

Barack Obama and the Future of the Black Prophetic Tradition

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By Glenn Loury, Merton Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences

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In breaking through the skin-color barrier in American politics, does Barack Hussein Obama bring with him a distinctive African-American moral vision – does he somehow embody an alternative version of American history? That is the question I wish to address this afternoon.

At President Obama's Inauguration, the soaring close of Reverend Joseph Lowery's benediction had the new president nodding and tapping his foot, as the preacher exalted the humble in the official story – America's minorities, black, brown, yellow and red – and humbled the exalted by hoping that "white will embrace what is right." This prayer nearly stole the show on Inauguration Day, confirming for many the glow of a blessing on a new era.

Well, are we, in fact, entering a new era? More pointedly, does the election of Barack Obama constitute some kind of fulfillment of Martin Luther King's famous 'dream'?

I think not, and will argue to that effect in this lecture.

What is more, I believe that the prophetic tradition of critical political thought and faith-based moral witness out of which Martin Luther King Jr. emerged, and which he embodied, is radically at odds with President Obama's recent rhetoric concerning the moral significance of the American Founding. For the tradition of social criticism that emerged over the generations from the suffering of the slaves, and gathered strength from the unrequited hopes of the freedmen, is a tradition that has always been keenly aware of the moral ambiguity of the American founding. And yet, no American politician - not even one as gifted at oratory as President Barack Hussein Obama - can afford to give public voice to such critical skepticism about the American project.

However, before I move to this critical argument, let me start by acknowledging the truly historic nature of Obama's election, and the powerful hope for the possibilities for real change that he has brought to my nation. It is often said that the United States of America is a country defined not by kinship, ethnicity, religion, or tribal connection, but by ideas - ideas about freedom, democracy and the self-

evident truths that "all persons are created equal, and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights," to quote from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

Another plain fact, too often forgotten, is that America is, always has been, and always will be a nation of immigrants. So, last November this nation of immigrants elected a son of Africa - a black man whose father was born in Kenya and who goes by the name Barack *Hussein* Obama- to be our 44th president. "Historic" hardly begins to describe just how momentous, how remarkable, and how improbable is President Obama's achievement. From now on, whenever Europeans complain to me about the flaws of American society - and they are many - I can respond by saying, "No, America is not perfect. But, please, can you show me your black president (or prime minister!)"

I must say that, as a black man who grew to maturity on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s and who was inspired by the words and deeds of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., I cannot help but feel a sense of personal joy at Obama's triumph in that election last November. Something profound has happened in America, of this there can be no doubt. In

saying this, I do not mean to imply that the great historic stains on American democracy left by slavery and racism have been entirely blotted-out. As mentioned, our nation was mired in the original sin of slavery at its founding. Full citizenship rights for the descendants of those slaves have been attained only within living memory. And, even to this day, the remnants of the system of racial caste which was constructed to buttress and legitimate the abomination of African slavery are evident all about us in America: in our prisons and jails; in our racially segregated public schools; and in the poverty and despair of the racial ghettos of our great cities. These horrid realities were not reversed by Obama's election last November, nor will they quickly fade away. Much work of reform remains yet to be done. Still, Obama's election seems without a doubt to be an important step forward.

Also, I must confess something to you: I was one of those cynics who didn't believe it possible - who thought the "audacity of hope" was just an empty phrase. Even as I witnessed millions of believers rallying around this cause, even as I saw people of all races bending themselves to this historic task, even as I observed the vast increase in voter registration in African American communities and

amongst the young all across the land - I nevertheless remained doubtful. It did not seem possible to me that the deep structure of American power would permit the ascent of this son of Africa and America to its pinnacle.

When the hopeful would regale me with their visions, I would cite the previous election of 2004, which returned George W. Bush to the White House despite what seemed to me to be his obvious inadequacy. I would recall how the Democratic Party's candidate, Senator John Kerry - a genuine war hero - was maligned in that election, and even made to seem un-American, by the Republican attack machine. I sat waiting for the same thing to happen again. But, I was wrong, thank God. It never happened. And, 2004 seems now to have been a long, long time ago.

