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Race and Presidential Politics '92: The Challenge to Go Another Way

by
May Louie

"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." – W. E. B. Du Bois

At presidential election time in 1992, America is once again looking at limited political options for national leadership. The Republican party platform is its most conservative ever. The Democratic party ticket is dominated by southern Dixiecrats. And we who have marched and organized, and risked and sacrificed much for racial equality and political empowerment, must now match our sense of foreboding with our determination to meet the challenge before us. Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 nation-shaking, agenda-setting presidential campaigns took us to places we had never been before and gave us a glimpse at the possibility of racial and economic justice. Those who felt the power of those campaigns and of Jackson's message must now forge a movement and a vision far beyond the choice we must now face.

A Nation in Pain

Twelve years of Reagan-Bush have meant deep and widespread pain and polarization. A Republican administration, with complicity for the most part from a Democratic Congress, has orchestrated a wholesale shift of wealth from the poor and middle class to the very rich. Now the top 1 percent of the population controls more wealth than the bottom 90 percent.

Massive disinvestment in the country and its people has resulted in 10 million unemployed, another 10 million underemployed; 35 million in poverty; and 37 million without health insurance. In June of 1991, Bridgeport, Connecticut, the largest city in the wealthiest

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county in the richest state of the Union, declared bankruptcy. Earlier this year, Los Angeles exploded, with San Francisco, Atlanta, Seattle, and other cities following suit.

Mass discontent is enormous. Disclosures of corruption and abuse of power (e.g., the House Bank scandal) have created a demand for change so great that there will



be a historic changing of the guard in the U.S. Congress, with a record number of incumbents resigning or losing re-election. In June 1992, an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll reported that 82 percent of Americans feel that "both political parties are pretty much out of touch with the American people."¹

And in this period of great suffering and alienation, what do those who would be president offer?

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans, neither Bill Clinton nor George Bush, have a vision or a plan for solving the nation's economic and social problems. They have each moved to the right of the American people. They have played to people's fears and racism to divide and to divert attention from the country's problems.

The American people favor a national health plan, full employment policies, and taxing the rich. They are overwhelmingly in favor of reproductive rights and environmental protection. They are indeed against "special interests," defining these not as minorities and labor, but as big business and the rich. The American people are more progressive than the parties, the candidates, and the platforms. But it is also true that they have deep-seated racial prejudices that can be, and have repeatedly been, manipulated by politicians and those who have no interest in economic justice and democratic freedoms.

The Road to the White House: Divide and Conquer

In 1980 and 1984, Ronald Reagan sowed division and fear, and won. From his 1980 campaign announcement in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the brutal mur-

ders of three civil rights workers, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, to his crushing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), the Reagan presidency pitted people against each other and convinced many to vote against their own interests.

In 1988, both George Bush and Michael Dukakis ran campaigns that fundamentally excluded minorities. Bush did not need or want the minority vote. Dukakis took it for granted. They both vied for the Reagan Democrats as the key to victory.

Emerging from the 1988 Atlanta convention with a seventeen-point lead in the polls and a united party,

The American people are more progressive than the parties, the candidates, and the platforms.

Dukakis ran fast and far from the Democratic party's most loyal political constituency, African Americans. From July to November, the Dukakis campaign held only five rallies in urban settings. Four of those occurred in the last two weeks of the election in response to his low showing in the polls. All of these urban rallies were held after 5:00 P.M., so that they would not be carried on network news. He flinched every time the Republicans used the word *liberal*. He treated Jesse Jackson as someone to be "handled" and minimized rather than dealt with as the leader of a considerable coalition, the recipient of 7 million votes in the primary season, and a force to be consulted and included.

George Bush's use of racism, on the other hand, was not defensive, but very offensive. He used the Willie Horton issue as the snapshot view of a Dukakis presidency, thereby feeding white fear of African-American male violence and rape. He used the idea of the welfare queen to attack social programs, again playing on white resentment and stereotypes of minorities as parasites on society.

