

Racism, Security Threats Issues for Obama

Recent Racist Incidents and Security Threats Become Factors in Obama Campaign

By [Marcus Baram](#)

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With Sen. Barack Obama on the verge of becoming the first African-American to receive a major party's presidential nomination, racism and potential security issues are emerging as factors in the race to the White House.

In recent weeks, the role of race in the Democratic primaries has been increasingly discussed. And while racist caricatures and jokes about threats against Obama's life have been widely condemned, they seem to reflect an undeniable element of racism that still exists in the country and could play an unknown role in a general election.

"There is no question that the possibility of violence directed at presidential candidates, especially Obama, is the elephant in the middle of the room," says Peter Fenn, adjunct professor of political management at George Washington University, to describe the media's careful coverage of the issue. "There is a hypersensitivity about this issue. And in one sense, there should be because you don't want to put the idea out there. But you also get overanalysis, like with Hillary's comments about RFK [Robert F. Kennedy]."

Last week, Hillary Clinton's comments about the 1968 assassination of Kennedy caused an uproar among those who believe that the candidate wanted to bring up the security issue surrounding Obama.

Fenn says that he was catching a flight at Dulles International Airport last year when an African-American woman told him that Obama shouldn't run. "She said, 'They're going to kill him.' African-Americans are more worried about it."

And polls bear out that perception. Fifty-nine percent of Americans (and 83 percent of African-Americans) said they were concerned "that someone might attempt to physically harm Barack Obama if he's the Democratic nominee for president," according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll from March 2. Twenty-four percent of those polled said they were "very concerned" about that possibility.

The latest controversy centered on a depiction of Obama in the cross hairs of a rifle used that appeared on the cover of Georgia's Roswell Beacon newspaper. The controversy focused on the image, though the story, which included interviews with several white supremacists threatened by Obama's candidacy, reflected a deeper reality.

Thomas Stevenson, a carpenter who lives near Atlanta, told the newspaper, "Some idiot out there's going to put a bullet in that silver-tongued devil and then there'll be a race war. There are some in our movement who are preparing for war, [even] praying for it."

The Beacon was heavily criticized for the image, and the local Holiday Inn announced it would stop doing business with the paper. The newspaper's publisher, John Fredericks, defended the story, saying, "Good, bad or ugly, we tell the truth."

As the African-American presidential candidate who has come closest to the nomination in U.S. history, Obama received Secret Service protection last year at the earliest date ever in a presidential campaign.

After receiving information that caused him concern over Obama's safety in April 2007, Sen. Dick Durbin said that he approached congressional leaders to discuss Obama's security situation. "I knew the crowds were large & but some of the other information given to us, unfortunately, I think, raised a concern among many of [Obama's] friends," Durbin told reporters.

And Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff soon authorized the protection, which consists of three shifts working eight hours each to cover Obama 24 hours a day.

Mark Potok, a civil rights expert at the Southern Poverty Law Center, has been tracking the views of white supremacists for years.

Last February, he noticed an increase in racist attacks and threatening remarks about Obama on the Internet.

"There is plenty of unpleasant stuff out there, "N***** this, N***** that" and it's been going on for the better part of six months," he said.

But since then, the level of vitriol has remained stable. "I don't think there's been any big increase in the kinds of things we're seeing," Potok says, adding that many of the white supremacist sites know that they're being monitored and users tend to be careful about posting violent threats.

Potok passes along violent threats to the Department of Homeland Security, including a recent e-mail sent to the Southern Poverty Law Center that warned: "ATTENTION, IF OBAMA BECOMES PRESEDANT I WILL KILL HIM MYSELF MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT."

Prominent white supremacists, including former Louisiana state representative and Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke, have condemned Obama in subtler terms.

Duke recently issued a statement denouncing Obama for his ties to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the candidate's former pastor who stirred up controversy with his conspiracy theories, and because his "ultimate loyalty" lies with "his fellow African-Americans."

While previous African-American presidential candidates, such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, were the target of racist threats, they were not campaigning in the age of the Internet and they were not nearly as successful as Obama.

The real possibility that an African-American could win the White House in November, along with the anonymity of the Web, which lends itself to expressing extreme views, has galvanized a certain segment of the population, explains John G. Geer, political science professor at Vanderbilt University.

“Is Obama being black raising security issues, the answer is, unfortunately, yes,” he says. “Because there are more people out there, hate groups who are going to make certain kinds of statements and claims that will alert the Secret Service to be on their guard.”

“There is a portion of the population who will be very unhappy about Obama, not due to his policies but simply because he’s black, and there will be even more of an increase in these racist views as the general election rolls around.”

In addition to the hate spouted by extremists, race has become an issue for the candidate in other, more subtle ways.

In exit polls taken after the recent West Virginia primary, two in 10 white voters said the race of the candidate was a factor in their vote, second only to the numbers in the exit poll in Mississippi. Sixteen percent of white voters in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Kentucky and Oregon say that race was an important factor in their vote, according to an ABC News analysis of exit polls from those states.

Obama recognized that race had been an issue in the campaign, particularly after the South Carolina primary, during his speech on race in March. He acknowledged the country’s racial stalemate but asserted that “Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.”

One Obama supporter, the first elected African-American mayor of Macon, Ga., knows all too well about being targeted by racists.

The day after he was elected in 1999, Jack Ellis says he “was out thanking voters on the street and I reached out to shake a white gentleman’s hand. And he looked in my eye and said, ‘A n***** will never be my mayor.’ I told him, ‘I will be the mayor of all the people, including you.’ The last time that happened was in the Army, and I hit the guy in the nose.”

Ellis also received notes laced with violent threats, and racists threw bricks through windows of his campaign office and tossed trash on his lawn.

“The racism was more severe than I anticipated, and it jolted me that it could be so blatant, that some people couldn’t get beyond it,” he says. “There are a percentage of white people in this state and elsewhere who cannot bring themselves to vote for a [black] candidate.”

Ellis, 62, remembers the days of segregation when he was forced to use water fountains labeled “colored,” and he believes Obama will be able to bridge the gaps.

“If race is a dominant part of the campaign, and it seems to be becoming part of it every day, you can’t ignore it,” he says, “but you need to look for people who are right-thinking and who can move beyond it.”

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