So, notwithstanding the critical nature of my remarks to come, I celebrate the fact that America has elected a leader for the 21st century. This eloquent and brilliant young black man, this representative of the Chicago neighborhoods that I have known so well, this usurper of power from a complacent establishment, this proponent of "change" - is now the president of the United States of America. Whenever I reflect on this fact, I just want to

shout, Hallelujah!

We Americans have elected a leader who, in his victory speech, took time to address himself to those "huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world" - so as to tell them that "our stories are singular, but our destinies are shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand." How remarkable! American voters, by a comfortable margin, have anointed a leader who is unembarrassed to declare that "America's beacon still burns as bright," and yet who understands that "the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals." How inspiring! The Commander In Chief of the US military, the Chief Executive Officer of this massive government and huge force for good and ill in the world, the symbolic leader of the United States of America, our head of state -- with all of the ceremony and pomp that goes along with that role -- is a relatively young African-American man, and that is a stunning, amazing fact.

Nevertheless, having said all of that, I must tell you that I worry about what this election outcome might imply for the future of the black prophetic tradition. Moreover, I am

skeptical about the connection of a President of the United States who happens to be an African-American, to that tradition. I speak here not about his personal views, as a black man and/or as a Christian believer, but rather about his role as the occupant of a very special, very powerful office, with the responsibilities which that entails.

I wonder whether or not these are commensurate matters at all - the black prophetic tradition on the one hand, and the exercise of executive power on the other hand. I wonder if they are denominated in the same units of currency, so to speak, whether the black prophetic tradition really articulates with the exercise of the powers of the office of the presidency.

What, you may be asking yourself, do I mean by "the black prophetic tradition?" Well, I see it as an outsider's and underdog's critical view about national narrative of the United States of America. It is, to be concrete, an historical counter-narrative - one that, for example, sees the dispossession of the native people of North America as the great historic crime that it was: One that looks back on the bombing of Hiroshima with a feeling of horror and national shame. It's an insistence that American democracy

-- which of course has always been a complicated political compact, usually serving the interests of the wealthy and powerful -- live up to the true meaning of our espoused civic creed. It is an understanding that struggle, resistance and protest are often the only ways to bring this about. And it's the recognition that even in the late 20th and early 21st century, America has not yet to fully do so. The black prophetic tradition is anti-triumphalist, vis-à-vis America's role in the world, and it is deeply suspicious of the "city on a hill" rhetoric of self-congratulation to which American politicians, including President Obama, are so often inclined. It's an outsider's critical assessment of what we Americans do, an assessment that sympathizes in a deep way with the struggles of those who are dispossessed: Palestinians in the Middle East today, for instance, and blacks at the southern tip of Africa in an earlier decade. This tradition of moral witness within the American experience that I associate with the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century and with the civil right movement of the 20th century preaches that "collateral damage" -- where civilians are killed by U.S. military operations -- is not simply an unavoidable cost of doing business in the modern world, but rather is a deeply problematic offense against a righteousness toward which we

ought to aspire. What I am calling the black prophetic tradition also reflects a theology, and a universal theory of freedom -- with a strong anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-militarist tilt.

What, then, is President Obama's relationship to this tradition? What, in this regard, are we entitled to expect from him? Some are trying to connect President Obama to that tradition, whether through his controversial former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, or otherwise. But I don't know if he wants to be connected. This is my principle point. President of the United States is an office. The office has its own imperatives quite apart from whatever an individual's personal beliefs might be. When one is sitting with the military Joint Chiefs of Staff, and one is told that a Predator drone operation against a "terrorist" operative in the tribal regions of Pakistan awaits one's authorization, then one has to make that call. Such a moment as that is no time to be quoting Martin Luther King or Frederick Douglass, or to be talking about the tradition of critical political thought which has been nurtured by black people in America for centuries. Rather, at a time like that, one simply has to decide whether one is going to kill those people or one is not going to kill them. My

view is that the person who is the Commander in Chief of the United States of America, regardless of his individual biography, when placed in that position and forced to carry out those acts, needs to be viewed with clear-eyed realism for who and what they are: namely, in the context of the example I am now discussing, the Commander-in-Chief of the largest military force in the history of human experience. Such a person ought not to be viewed through a rose-tinted glass, with some romantic and unrealistic narrative.

