my member—I’m a pastor; he’s a member. I’m not a “spiritual mentor”—hoodoo. I’m his pastor. And I said to Barack Obama last year, “If you get elected, November the 5th I’m coming after you, because you’ll be representing a government whose policies grind under people.” All right?

It’s about policy, not the American people. [...]

MS. LEINWAND: Can you elaborate on your comparison of the Roman soldiers who killed Jesus to the U.S. Marine Corps? Do you still believe that is an appropriate comparison? And why?

REV. WRIGHT: One of the things that will be covered at symposiums over the next two days is biblical history, which many of the working press are unfamiliar with.

(Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

REV. WRIGHT: God wants us reconciled one to another, and that third principle in the prophetic theology of the black church is also and has always been at the heart of the black church experience in North America. [...] Reconciliation, the years have taught me, is where the hardest work is found for those of us in the Christian faith, however, because it means some critical thinking and some reexamination of faulty assumptions. [...] If I see God as male; if I see God as white male; if I see God as superior, as God over us and not Immanuel, which means God with us; if I see God as mean, vengeful, authoritarian, sexist or misogynist, then I see humans through that lens. [...] [When someone sees God this way, then] How we are seeing God, our theology, is not the same. And what we both mean when we say, I am a Christian, is not the same thing. The prophetic theology of the black church has always seen and still sees all of God's children as sisters and brothers, equals who need reconciliation, who need to be reconciled as equals, in order for us to walk together into the future which God has prepared for us.

Reconciliation does not mean that blacks become whites or whites become blacks or Hispanics become Asian or that Asians become Europeans. Reconciliation means we embrace our individual rich histories, all of them. We retain who we are, as persons of different cultures, while acknowledging that those of other cultures are not superior or inferior to us; they are just different from us. [...]

QUESTIONS: MS. LEINWAND: You have said that the media have taken you out of context. Can you explain what you mean in a sermon shortly after 9/11 when you said the United States had brought the terrorist attacks on itself, quote, "America's chickens are coming home to roost"?

REV. WRIGHT: Have you heard the whole sermon? (Laughter, applause.) Have you heard the whole sermon?

MS. LEINWAND: I—most—(chuckles)—

formed a perfectly ordinary audience-rallying shout at a campaign rally into the "Dean Yell," a sign of political and perhaps psychological instability. Dean's campaign sank, but in Dean's place the Democrats got a candidate, John Kerry, who lacked the spine (and the elementary honesty about his antiwar past) to counter the Bush team's smears. As this example shows, the vetting process isn't centralized and isn't always successful in finding an ideal (from the elites' viewpoint) candidate, but it does operate, even on quite minor political matters.

This kind of filtration or vetting process, it seems to me, is what was involved in the three incidents I referred to in the beginning of these notes. They are not so much decisive turns in Obama's campaign as particularly striking parts of a process of adjustment and calibration that Obama has been engaged in from the beginning. Obama built his campaign from the start around the premise that he is a postracial candidate; that his biracial background, U.S./African origins, self-chosen African American culture, Christian faith, and nonracial liberal politics are emblems of a new political reality, an "American" candidate who is incidentally African American. So far as Obama's ability to position himself in this way does show a new direction in the U.S. politics of race it is part of the shift I referred to earlier. But this stance has also been the product of a continual balancing act and repeated moments of readjustment designed to maintain this image and avoid probing barely scabbed-over U.S. racial wounds. In particular, the three incidents I've mentioned show the continual process of repudiation required to be accepted as a viable candidate within the U.S. political process.

As everyone who follows U.S. politics knows, Obama was put in a defensive position earlier this year by website and blog postings of certain statements by Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, nowretired pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, where Obama was a parishioner. The bond between Obama and Wright in the past was close: Wright performed Obama's marriage, christened his two children, and

was a general inspiration; the title of Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, came from one of Wright's sermons. Wright is a follower of "Black Liberation" or "Black Power" theology, which is associated with such giants in recent African American theology as James H. Cone, author of *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and Gayraud S. Wilmore, a historian of African American religion. Wright himself is a solidly established Christian writer, whose works include sermon collections and contributions to anthologies. His sermons have been reprinted and analyzed in such studies as *The Heart of Black Preaching*, by Cleophus J. LaRue (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). In sum, he is not some hick who walked out of the woods, as white and some Black media opinion portrayed him. As for the soundbite excerpts from his sermons floating around the internet, they are patched together to present Wright in the most "inflammatory" way possible. Even so, their ideas are common in some African American and other discussion: the U.S. has operated as an oppressor nation; the 2001 attacks, though wicked, were in part payback for U.S. "state terrorism"; it is possible (at any rate not unthinkable) that the U.S. created the AIDS virus in some kind of experiment that went wrong. All these ideas are in common circulation, as people who follow such discussions know. The use of these excerpts to embarrass Obama thus (1) was a demand that he repudiate ideas that circulate every day as part of the political debates among African Americans (and others); and (2) exploited an almost total ignorance among the U.S. majority of what these debates are saying.