Dukakis won the Reagan Democrats, but he lost the election. He won the urban vote, but his strategy depressed that vote below 1984 levels. In key states where Dukakis lost by a narrow margin, an inspired urban vote would have put that state's electoral votes in Dukakis's column. With an urban vote at 1984 levels, he would have won the presidency. There are at least twelve states in which the number of unregistered and nonvoting African Americans exceeded the number of votes by which Dukakis lost.

Dukakis lost, not because he was too liberal, but because he ran away from a populist message and a loyal popular base. His cold, hard, "competency" campaign failed to inspire and rally people.

Enter the Democratic Leadership Council

This year's presidential election takes this race-signal politics to another level. Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) are competing with George Bush on his own racist turf, but with a slicker

veneer.

The Democratic Leadership Council was formed in 1985 to vie for control of the Democratic party. Comprised mainly of moderate and conservative southerners, it set the goal of bringing the party back to the political center. It wanted to appeal to middle-class voters, and to move away from "special interest" groups. In 1991, when Bill Clinton was the chairman of the DLC, it declared its intention to form fifty state chapters. These, of course, formed the nucleus of Clinton's national apparatus in the presidential primaries the following year.

At the 1990 DLC conference in New Orleans, Jesse Jackson gave a speech, *Delighted to be United*, in which he praised the Dixiecrats for finally embracing many of his long-held positions, including reductions in the military budget, fighting the war on drugs, etc. Jesse Jackson is, minimally, the symbol of the progressive politics that the DLC opposes. They needed him on the other side. As he embraced them on areas of common ground, they were stunned, and undermined, and would never again give him a platform. In 1991 and 1992, the group excluded Jesse Jackson from speaking.

Jackson's ascendancy in America is the DLC's worst nightmare. Jackson thwarted the Dixiecrats' earlier plans to increase southern conservative influence over the Democratic presidential selection process through the creation of super Tuesday (which concentrated a large number of southern primaries early in March). Jackson won big on super Tuesday in both 1984 and 1988. In 1988, there were four DLC members running for the Democratic nomination—Al Gore, Dick Gephardt, Bruce Babbitt, and Joe Biden. Jackson, with 7 million votes, won far more votes than all four combined.

The 1991 DLC conference contrasted itself to the Democratic party by focusing on its greater willingness to use military force, limit social spending, vigorously attack welfare, lessen its commitment to civil rights, support a fast track trade agreement with Mexico, and school choice. It was strongly challenged by Congressman Bill Gray (who was a vice-chairman of the DLC) as well as by Jesse Jackson for its position on civil rights. The group went out of its way to criticize quotas in a calculated political signal that placed it squarely with the George Bush who finally signed the much-weakened 1991 Civil Rights Act. Their position on civil rights—saying they are committed to equal opportunity but not equal results—is racist, since it implies that lack of equal results must be caused by inherent inferiority. Decades ago, Lyndon Baines Johnson made clear that equal results must be the measure of true equality of opportunity.

Now, in a presidential season without a Jackson candidacy, Bill Clinton, most recent past president of the DLC, and Al Gore, DLC member, comprise the Democratic ticket. The DLC has achieved its goal of taking over the 1992 presidential process. (However, they have not yet been able to substitute their agenda; they have

had to make some important concessions on platform, including calling for the rich and corporations to pay their fair share of taxes, protection against striker replacement, and support for public education.)

In dominating the Democratic ticket, the DLC's racial strategy moves beyond Michael Dukakis's defensive posture. They have more than taken the black vote (and the labor vote) for granted. Their strategy is clearly and expressly to compete for the white, suburban, "forgotten" middle class by aggressively using racial signals to attract these voters. They have gone on the offensive to try to isolate the nation's leading voice on racial equity and racial unity, Jesse Jackson.

What Are These Racial Signals?

In January of this year, with the entire primary season still ahead, the Gennifer Flowers scandal threatened to waylay the Clinton candidacy. To divert attention from that, he ignored pleas for mercy and allowed the execution of a lobotomized African-American man, Willie Ray Rector, who had an I.Q. of seventy, to show that he was tough on crime, tough on blacks, and to avoid the Willie Horton nightmare that haunted Dukakis.