I really wonder what the tradition of black protest and struggle in America has to do with the exercise of the powers of the Office of the Presidency. I suspect that the answer to that question is, very little at all. I my guess is that it is a mistake - a serious political error - to think otherwise. Of course, I could be wrong about this, but I remain to be convinced. I'm a skeptic about this kind of talk in reference to President Obama, based on the fact of his "blackness."

The romantic idealists argue that surely his biography, his history, even his skin color informs the man who is now President. But, for me that merely shifts the question to an inquiry about the extent that personality and individual

morality can real exert leverage over the exercise of such an office as the American presidency. Here is an analogy to ponder: Someone rises to be the leader of a large corporation - Exxon-Mobil, say, or Bank of America, say. At the end of the day that job is about making money for the shareholders -- period. It's not about anything else. It's not about saving the planet, or integrating the workforce, or ending poverty. It's about making profits for the shareholders. Now this woman -- with her unique experiences and perhaps with an inspiring biography -- may approach the exercise of her responsibilities in that office in a slightly different way than would a man, but something tells me she won't be the chief executive officer for very long if she fails to continue making profits for the shareholders. Moreover, I suspect that the amount of leverage she has to do good in the world is pretty small, relative to the imperative of sustaining her company's financial performance at a high level. Likewise, if someone is the chief executive officer and commander-in-chief of the largest military in the world - if someone has a guy always nearby carrying an electronic device, as the US president does have, allowing one to signal the special codes to submarine commanders at sea, armed with multiply targeted warheads, authorizing the release of those weapons

so as to incinerate tens or hundreds of thousands of persons -- then the imperative of that office is to 'make profits for the shareholders,' so to speak. Put plainly: the imperatives of office in the position of the American presidency are, basically, to further the interest of the American imperial project, not to critique that project. Moreover, if one doesn't exercise one's discretion so as to advance that imperative, one will not remain in office for very long.

I wish to avoid misunderstanding. I am not here criticizing Barack Obama, the man. As I have already said, I admire him greatly. My assessment of Barack Hussein Obama, the man -- given all I know about him, the books he's written that I've read, the speeches he's given that I've heard -- is that he is compassionate, and that he is possessed of a deep historical sensibility. Left to his own devices, I feel confident in saying, he would always stand on the right side of history. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Well, I see the rise of Barack Hussein Obama as representing one way in which that moral arc is, indeed, bending toward justice. He is someone, I think it fair to say, who has made more room within his own

philosophy for a concern about the dispossessed than anyone who has ever held that office. He is, I would reckon, aware of the imperfectness of American democracy and of the inflated character of some of the rhetoric that he himself has had to use as a matter of political expediency. But the main point that I'm making here is that the office has its own imperatives; and, that's the thing which those of us who have been clamoring for change and who may yet be sorely disappointed, must take the measure of.

Now I could well be wrong. It could be that a single person of extraordinary qualities -- of enormous depth of soul and breadth of vision -- can really transform the functioning of a government that has its own momentum and its own natural movements. But I have very serious doubts about that. So, I am just trying to stay sober, and not to be swept away with fairy tales and false hopes.

Consider, then, the idea that Barack Obama and Martin Luther King stand at two ends of a process that is moving toward the enactment of historical justice. I simply don't believe that - not for one minute. I view such a notion as dangerous nonsense - and, that's not a criticism of Barack Obama; not at all. To me, such dreamy political rhetoric

is rather like mixing the sacred and the profane. King's role is, in this metaphor that I am now invoking, a sacred one (in a civil, not a religious sense.) His role is to call America to a moral accounting. Indeed, his martyrdom was an almost foreseeable and necessary end to the tragic drama that was Martin Luther King, Jr. at mid-20th century -- almost necessary, because the nature of the challenge that he posed to the status quo. Recall that at the end of King's life he was attacking the militarism and racism of America's war in Vietnam; he was organizing poor people to shut down the government, if necessary, in order to force attention to their claims. That is, he was attacking the system of American power at its very core. Martin Luther King in that sense was a sacred, prophetic figure moving through American history.

Nobody who has to tell Iowa farmers, say, that they will prosper economically even though the market won't pay enough for their products; nobody who has to assure gun owners that their weapons are safe from regulation; nobody who must splits the legislative bargaining difference with Republican who have a tax-cutting agenda; nobody who, to ensure that the military will follow his orders, must avoid challenging their fundamental imperatives -- no such person

can play that kind of prophetic role.

