

Glen Ford, “Race and National Liberation Under Obama”

I’m here to talk about race and national liberation under Obama. It’s quite clear that there is a general understanding here that liberation and progressive movements of all kinds have suffered a paralytic effect under this Obama administration. I’m not going to directly address that paralysis in other people’s communities, I’m going to address what the Obama candidacy and now presidency has meant to Black America—the paralysis that set in along traditionally active elements of the Black community.

I want to put this in a little bit of a political perspective. I’m not a professor but I think I do understand a little bit about the subject. There are several ways to look at the Obama phenomenon. I’m going to go back to a larger context. Obama represents, in Black America, the ultimate conflict between two very ancient political currents. Two ancient currents in Black political thought. One of those currents is the imperative towards self-determination, and that involves a rejection of the American model of exploitation and of the domination of one people by another.

That imperative demands political autonomy for Black people and it tends to demand political autonomy, self-determination, for other people as well. That is the root of Black anti-imperialism, which is why Blacks have always been the group that is most distrustful of American military adventures abroad. That is born out not just by the literature that we can examine from history but by all the polling that’s been taken since the major political polls have been keeping track of Black political opinion. We have always been most opposed of any group to US military adventures abroad. Sometimes our opposition was incoherent, but there has always been that basic opposition.

I’d like to give an example. I love this little factoid that comes out of polling. In February of 2003, about five or six weeks before the invasion of Iraq, the Zogby organization conducted a poll. Zogby is always very good about breaking it down by race. They asked the question—it was very clear at this point in history that the US was going to invade Iraq, so the question was: “Would you favor an invasion of Iraq if it would result in the death of thousands of Iraqi civilians?”

A big, strong majority of white males said, “Yes! Let’s do it, I don’t care about thousands of dead, innocent, civilian Iraqi men, women, and children.” More than a third of white women said, “Sure, go ahead, that’s the price we—they—got to pay.” About the same percentage of Latinos said “Go ahead on with the invasion,” regardless of the consequences to Iraqi men, women and children out of uniform. Seven percent—seven percent!—of African-Americans gave the thumbs up for the invasion if that were going to be the price that Iraqis paid for the invasion. If you know anything about polling, seven percent is negligible—that’s just like, people who ask, “What did you say?” See what I’m saying? This means there was near unanimity in the Black community that the Iraqi people should not be done such harm by the American military machine.

I’ll never forget that statistic, I think it goes to the heart of the tendency, that part of the ancient current that exists in Black America. That gave actual, numerical quantity to that ancient tendency. This tendency also calls for transformation of US society. That sometimes means separation from white society and sometimes it does not. But it does call for a transformation of white society in the United States, because even separation means transformation. Then there’s the other current. There are two main currents that have always existed in Black society, including before emancipation. That other current demands Black elevation, and Black recognition, under an otherwise still existing status quo of American society. It does not demand transformation of society except in terms of internal Black upward mobility. And it worships Black faces in high places. That is the main manifestation of it.

I'm going to add a word of caution here. That tendency is not strictly integrationist, it is not necessarily assimilationist. In fact, both these tendencies—the self-determinationist tendency and the Black upward mobility tendency—are infused in a general framework of Black nationalism or Black peoplehood. Because the fact of the matter is that Black people are, at root, nationalist. And that is why the struggle within the Black community—whether you are talking about this elevationist, upward mobility tendency or some sort of transformational principle—the struggle is always within the group. And the argument is always, “What’s good for Black people?” See, that root is a nationalist framework. Nationalist terms of reference. So we can’t talk about a “nationalist tendency” and an “integrationist tendency.” That doesn’t make much sense in the real world.