In March, on the eve of the Georgia primary, Clinton orchestrated a photo opportunity at the Stone Mountain Correctional Facility, where he was backdropped by about forty black prisoners. *The New York Times* was among the newspapers that carried the photograph.²

Later in March, the Arkansas NAACP blasted Clinton for playing golf at an all-white country club. He had been doing so for eleven years.

When Los Angeles erupted in May after the Rodney King verdict and America was challenged to confront the rage and decay in our cities, Clinton did not offer a plan for addressing the urban crisis. Clinton provided

The Democrats and Republicans are competitive in their divisiveness.

leadership that was in the tradition of Dan Quayle. Quayle's response was to blame the rioters for the riot, the murderers for the murders. Clinton's contribution was to call for a stronger anticrime bill. In fact, Clinton tried to define some new political turf outside of the traditional left and right by saying that he could be both probusiness and proenvironment, probusiness and prolabor; he could be both pro-civil rights and tough on crime. He equates crime with color!

Clinton insulted the National Newspaper Publishers Association by a last minute cancellation of a scheduled appearance before their June convention.

In June, when Clinton was invited to address the National Rainbow Coalition's "Rebuild America" conference, he chose to use that opportunity to "push off" Jackson and the Rainbow, with a cynical attack against young rap artist and community organizer, Sister Souljah.

The Rap on Souljah

Let us look at what really happened in the Sister Souljah situation. The Rainbow conference was a dynamic and, in many ways, ground-breaking conference that sought real solutions to problems of federal disinvestment, crime and drugs, racial divisions, and low voter participation. It brought together individuals and sectors of society that, if not for Jackson's unifying magic, would not even talk to each other.

Into this delicate political situation walked the candidate Bill Clinton. He criticized Sister Souljah for inciting blacks to kill whites, quoting her out-of-context from a *Washington Post* interview. He compared her to David Duke, and by implication, criticized the Rainbow for allowing her to participate in its youth empowerment session the previous evening. *Boston Globe* columnist Thomas Oliphant described it this way:

Yes, she really did say in a long interview with the *Washington Post* after the LA riot: "If black people kill black people very day, why not have a week and kill white people."

But I've read the transcript of the May 13 interview 10 times, and there is no doubt in my mind that she is reporting on—and reflecting—street-level rage, not advocating murder, which is the impression Clinton's selection of her most inflammatory words was designed to foster...

Clinton took his shot in ignorance of why Jesse Jackson had Sister Souljah at the Rainbow's meeting...

Say what you will about Jackson's political ego, no one can heal as he can when he puts his energy into it the way he has since the riot.³

Long after Clinton had been informed of the context and meaning of Souljah's comments, encouraged to talk directly with her, and informed of the context of her appearance at the Rainbow conference, he continued to say that he would stand against racism. As stated in an editorial that appeared in the *Boston Globe*:

For a candidate desperately seeking to come from behind in the polls, the Rainbow meeting, and Souljah's participation, provided a perfect opportunity—not for courting members of his party's core constituency, but for kicking them to the curb.

This was not about a little-known rap artist... This was about Clinton's efforts to impress conservative and moderate Democrats by proving he could stand up to Jackson.⁴

From the point of view of calculated political strategy, the Sister Souljah move by Clinton was brilliant. He turned truth on its head and won the admiration and praise of the white pundits and handlers. He successfully substituted symbol for substance, division and "push-off" for healing and inclusion, political calcula-

tion for vision. He falsely claimed the moral high ground on race, while actually being the voice of white resentment of black nationalism and resistance. He outdid Allan Bakke in his use of the reverse discrimination argument. He played to white fear of black violence without offering any solutions for the rage and alienation of our youth and our cities. He mobilized his national network to portray Jackson as a racist who refused to condemn the killing of white people, when Jackson is, in fact, the nation's most effective voice for a genuine alternative to racial hatred. The managers of the two previously failed Democratic presidential attempts—Susan Estrich (Dukakis) and Bob Beckel (Mondale)—were mobilized to publicly cheer Clinton on for his tough “handling” of the “Jackson problem” and to empathize with Clinton's difficult chore. He encouraged black leaders to line up against their own troubled youth in the name of taking a stand against racism. In this single incident, true to his white, southern, DLC roots, Clinton showed himself to be a masterful manipulator of all the time-honored techniques used against the oppressed.