So, let's not get confused. Let's not mix the prophetic and the sacred with the profanity of American politics - with its lust for power and money and oil and nuclear weapons. They don't mix. They're not about the same things.

Bear in mind that Barack Obama raised 750 million dollars over the course of his two-year run for the presidency. That is to say, he bought the presidency just like any other American politician who wants that office. Some of that money came from a large number of small contributors. But, much of it came from where it always comes from - with the usual strings attached.

I really do want to be clear. I am not saying that Obama is a Bush clone, or that all politicians are the same. I'm sure that Barack Hussein Obama vividly identifies with the anti-racist struggle throughout world history, that he sees his grandfather's experience under British colonialism in Kenya, for instance, as a constituent part of the larger struggle against white supremacy. However, what I'm saying here is that he's the President of the United States, and

that the office has its own imperatives. And the question is how much can any person's, including his own, individual outlook break out of the mold and the framework and the momentum that's implied by his office -- which office is, after all, enmeshed within the structure of American power.

Permit me, for a moment, to shift gears and to talk about the generational aspect of Obama's ascendancy. As it happens, the President of the United States is more than a decade younger than me and, well, could have been one of my students somewhere along the line. This underscores an important point, I think: that a post-1970s generation of African-Americans who had penetrated into the various citadels of elite achievement in American society -- Harvard Law School or Business School or whatever -- have now come into their own, and Obama is at the forefront of that. And, it's a great thing. Now, if I utter the words 'affirmative action' here, someone will get upset that I'm saying somehow that Barack Obama or Michelle Obama didn't earn all the accolades that they received from the Harvards and the Princetons of the world and I don't mean that at all. But I do mean to observe that there's a much larger number of black people like themselves whose opportunities to show what they could do have been expanded because of

affirmative action than there would otherwise have been; and this is one of the fruits of that effort to break open America's elite institutions to a wider array of people. I don't want to take anything away from their achievements, not one thing whatsoever, in saying that in a different America, in an earlier era, people like Barack and Michelle Obama would not have had the opportunity to prove what they're capable of doing. So that's a point that's worth making.

Having said that, however, I must now observe that there's another, darker side to this progress. There is the risk of cooptation. There is the risk of buying into a meritocratic game of getting to the top, an elitist outlook - a view which says that 'my kid can only go to the private academy, he can't go to an ordinary public school, because people who run the world don't send their children there -- a kind of class identification with the hierarchy of American society where one comes to view oneself as being on top. Again, please don't misunderstand.

I'm not saying anything specific about Barack or Michelle Obama, God love them. Yet, I do regret -- and it is in a way very unfair to them in me saying so, but I'm going to

say it anyway - I do regret that they chose a private academy (the Sidwell Friends School in Washington) for their daughters, and not a public school where the normal people would send their children. I regret it because it struck me as a great opportunity to make a statement. But what I am saying here is unfair because one ought not to use one's children to make statements. I agree with that completely. Still, here's the danger: just as sending their children to a public school would have made a powerful statement, sending them to a private school also and unavoidably makes a powerful statement.

There was a famous speech given by Frederick Douglass in 1852 called "Whose 4th of July?" Douglass, the famed anti-slavery advocate and black leader, spoke on the occasion of 4th of July, 1852 in which he was making the point that to the, you know, slave-owning classes and their sympathizers and others in the American electorate that you may be celebrating your 4th of July but that we, you know, black folks have got a way to go before we can feel that it's our 4th of July. And there's a philosopher named Charles Mills at the University of Illinois who wrote an essay about this speech of Frederick Douglass making the point that he doesn't mention the Native Americans a single time in the

speech. It's 1852 and the extirpation of the civilization of the native peoples of this continent was still in its sway, still going forward. Frederick Douglass' view was that the Founding Fathers of the American nation had believed, as it says in the Declaration of Independence, that all persons were created equal - that they included African-Americans in this belief. But, on the occasion of giving that speech, it didn't occur to him to say that this principle also applied to Native Americans. So here's the point that I want to make. As we African-Americans climb the ladder into the upper echelons of American society, are we going to be able to maintain a sensibility that, you know, carries this critique all the way home?