Obama's first response to this pressure, in a speech on race in Philadelphia March 18, was for my money the high point of his campaign. It was almost as if the race spoke through Obama to tell the nation things that Obama had never said before and that the nation needs desperately to know. While Obama did repudiate Rev. Wright's ideas, in a nonspecific way, he stopped short of repudiating Wright himself. Instead, his speech devel-

gan to be used. I do not in any way disagree with Dr. Cone, nor do I in any way diminish the inimitable and incomparable contribution that he has made and that he continues to make to the field of theology. Jim, incidentally, is a personal friend of mine.

I call our faith tradition, however, "the prophetic tradition of the black church," because I take its origins back past Jim Cone, past the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the transatlantic slave trade. I take it back past the problem of western ideology and notions of white supremacy. I take and trace the theology of the black church back to the prophets in the Hebrew bible and to its last prophet, in my tradition, the one we call Jesus of Nazareth.

The prophetic tradition of the black church has its roots in Isaiah, the 61st chapter, where God says the prophet is to preach the gospel to the poor and to set at liberty those who are held captive. Liberating the captives also liberates those who are holding them captive. It frees the captive and it frees the captors. It frees the oppressed and it frees the oppressors. The prophetic theology of the black church during the days of chattel slavery was a theology of liberation. It was preached to set free those who were held in bondage, spiritually, psychologically and sometimes physically, and it was practiced to set the slaveholders free from the notion that they could define other human beings or confine a soul set free by the power of the gospel. [...]

The prophetic theology of the black church is a theology of liberation. It is a theology of transformation.

And it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation. The Apostle Paul said, "Be ye reconciled one to another, even as God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self."

God does not desire for us, as children of God, to be at war with each other, to see each other as superior or inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other or put each other down.

And I would invite you to spend the next two days getting to know just a little bit about a religious tradition that is as old as and, in some instances, older than this country. And this is a country which houses its religious tradition that we all love and a country that some of us have served. It is a tradition that is in some ways like Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man." It has been right here in our midst and on our shores since the 1600s, but it was, has been and, in far too many instances, still is invisible to the dominant culture in terms of its rich history, its incredible legacy and its multiple meanings. [...] And maybe now we can begin to take steps to move the black religious tradition from the status of invisible to the status of invaluable, not just for some black people in this country, but for all the people in this country.

Maybe this dialogue on race—an honest dialogue that does not engage in denial or superficial platitudes—maybe this dialogue on race can move the people of faith in this country from various stages of alienation and marginalization to the exciting possibility of reconciliation. That is my hope as I open up this two-day symposium, and I open it as a pastor and a professor who comes from a long tradition of what I call "the prophetic theology of the black church."

Now, in the 1960s, the term "liberation theology" began to gain currency with the writings and the teachings of preachers, pastors, priests and professors from Latin America. Their theology was done from the underside. Their viewpoint was not from the top down or from a set of teachings which undergirded imperialism. Their viewpoints, rather, were from the bottom up, the thoughts and understandings of God, the faith, religion and the bible from those whose lives were ground under, mangled and destroyed by the ruling classes or the oppressors. Liberation theology started in and started from a different place. It started from the vantage point of the oppressed.

In the late 1960s, when Dr. James Cone's powerful books burst onto the scene, the term "black liberation theology" be-

oped five ideas, all of which grow out of a long African American background but have seldom been voiced to the nation at large. First, Obama argued that the Constitution adopted in Philadelphia in 1787 was flawed but inherently democratic, since it "had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law." Here he embraced the long tradition most associated with Frederick Douglass that "interpreted as it *ought* to be, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT" (Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"). This view lies behind the political stance of trying to force recognition of assumedly inherent constitutional rights, which has been the major African American strategy for change since Douglass's time. Secondly, from the same history Obama drew the conclusion that the struggle to perfect the Constitution has occurred and still continues over the long span of historical time, the "two hundred and twenty-one years" since Philadelphia that the candidate twice mentioned, a "long march" occupying "successive generations." Thirdly and centrally, Obama voiced a centuries-long, always disputed, majority African American view that the United States is reformable: Rev. Wright's mistake "is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country [...] is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past," whereas "what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change." Fourthly, the candidate laid out, though nonspecifically, a perspective of achieving substantive brotherhood, a "more perfect union," to use his own play on the Constitution's preamble—a "more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America." And finally, Obama spoke with real eloquence about the life of his then church and the African American church in general:

"Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, scream-

ing and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.”