Juan Gonzalez at the *New York Daily News* got it right when he said, “Move over, Willie Horton. Sister Souljah has arrived. This time, the election year ‘Black Threat’ drummed up to enrage and keep the races divided comes from the Democrats, not the Republicans.”⁵

And the Beat Goes On

The Clinton-Gore post-Democratic National Convention bus tours have taken them to middle America, to areas where the only nonwhite face in the staged photo opportunities is that of a secret service agent. Clinton-Gore's first stop after the New York convention was

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Camden, New Jersey, a predominantly black and brown city, with an African-American mayor, city council president, police chief, school superintendent, and Democratic party chairman. The Clinton campaign informed the local leadership that they were holding a “private rally,” and did not invite them to the all-white rally with a select group at G.E. Aerospace.

The Clinton inner circle is modelled after his exclusive white country club. Even those African-American leaders who joined the Clinton camp early, with few programs and promises for their constituencies, and who acted as willing voices in Clinton's anti-Jackson moves, have been “pushed off.” The Clinton forces dangled carrots to sow divisions and rivalries, but then withdrew the carrots. An effort to get out the vote in the form of

a proposal for black southern voter registration drafted by Mike Espy, John Lewis, and Bill Jefferson was submitted to the Clinton campaign and is being stonewalled. As DeWayne Wickham of *USA Today* described, “it seems the Arkansas governor cares less about exciting black voters—the Democratic party's most loyal constituency—than he does about inciting the white suburban and southern voters he hopes will help him reshape the party.”⁶

The sum of the Clinton strategy is clear: to avoid minority audiences (except perhaps after sundown), to publicly slap Jesse Jackson to show toughness against

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minority aspirations, to launch no efforts to register and inspire a black or Latino vote, and thus signal the all-clear to the white Reagan Democrats to come home.

The Republicans, of course, will not concede the territory of race and other divisive politics to the Democrats. In a draft of their party platform, they described Washington, D.C., as a “national disgrace,” plagued by “hellish crime,” “unremitting scandal,” “illegal drugs,” and “massive dependency.” At the same time that Jesse Jackson's work on statehood for the District of Columbia has given the idea renewed life and possibility, the Republicans are calling for “rescuing the nation's capital” by increasing federal controls.

The Republican platform also won approval from Pat Buchanan for its toughness against illegal aliens with language that Buchanan said showed support for his campaign's call for building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. The August Republican National Convention was a showcase of prejudice, intolerance, and negativity. Ronald Reagan's keynote speech showed that he has not lost his touch; he can still reach into white America and call them to a sense of racial superiority. The Democrats and Republicans are competitive in their divisiveness. The difference is that the Republicans are consolidating their base, while the Democrats are rejecting theirs.

Call the Nation to Higher Ground

At least part of the story of the 1992 presidential election is the story of a continued and escalated retreat from racial equality and the manipulation of racial attitudes as a substitute for real change.

While some would argue otherwise, I believe that on November 3, we need to elect Bill Clinton as president. On some essential points, he is significantly better than Bush. He supports fair taxes on the rich and corporations, statehood for Washington, D.C., same-day voter registration, protection against striker replacement, funding for education and preschool care, reproductive choice for women, equal rights for gays and lesbians, a reinvest-

ment package for America, environmental protection, and greater reductions in the military budget.