Inequality of the opportunity for human development is a fundamental evil in this society. The fact that some kids who happen to be born on the wrong side of the tracks don't have a chance to be all that they can be because of the way that our institutions are arranged is a fundamental problem, okay? And one of the first acts of Barack Obama upon arriving in Washington was to reaffirm that hierarchy, to reiterate where the lines of opportunity are drawn in the society and what side of those lines he and his family stand on. It's very unfair. Very unfair to ask somebody

to use their children as guinea pigs, unless of course they're being photographed in the midst of an election campaign, then it's quite all right to trot them out...

There is a final point I wish to make, regarding the limits of reform and the importance of maintaining a sober realism when discussing the new American president. It has to do with American foreign policy, and in particular, with my country's policies toward the conflict in the Middle East. When I have spoken in the US about these matters recently, some people are perplexed by my evocation of the spirits of long-dead African American figures, and my connecting them with present-day moral concerns raised by the plight of the dispossessed, stateless Palestinians. How does this even come up, they seemed to be asking, as if I pulled this subject out of thin air -- as if it's somehow a real stretch to inject the conflicts of the Middle East into a discussion about race and American politics. What I have claimed was that the moral legacy of these past, heroic warriors against white supremacy -- the critical, subversive, prophetic, outsider's voice that I associate with their legacy -- stands in danger of being lost or, at least, severely attenuated. I intimated that Obama's 'bargaining' with segments of the American people over such

matters -- as he strives to preserve his viability within the American political system in the midst of a presidential campaign and in the aftermath of this former pastor's offending public remarks -- could have the effect of counteracting this critical voice. Furthermore, I had the temerity to suggest that one of the issues, among others to be sure, where this development could have practical consequences has to do with how the experience and political voice of blacks would be inflected, within the ongoing, broader American national dialogue over the conflict in the Middle East. I stand by these claims. Does anyone even remember how Louis Farrakhan became a nationally recognized figure? Let me remind you. It occurred in the aftermath of Andrew Young's dismissal in 1979 from his position as Jimmy Carter's UN ambassador, because Young had unauthorized contact with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization -- contrary to official US policy. Jackson had been forthright in defending Young, and had traveled to Palestine to show solidarity with Young, and with Yasser Arafat. Five years later, during Jesse Jackson's historic first run for the White House in 1984, a firestorm erupted after Jackson, in an unguarded moment of banter with reporters, referred to New York City as "Hymietown" -- a remark by which many

Jews, and others, were (rightly) offended. As Jackson fell under attack, Farrakhan spoke out before black audiences in Jackson's defense, making a number of anti-Semitic remarks which were seen (again, rightly) as deeply offensive by many Americans. Now, there is nothing new to the American experience about the notion that an ethnic group's historically conditioned sensibilities might inform how members of that group, acting as citizens of this republic, come to construe, react to and advocate about events taking place abroad -- whether in South Africa, or Ireland, or Cuba, or Taiwan or Palestine. I can say with some degree of certainty that Rev. Wright's views -- about the plight of the Palestinians, and about their victimization at the hands of what Wright has called US-sponsored 'state terrorism' -- are not the least bit unusual, within the context of the black experience as lived, for instance, on Chicago's South Side. That a person steeped in Wright's social world could find himself reminded by events in today's Middle East of the anti-colonial struggles and anti-racist struggles of an earlier time can come as no surprise to anyone who has bothered to walk the streets of that community, to sit in its barber shops and beauty salons, or to spend more than a passing moment in the vicinity of a black church (or mosque) in the community

which Barack Obama represented in the Illinois state legislature for a decade. You can be sure that, no matter what he may say about the matter, these views were no revelation to Obama himself.

Now, take a look at what Obama actually had to say about this matter in his Philadelphia 'race' speech:

"But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm ... expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country--a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam."

I'm sorry, but I have to again insist: the fact that a black Muslim or, for that matter, a black Christian religious leader, ministering to a huge flock in Chicago's black ghetto, would fail to see the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as being due to a purportedly 'perverse and hateful' Muslim ideology hardly certifies that said religious leader has a "profoundly distorted view of this

country." Such a claim is just propaganda, pure and simple, and it can serve only one purpose -- to de-legitimize criticism of American foreign policy by what amounts to some not-so-sophisticated name calling. One may agree or disagree with Wright's (and, for that matter, Farrakhan's) reading of the situation in the Middle East, but one cannot fairly characterize those views as deluded, unfounded, irrational, or un-American. In the sentence quoted above, acting on behalf of his own ambitions (and perhaps articulating sincerely held views), Barack Obama nevertheless spoke in such a way as to deny space within the legitimate American conversation for an important dimension of the historically grounded, authentic African American political voice. To repeat, in my considered opinion, he has not earned the right to do so.