This speech had a simplicity, seriousness, and historical-cultural breadth that lifted it far above most U.S. political rhetoric.

But by the same token, the speech only half accomplished what is necessary in the U.S. political system for a candidate to be viable and acceptable in a presidential election. It only half embraced the falsehoods (in this case about race) on which U.S. politics are based, and it only half separated the candidate from the actual continuing life of the African American community by substituting a symbolic relationship (an Obama victory as emblematic of African American advance and nonracial politics) in place of real ongoing dialog that would bring this community together with the larger U.S. population. The episode that followed, of Rev. Wright’s speech at the National Press Club (April 28) was in my view no matter of personal psychology (Wright felt spurned by his one-time protégé; Obama needed to Oedipally repudiate his symbolic father) but resulted from the fact that Obama’s address, even if Obama didn’t intend it to, did in fact leave the way open for continued dialogue with the substantial trend in African American opinion that Rev. Wright represents. Wright’s remarks on April 28 were theologically broad-gauged, stressing the reality of race discrimination and a “theology of reconciliation” among both Black and white Americans; Wright fielded the barbed questions that followed it, but kept the focus on historic traditions of the Black church and prophetic theology. (I include brief excerpts in a sidebar to this article.) Wright, then, did not come across as a hatemonger. But from the standpoint of the U.S.

uation in which hopeful people can’t believe what the Democratic nominee says, and even much more than what s/he says. In my eyes, at least, it is unlikely that a candidate who has fit his campaign within certain limits because of the political pressures of an election (has chopped off his feet, as in the legend of the Procrustean bed) will be freer once the campaign is over (will be able to reattach his feet). I cannot prove this, but in my view, the Democratic Party’s ability to persuade people of essentially the same hopes of true reform every four years, regardless of who its nominee might be, is one sign of the party’s illusion-generating role in U.S. politics.

Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright’s Remarks, April 28, 2008

I include these excerpts from Rev. Wright’s appearance at the National Press Club in Washington because his views are not as well known as Obama’s and because, in my opinion, it is worth knowing something about the wing in African American theology that he represents. After Rev. Wright’s remarks I include a few of the questions that were submitted in writing and read out by the chair, Donna Leinwand of USA Today.

REV. WRIGHT: Over the next few days, prominent scholars of the African-American religious tradition from several different disciplines—theologians, church historians, ethicists, professors of Hebrew bible, homiletics, hermeneutics and historians of religions—those scholars will join in with sociologists, political analysts, local church pastors and denominational officials to examine the African-American religious experience and its historical, theological and political context. The workshops, the panel discussions and the symposia will go into much more intricate detail about this unknown phenomenon of the black church—(laughter)—than I have time to go into in the few moments that we have to share together.

process by which the Democratic Party trims the candidate to fit the political system.

Finally, there will be those who argue that Obama will truly carry out transforming policies, at least on domestic issues, when and if he is elected. There's been a strong surge of what can only be called faith and trust in Obama, especially among African Americans and younger, more liberal white Americans who are sick of both the racial divides that Obama crosses and the dead-conservative, repressive, and vilely dishonest politics of the Bush years. Thus a new release, "Black President," by the New York rapper Nas announces, "I'm thinking I can trust this brother." Hopes of this kind are essentially faith-based; there is no way to prove them right or wrong except by waiting.

I think there are plenty of reasons in past history not to hold such hopes. When Obama was recalibrating his views on Palestine, in 2004, he told one Arab-American supporter, according to the supporter's recollection, "I'm sorry I haven't said more about Palestine right now, but we are in a tough primary race. I'm hoping that when things calm down I can be more upfront" (*Times* May 11). It didn't happen, of course. (The Obama campaign calls the report inaccurate.) I myself can recall discussing essentially the same point with friends the day after Bill Clinton's nomination in 1992. When I mentioned the tepidness of Clinton's positions, my friends assured me that Clinton had to make compromises in order to get elected but would implement a social change agenda once in office. I argued that his compromises would limit his future options and were therefore his real positions, but my friends didn't accept the point and I ended by saying we should come back to the discussion in 2 years. (That didn't happen. Other than the failed health care plan—compromised to death by Hillary Clinton—the only major domestic "reform" of Clinton's administration was the abolition of welfare, a conservative initiative that Clinton embraced for his own reasons.) Basically, I have this same conversation every presidential election year: there seems no sit-

political system as a whole and of the Democratic Party as a filter for candidate viability, a candidate who is in even an implicit dialogue with Black Liberation theology is an obvious impossibility. Obama made a second break, with Wright's ideas, Wright as a person, and Trinity Church.

