

President-Elect Barack Obama: Race Has Been Haunting This Election

By Walter Earl Fluker

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Today the entire world is transfixed by the power and promise of the American Dream. Barack Hussein Obama will become the 44th president of the United States of America!

For many, his presidency marks a new beginning, for others it provokes suspicion, fear, and distrust because our nation is haunted by an old ghost—not quite like the ghosts with which we have become comfortable: Banquo visiting his cunning and power-hungry murderers; Washington Irving's headless horseman spooking the quiet village of Sleepy Hollow in Ichabod Crane's early America; Edgar Allan Poe's tell-tale heart pounding from behind the walls of the cellar of *The Cask of Amontillado*; or the ghosts from the framed portraits on the walls of the staircase in *Hogwarts* in the *Harry Potter* chronicles.

No, this is a different kind of ghostly visitation that is a 21st-century cultural haunting of America. This ghost is more like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who is a full-bodied, central character in the American narrative. In America, to use the language of literary scholar Kathleen Brogan, the ghost "serves to illuminate the shadowy and more repressed aspects of our national character" that have played out disastrously in this presidential election. During the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama, this old ghost showed up everywhere: in the elderly woman in Milwaukee expressing her suspicion and distrust of the "Arab"; in the old man screaming, "I am fed up; and mad as hell!"; in the unidentified shouts at Republican political rallies: "Kill Obama!"; on the front page of the *New Yorker* depicting Barack Obama wearing a turban and his wife, Michelle, toting an AK-47; in the sign of a backwards "B" on the face of the young McCain campaign worker in Pennsylvania; and in a foiled assassination plot that, thank God, was hatched by simpletons. These are all signs of the ghost that stalks in the shadows of American collective consciousness—it is alive, well, very dangerous, and it will not go away because we have elected our first African-American president.

What is at stake in these cultural hauntings is a revelation of how deeply embedded race is in American culture; and an opportunity, maybe an invitation to a larger public conversation on leadership, religion, and race in our country. These assaults on Barack Obama's character are related to the larger question of American character that is generally connected to the call for renewal in our society, as if the United States were a huge machine that the right political leader simply needs to fix or adjust—much like raising the hood of a dysfunctional automobile and replacing the carburetor; or adjusting rising oil prices by offshore drilling or offering a tax holiday or fixing the markets. But the United States of America is not a machine—it is a republic of "we the people," consisting of ethnicities and tribes from every corner of the Earth who must find a way to live together in what Fared Zakaria calls a post-American world.

The election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land will not provide a quick fix or a miraculous adjustment of American character that will remedy our present

impasse—"we the people" must assume responsibility for our common destiny and this will require an open and candid conversation about what ails us most and what has played out in his presidential campaign, both abroad and at home—our history of racism. Barack Obama is a bright star here and abroad because he has new ideas, a new agenda, and yes, a new face—but the nation's lingering ghost will still haunt his every stride forward.

As Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, "Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before."

Prompted by his pastor's sermons that mixed racial and political commentary, Barack Obama's speech, "A More Perfect Union" on Feb. 29, 2008, is an illuminating commentary on the subtle and damning configurations of race, religion, and politics in American life and culture. It is instructive to note that religion provided the context and the energy for placing the issue of race in the center of the debate on his character, defined as loyalty to "American values." As the first African-American president of the United States, his leadership will confront us with the difficulty that "we the people" have in speaking the truth about race and American character. In his call for unity and a return to the bedrock American values of freedom and equality that made his candidacy possible, he was also reminding the nation of the terrible secret that everyone knows—in America, with the exception of comedians, we live and breathe race but we are not allowed to speak about it openly and honestly without penalty.

In an uncharacteristically candid statement to the editorial board of the *Washington Times*, Condoleezza Rice said that racism is a "birth defect" of America, and "that particular birth defect makes it hard for us to confront it, hard for us to talk about it, and hard for us to realize that it has continuing relevance for who we are today." Jim Wallis, in his book *God's Politics*, suggests that the problem of race is even more grievous for the religiously inspired; telling the truth about race means acknowledging that racism is "America's original sin." Dealing with America's original sin, however, will require more than confession. According to President-elect Obama, it will involve addressing issues that "reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like healthcare, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American."

Working through our history will require courageous leadership that is not bogged down in character assassination and frivolous debates about everything but this deep-structured issue of race and that will challenge all of us to listen to one another with empathy and respect. For our next president of the United States this is a risky proposition, but it is a risk worth taking as we enter the 21st century tip-tilted toward a global racial, ethnic, and religious cataclysm unparalleled in our history.

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