By way of concluding, I wish to tell a story about a friend of mine, now deceased, named Tony Campbell -- the Reverend Anthony C. Campbell, that is -- who served as minister in the Boston University chapel during the summers for over a decade, until his death a few years ago. An African-American who had for many years been pastor of a large church in Detroit, and who was a close personal friend of then BU president, John Silber, Tony preached in the

university's chapel nearly every Sunday during the summers, while serving as 'preacher-in-residence' and professor of preaching in the university's school of theology. His sermons were broadcast throughout the New England region on the university-sponsored public radio stations.

As it happens, Tony's father had also been a well-known Baptist minister. The family came out of South Carolina. Tony had a somewhat academic bent. Though a Baptist by birth, he was also very familiar with the Anglican and Episcopalian traditions. He had preached at Westminster Abbey, and at Canterbury. Indeed, before his death he preached sermons from pulpits in a dozen countries throughout the world. He was an elegant, beautifully poetic preacher. No ranting and stomping in the pulpit from him. He was always understated. His voice tended to get lower, and slower, as his sermons approached their climax. (My son and I once traveled to New York from Boston for the sole purpose of hearing Tony preach at the Riverside Church, because it was such an honorific thing for him. And, on that occasion he once again 'hit it out of the park' with an achingly beautiful and profound reflections on some aspect of the Christian teaching.)

Well - and here is the crux of my story, less than two weeks after the events of 9/11/01, Tony preached his final

sermon of the summer at Boston University. I was there. The title he gave for that sermon was, "A Reversal of Fortune." His text was based on a teaching in the New Testament about the figure of Lazarus, not the one who was raised from the dead, but the wealthy man who ignored the beggars sitting in front of his door throughout his blessed life. When he died, said Lazarus was sent to roast in the fires of hell and, upon asking for relief from the angel of the Lord was denied it, being told that he had had his chance on earth. And, when he asked that word be sent back to his brothers, lest they fall into the same condition, he was told, in effect: "they didn't listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen now? Let them roast along with you."

My good friend, the late Rev. Anthony C. Campbell, summer preacher at the Boston University chapel and heir to a great tradition of black preaching -- an urbane, mild-mannered sophisticate -- started his sermon with that scripture. This is, I tell you, a man who did not have a radical bone in his body -- a Baptist with high-church pretensions who had preached at Canterbury. He was as thoroughly American and as committed a Christian as one could imagine. And he argued, in the wake of our country having been attacked by terrorists, which the U.S. was now

in the position of the Lazarus figure of that biblical tale. We were, in effect and to some degree -- he argued -- reaping what we had sown. Those were not his words, of course. He was far too eloquent and subtle a preacher for that. But, that was his message, and there really could be no mistake about it. In other words, he argued that we live now with the consequences of our neglect of complaints against injustice, our contempt for decent world opinion, our arrogance, our haughtiness, and our self-absorption. This is a sermon that was preached in Boston University's chapel less than two weeks after 9/11.

The point of this extended closing anecdote is to explain and defend my assertion that the African-American spiritual witness -- for Christians, the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as refracted through the long generations of pain and suffering and disappointment and hopelessness endured by millions of the descendents of slaves in this country -- has a prophetic message for the American people. In my humble opinion, Barack Obama has not earned the right to interpret that message so as to suit his political needs of the moment. And, more importantly, he certainly ought not to be allowed to denigrate or to marginalize it. With respect to the application of this tradition to moral problems raised by the plight of the

dispossessed and stateless Palestinians, this is precisely what he did during his campaign for the presidency.