The American people desperately want and need change. They will be voting for fair taxes, jobs, and workers' rights. Working people who vote for Bill Clinton will do so not in support of his antilabor, right-to-work stance, but because they still see the Democrats as the party of working people, while Republicans are seen as the party of the rich. Minorities will vote for Bill Clinton not because they support his "push off" politics, but because they see differences between him and George Bush. People who care about the cities will vote for Clinton because he offered, albeit very late, a reinvestment plan that at least points us in the right direction. In this, the "year of the woman," women will vote for him because of his prochoice position.

The question about the labor, minority, and urban vote this year, as it was in the Bush/Dukakis race, is whether the message, agenda, and campaign strategy hit close enough to people's needs and hopes that they will vote in sufficient numbers. The primaries would suggest that they may not. We lost 4.5 million voters between the 1988 and 1992 presidential primaries. Voter turnout was down by 13.3 percent. Black voter turnout in some states was down by as much as 60 to 70 percent.

Will some people be voting for Clinton in response to his race signals? Undoubtedly, Clinton will be well rewarded for his manipulation of racial fears.

That is the strategic dilemma for voters this election. The scope of the conversation on race in presidential politics has moved to exclude a stand for racial justice. At a time when the nonwhite population has grown tremendously, with African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and native Americans now 25 percent of the population, the political discourse is moving rapidly to ostracize minorities. Not only is there a narrowing of the political turf to the fight for and therefore the exclusive concerns of white, suburban, middle-class voters. We have been made into political albatrosses, special interests, criminals, and parasites.

We must determine now to strategize and organize to break out of the prison in which we now find ourselves.

In the aftermath of the 1984 and 1988 Jackson presidential races, there have been tremendous electoral gains for blacks, Latinos, Asians, and progressives—from Maine to Mississippi, from New York City to North Carolina, and from Minnesota to California. There is a ground swell for empowerment and democracy throughout the country. This year, the number of black and Latino representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives may increase by as much as 50 percent. In the twenty-seven years since the Voting Rights Act, the number of black elected officials has grown from 400 to almost 7,500 (still only 1 percent of the elected officials in the country). Asians are running for and winning office for the first time in many places. In communities, campuses, and workplaces across the country, people are organizing for change. These are building blocks for

a national movement.

The historic opportunity for change exists. With the end of the Cold War, the nation's resources can now be directed to domestic economic development. There is massive discontent with the existing social, economic, and political situation. But this discontent can be pulled to the left or right. David Duke, Pat Buchanan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton offer only one vision of society—one in which white racism and white superiority are givens. This can only lead to increased polarization and suffering. There is another option—the one offered by Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition.

This other tension in American politics is one that calls us to higher ground. Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition have called the nation to "turn pain into power and pain into partnership, rather than pain into polarization." During the height of Reagan's popularity, Jackson stood with family farmers, striking workers, struggling students, and environmentally endangered communities. He reached deep into people's striving for justice and decency, showed us the common thread that unites us all, and made us believe that through struggle and coalition, we could change the course of the nation.

This message won 2.5 million white votes. This work has shown that there is an alternative to mainstream, racially divisive politics. It is possible to rally people around a moral center, based on a belief in principles and values higher than crass political calculation. Through shared goals and shared struggle, we can achieve common ground. This view challenges the very foundation of American politics and race relations today. For this view to win, it will require an expansive, inclusive vision, a plan that corresponds to the scope of the nation's problems. It requires a commitment to long-term organizing from the bottom up and the building of a strong grassroots movement in each of our communities. Let us commit to work at this goal with the urgency and intensity that circumstances and history require of us.

Notes

¹*Polling Report* 8, no. 13 (6 July 1992).

²*New York Times*, 3 March 1992.

³Thomas Oliphant, "The Right Way—and the Wrong Way," *Boston Globe*, 17 June 1992.

⁴Editorial, *Boston Globe*, 19 June 1992.

⁵Juan Gonzalez, "Bill Hits Low Note in Rap of Souljah," *New York Daily News*, 17 June 1992.

⁶DeWayne Wickham, "Bill Clinton's Black-Vote High-Wire Act: Can He Court Reagan Democrats and a Big Black Turnout?," *USA Today*, 31 August 1992.

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