Now, both of those tendencies are warring, of course. But they exist within not only distinct political movements in the history of Black people, and not just within discreet political personalities, historical personalities among Black people. Let’s talk about WEB DuBois—we’ll see what looks like great vacillations over a career. It’s not so hard and fast as that. Because the fact of the matter is that these two currents exist within almost every Black individual, and they are warring with each other. And people go back and forth. These are real, real tendencies within basically every Black American. This must be understood to understand why it seems that we vacillate and go between... how can people who call themselves revolutionaries, as we saw in this Obama adventure, that is still unfolding—people can call themselves revolutionaries and be Obama-ites at the same time? Yes they can! Because these are warring tendencies within the same individuals.

So I wanted to get that groundwork out of the way and bring us to the near history. Another way to look at the Obama candidacy is to take a look at what corporate America has been doing in terms of its strategy to infiltrate, negate, somehow put its mark on, Black political activity. Because Black people are central to what goes on in the United States. Not just because we are clustered in the cities. But because, we are central to what America is. And other people are taking cues to what we do, as well. So they figured out, “We have to do something about these Black people, we can no longer just treat them as invisible people, as we could in the previous era”—before Civil Rights, before we stood up, before Black Power. So you’re going to have to deal with them some kind of way.

And racist folk in the corporate structure wrestled with themselves for a very long time. In fact they gave us a respite after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements where they didn’t mess with us and they carried out some very stupid and ineffectual strategies which gave us some breathing space which I wish we had taken advantage of—but, shit, that’s old man talk. It did not happen. In the post-Civil Rights era, the Republican Party—which is the most coherent mouthpiece for corporate capital, not only one, the Democrats are too, but the Republicans do it in a distilled form that we can recognize easily—at first, they looked to create some kind of counter to the self-determinationist tendency which had become paramount in Black America in the Black Power movement by creating what one might call a comprador class: a compliant class.

During the Nixon era, all these government agencies that promoted Black business were a part of that. That was a political program. It was expected that these Black businessmen would become Republicans. So the corporate right at that time, working through the Republican Party, tried to revive Black Republicanism. It did not take. It could not take. Because the last Black person elected to congress from a Black congressional district was in 1935 and that was Oscar De Priest. There has not been a Black Republican from a Black congressional district since then. So, Black Republicanism was dead but they didn’t quite understand that, so they kept on beating that dead horse for awhile. When they saw that that wouldn’t work, they decided maybe they could influence Black folks by giving up chairs and all kinds of funding to Black right-wing academics. So we saw the rise of Thomas Sowell and Glenn Loury and a whole coterie of them. They put them on the speaking circuits, and the American Enterprise Institute got them on television all over, and... nothing. Nothing happened in Black America. White folks have a lot to say: “Ah, well, Glenn Loury says...” or

“Thomas Sowell said...”—but it had absolutely no impact on the internal dynamics of Black America. So then they said, “Well, damn, what can we do with these people?” Aside from the general policy of mass Black incarceration. But what could they do at that level of politics?

Finally, in the mid-90s, the Bradley Foundation, out of Milwaukee Wisconsin—that was George Bush’s favorite foundation, and it should be, because the Bradley foundation basically created the Bush regime’s domestic policy as it related to Blacks. That is, the “Black Outreach” policy. And the Bradley Foundation, they were not geniuses, but finally they grappled with a racism so virulent in these circles that they could not tolerate more than two or three Black people at the cocktail party. It was really that basic. So the very concept of creating some kind of larger Black astro-turf organization as they had created in the environmental movement and all kinds of other movements, just by funding these things, was beyond them because of their racism.

At the Bradley Foundation a couple of their executives overcame that basic virulent racism and said “Let’s astroturf some Black stuff.” So they created a wedge issue that had never existed in the Black community before—public vouchers for private schools. Vouchers for private schools, if it had been a subject of conversation even in Black communities, was associated with segregation academies. That was the history. No Black folk had ever marched or demonstrated for Black folks to get vouchers for private schools before the mid to late nineties when the Bradley foundation came up with it. And after they hit upon that wedge issue they then created out of whole cloth an organization called the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

They funded it initially to the tune of two million dollars, gathered a group of mainly Black Democrats in Milwaukee for their initial meeting, then got together with the whole right-wing conspiracy [laughs] of foundations, the great funders, to raise probably about ten million dollars in the next two years to put these guys on a publicity tour and use their vast media resources to make this appear to be the new Black politics that was examining other options—especially related to education, which has always been an issue that was held dear in the Black community. And their first candidate was Cory Booker of Newark, New Jersey.