And Palestine, Gaza -- refugees for six decades? A great military power -- I'm talking about the Israeli defense forces -- over and against basically a prostrate people. American weapons? Cluster bombs, white phosphorous, F-16s? God, what a morass for the United States of America. I'm not talking about Zionism though. They have their issues, and they have their imperatism; they are going to do what they're going to do about their agenda. I'm talking about the United States of America, I'm talking about justice in the world, I'm talking about what side of history that we stand on. I'm talking about the ideological underpinnings for our posture, vis-à-vis that problem in the Middle East. OK. Is it neo-colonial, is it racist? I'm talking about the ideological underpinnings for our posture. Every time somebody utters the sentence, "Only democracy in the Middle East." Every time somebody says, "Special relationship," they're making profound ethical statements about the meaning of the American experiment. I'm not talking about Zionism. I'm talking about the American experiment. OK. Let freedom reign. "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." We Americans have

abandon state-enforced racism and the domination of people based on ethnic or racial characteristics. We have what amounts to an open-border with Mexico, primarily because we have decided that we are not a country that shoots people when they try to cross our border in search of economic opportunity. We have interpreted our Constitution to say -- in the "equal protection" clause of the 14th Amendment -- that the exercise of government and police powers -- cannot in any way be influenced by ethnic identity or religious conviction. Now in many ways, the experiment at nation-building that has been ongoing since 1948 and long before in Palestine is antithetical to those values. We Americans damn well had better figure out what side of history we wish to stand on. And I'll just tell you this: if a black face is put at the helm American hegemony, and if it does nothing to shift our course in this regard, then it will serve to legitimate our being the wrong side of history. So, the ball is in Barack Hussein Obama's court. Because if he doesn't come up with a different act than the act that we've been seeing, the net effect of that will be to etch injustice in deeper, to make it more stable and less susceptible to reform and change.

My prayer is that I am absolutely wrong, and that my worries are

misplaced entirely. So he may yet rise to this occasion and I will simply be in awe of it. He will be the Mandela of the 21st century if he manages to get it done. How will we know if he's succeeding? I think of a few things: the war on terror. OK. It's right out of Orwell. It's right out of Orwell. Permanent war against abstract enemies, whose shape shifts, and whose definition is revise with each passing year. We're going to be at war forever. It's got to be called off. The war on terror has to be called off. The construction of the United States is a war. The President of the United States -- the previous holder of that office -- said he's a war time president. This one can't leave office a wartime president. We can't be at war forever. The country can't take it.

What he said about terror during the inaugural was interesting. And I don't take issue with it. He said, you know, your people will judge you by what you build, not by what you destroy. He said, "We'll defeat you and we'll outlast you because we're stronger than you are. If you think that we're just going to cower, and wither, and go under in the face of your slaughter of innocence, no, we're not. We're going to fight you back." That's all well and good, I mean, we ought to go get the domestic terrorists

who blow up federal buildings too. The one's who kill abortion doctors, we ought to go get them too. I'm all for fighting the people who would fly planes into buildings and slaughter innocents. Nothing wrong with that. He said too, and hopefully, that if you'll just unclench your fists you will be met with an extended hand. That sounds right to me, how it's going to actually play out with the Iranians advancing toward being able to build a weapon, and with the Israelis asking for over-flight rights over Iraq, and bunker-buster bombs to be able to take out Iranian reactors. We'd better just wait and see.

I'm reminded, as I ponder these questions, of the work of the African American political scientist Martin Kilson, who is Emeritus Professor of Government at Harvard who was a tenured professor at Harvard in the late '60s and early '70s when the big brouhaha was going on that resulted in the establishment of African-American studies and Marty Kilson was a critic of that advocacy. He was against it. He believed that the way that African-Americans needed to advance was through the disciplines, coming up and earning their spurs just like anybody else. He didn't want a separate side thing set up. Anyway, you know, his thinking evolved. He's always been a man of the left, Martin

Kilson, and the reason I'm thinking of it is because a book that he had been promising to write for years and I don't think was ever completed was titled Neither Insiders Nor Outsiders. That was the subtitle of the book. African-Americans were neither insiders nor outsiders. Not insiders for the obvious reasons. You know, your nose is pressed against the candy store window, you don't quite have equal opportunity. But not outsiders either, because we're going back six, seven, eight, ten generations, sons of the soil here, been -- as American as anybody could possibly be. And so therein lies the conundrum, the -- you know, the kind of paradox, neither insiders nor outsiders. Now it seems to me that the central message of the last 25 years is that we're sliding into becoming insiders, OK? What kind of insiders are we going to be? That's the question.