Finally, in a homily in a South Side Chicago church on Father's Day, a week after clinching the nomination, Obama made his first extended speech to an African American audience as "presumptive nominee." Politically, there was a need for Obama to reaffirm his ties to the community and to do so in a way that would confirm the consistency of his politics with those of the Democratic Party mainstream. His speech concerned the need for African American fathers to take responsibility for their families; to cease being, in many cases, absentee, occasional, or uninvolved parents, and, as Obama put it, "recognize that responsibility doesn't just end at conception." Without in any way downplaying the importance of this question, it is also the safest possible issue dealing directly with African American life that Obama might have chosen, one that African American moderates and conservatives like Bill Cosby and Shelby Steele have made their own. The Black fatherhood issue, however important, keeps the focus of problems and change for African Americans within the community itself. Focusing on this issue asserts, by implication, that the United States as a whole does not need to change, reform itself, or initiate any policies in order to achieve racial progress, nor do whites need to change their attitudes, behavior, or even awareness for this to happen. In terms of overall political philosophy, this speech constitutes an answer to Rev. Wright's "theology of reconciliation," with its insistence that both whites and Blacks need to contribute to solving the country's racial division. In the narrower political sense, of electoral calculation, Obama's message, I think, was aimed not at African American voters nor even at the white working class voters that Sen. Hillary Clinton had tried with

some success to make afraid of Obama, but rather at those liberal political elites and media opinion makers who might still be unsure of Obama's commitment to social stability. That is, Obama's speech was another step in the Democratic Party vetting and filtration process that determines that a candidate must demonstrate commitment to maintaining the U.S. system in order to be seen as viable.

The first conclusion I would draw from these events is that it is impossible for any presidential candidate to be nominated while telling the truth about the ideas and outlook of the African American people. This is what Obama did on March 18, at least in part, but he was subsequently forced to continue "repositioning" himself and has not repeated the emphases of that speech. This fact, if it is one, is only a particular example of the general point that it is impossible to be nominated while telling the truth about any aspect of U.S. life. But this example is particularly striking given the candidate's identity as an African American, even taking into account that up until now it was impossible for any African American to be nominated at all. Secondly, I would draw the conclusion that the Democratic Party as an institution is a key mechanism by which this filtration or purification of U.S. politics—from the social, racial, and economic elites' point of view—is carried out; and this is the major reason why I don't vote.

One can make several objections to what I've said. First, I've discussed only one issue, though a crucial one. True. But a look at Obama's stands on other issues wouldn't lead to different conclusions. While Obama opposes the Iraq war—today; what he would do in office is impossible to say—so does a large segment of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Obama doesn't differ from this establishment in any noticeable way, and no more than others does he criticize or even discuss its assumption that the U.S. has the right to dominate the whole world, which he fully shares. He made this especially clear in a *New York Times* Op Ed piece July 14—in other words a statement to

the opinion elite I have been discussing—that proposed sending 2 new combat brigades, about 10,000 troops, to Afghanistan.

On domestic policy Obama differs strikingly little from Sen. Clinton and other Democrats. The one area in which he did seem tangibly different was in "transcending" the race issue. The developments I've traced mean he is now in a position of having (so far) transcended this issue in terms of electoral appeal, while not taking on the obligation to actually do anything about the issue. That is what makes the filtration process so important, for this process reveals both that any candidate's ability to publicly discuss U.S. racial assumptions is extremely limited, and also that the shift in voters' attitudes that allowed Obama to win the nomination is, while real, also quite limited.

(How limited can be seen in the relatively minor flap over Michelle Obama's comment in February, "For the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country." Mrs. Obama succeeded in defusing this one by saying she meant the U.S. government. But how absurd, really, for anyone to blink at such a comment by an African American; what abysmal ignorance people's surprise—if not feigned—shows about the cultural life and thought processes of other Americans; and what narrow limits the incident reveals for political acceptability in the United States.)

One might also object that Obama's Father's Day speech is not a result of compromise or backing away from controversy but is the real Obama; all along, he was moderate and politically nonconfrontational. Again true. But his trajectory has required some reinventing of himself: quietly dropping earlier pro-Palestinian positions when stepping up from Illinois Senate to U.S. Senate (*New York Times* May 11); keeping Muslim supporters out of view in this campaign (*New York Times* June 24). In my view Obama's sincerity or lack of sincerity in these shifts and his overall politics doesn't affect my overall argument that the incidents I've discussed show the limits to discussion of a major U.S. issue within a political campaign, and also show the