Cory Booker was part of the initial meeting, I believe it was in 1998, the formative meeting of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, in Milwaukee. He became then their shining star. He was introduced to the world by the Manhattan Institute. The Manhattan Institute is that part of the vast capitalist conspiracy where the division of labor calls for them to do media, because they are in New York. So Cory had his coming-out party at the Manhattan Institute’s media-centered luncheons.

He then announced his candidacy for mayor. He was a one-term, thirty-one or thirty-two year old city councilman. A nobody. And he announced that he wanted to be mayor of Newark, New Jersey. And all of a sudden he had five million dollars at his disposal. And Sharpe James, long talked about as the most powerful Black politician in New Jersey, had nothing close to that. To make a long story short, Cory almost won.

That was in 2002 and that was the year of the great jump-off when corporate America, through their various organizations, decided that they were going to penetrate the Democratic Party in the ghetto. They had never done that before. There were corrupt politicians, there always have been, but nobody was toeing the line, who were direct surrogates for the corporate line—a line that was concocted, was invented by the Bradley Foundation. So in 2002 Cory Booker almost won in Newark, but Artur Davis won, taking a congressional seat from Earl Hilliard, in Alabama. The same formula, came with gobs of money, out of nowhere and swept Earl Hilliard away. Then, a couple of months later, Denise Majette, came from nowhere, with three times the money that Cynthia McKinney had, and swept her out of her congressional seat in Atlanta. And all of a sudden, this corporate plan, this strategy which had been birthed in Milwaukee was now bearing fruit. And they had their little caucus in the Congressional Black Caucus. The Congressional Black Caucus has not come out with a coherent

progressive position since because they always acted on consensus. Once those two—and others who were to follow—infested the caucus, there could be no consensus. So, just in 2002, they successfully neutralized the Congressional Black Caucus. They've never been able to say since that they are the conscience of the congress because of the events of 2002.

The US media, corporate media, played that up as a battle royale between the “new” Democrats and the “old guard:” the “Civil Rights-oriented Democratic establishment.” That meant there was an expectation and an eagerness on the part of the corporate media and the public that's influenced by that for these “new” Democrats. And 2002 is when Barack Obama made his big move. And Barack Obama's magic—this is his personal skill—was able to capture and appeal to both of these tendencies in Black America: the tendency that seeks Black elevation, and Black respect and Black recognition, and worships Blacks in high places—and the one that is progressive.

So Barack Obama, essentially a corporate politicians, also speaks—and speaks to well—to peace issues, that's his famous October 2002 antiwar speech. And he gave great, skillful rhetorical flourishes towards single-payer. So he seemed to embody and appeal to both of these tendencies. And he had both of things work. There was a desperation in Black America. The result, of course, was that Black America was neutralized as I have never seen. And I've been a reporter for forty years and I have never seen something like this in my experience.

In the 2008 campaign, organized Black America raised no questions—not one!—in an organized fashion, to Barack Obama. It was the first time in my forty years that we did not raise the demand of a “Marshall Plan for the Cities.” I've been hearing about a Marshall Plan for the Cities ever since I've paid attention to things of that nature and we didn't even raise that. No one wanted to say anything that might somehow upset this march, this ascendancy—except the Uhuru Movement. In 2008, the Uhuru Movement, also called the African People's Socialist Party, headquartered in Tampa-St. Petersburg, Florida, interrupted one of Obama's town hall meeting campaign stops. They unfurled a banner at the back of the room that said a very simple question.

It said, “What about the Black community, Obama?” That's really damn simple. And they didn't even shout it. But it stood out in this strange and weird campaign where Black folks, for the first time in my memory had made no noise at all and not tried to impact on the dialog at all during this whole display. It flustered Obama because he wasn't used to being challenged. He stuttered and stumbled and lied but he was clearly set off of his stride.

So it was proper that on September 12 of this year, the Uhuru Movement—and I'm not a member—the Uhuru Movement who had made that intervention, that solitary intervention during the campaign, called for the formation of a Black is Back coalition for peace, social justice, and reparations. And some of us answered that call—some from the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement.

And we set the date for a demonstration in Washington, DC for November 7. That gave us eight weeks but we were determined that, coming from a position of total quietude, anybody who can make noise, anybody that can pick up a flag and plant it somewhere, that's progress. My own assessment was that if we got 200, 250 people, that we had successfully planted a flag and the effort would be a success. I would have been overjoyed, as I told this brother, with 500, because that's twice as good. But we got our 200, 250. But more important than the raw numbers—and these were good people, really dedicated activists, and much younger than the geriatric marches that we are used to seeing—it was really quite invigorating. I got tired, other people weren't tired—why? Because they were young!

But the elements that were there were significant. Larry Hamm from the People's Organization for Progress in Newark, New Jersey. And that is the grassroots organization with membership in northern New Jersey. If you're not shaking with Larry Hamm, nothing's shaking, all right? And because it's grassroots, not a lot of people like those in this room—please, I'm not being presumptuous, who talk

things out and share principles that verge on socialism, sometimes—Larry Hamm is in charge of an organization of regular folk who respond to day-to-day concerns and are not immersed in all the doctrine—and therefore, however, are quite vulnerable to the “Black faces in high places” appeal.

And he shared with us at the rally on November 7 that he had great problems motivating staunch members of the organization, real activists, people who can be expected to turn out and put their bodies on the line. Confront the police, as soon as Larry said it was necessary. These people were extremely reluctant even after all the evidence that Barack Obama is the bankers’ president. See, I didn’t want to go into all of that about how Barack Obama is the bankers’ president, because all y’all know that, you see? That would be extraneous.

But he fought for the bus to come down from Newark, to make this statement, to plant the flag of opposition to this president. That was a very brave thing for him to do and it shows that the cracks are widening in what seemed to be near unanimous support for Barack Obama. What seemed to be a near triumph of that tendency that is just for Black elevation and some modicum of respect and to see Black faces in high places, over the principles and actual necessities of Black life.

We saw Charles Barron—everyone here is familiar with Charles Barron, city councilman from Brooklyn and former Panther Party Member—and I was in two debates with Charles Barron in December and then, I believe, of March of this year. We had these debates in Harlem. We called them the “Great Debates,” because, you know we speak large—between those who said in the negative, “Is Barack Obama good for Black America?” and those who said in the positive. And Charles Barron was on the positive side in both of those debates. Larry Hamm, also, was an Obama-ite, and actively campaigned for Barack Obama.

And here’s Charles Barron, making one of the most dynamic speeches. Clearly splitting with members of the December 12 Movement, which is one of the big activist groups here in New York, on this subject. That is, putting his political capital on the line. Because he sees that it is necessary. I don’t see him just as a weathervane trying to see which way the wind is blowing. These guys are actually putting their political capital at risk—people with real organizations, who are going blow to blow with their own constituency. Saying that it is necessary that we split with this Obama man.

So I believe that we are seeing cracks that will get wider and wider as the crises become more frequent and deeper. As the treachery becomes more and more apparent. I don’t think that Black America is going to be the backwater that it was—and shamefully so!—in 2008. I believe we’re coming out. We’re getting over this high, this rush. Please forgive us! [laughs] It was a high, it was a rush, and people are coming back to their senses. And there is great political space being created to organize the way we used to do, under these new circumstances.