

The Obama “Dog Whistle”

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“It’s obvious by now that Barack Obama is treating black Americans like one treats a demented uncle, brought out from his room to be ridiculed and scolded before company from time to time...” – Ishmael Reed in 2008

Every successful politician panders to some degree. It is part and parcel of the theater of running for office in America. Candidates may say that they are adamantly in favor of abortion rights or adamantly against them while we can never be sure that they really care one way or another. If the political wind shifts enough the peace lover can cry out for war or the war hawk may turn into a dove.

An interesting way of deterring how much politicians pander is to observe their behavior as lame ducks. George W. Bush went from quoting scripture on a regular basis to being decidedly less religious during his second term in office. As a soon to be former politician he no longer needed his red state evangelical base.

Barack Obama is no exception to the pander principle. As a black man needing to get votes from white people he had to pander to their racism in order to guarantee victory. During the 2008 election he proved his willingness to do so numerous times. On [Father’s Day](#) that year his screeds against black men culminated in a vicious verbal beating, and at a church no less. He singled out black men for bad behavior, telling them they acted like boys who didn’t care about their children or working or doing anything valuable.

While the audience in his presence was black, the real audience was white. The political slang is “dog whistling.” Just as there are sounds which can be heard only by the canine ear, there are messages tailor made for specific constituencies, though they appear to be made for others.

The Father’s Day speech was the coup de grace, delivering a message to white Americans that they had nothing to fear from Barack Obama. There would be a black face on high but no politics representing the masses of black people. One black man would be seen, but no other would be heard.

The open and none too subtle attacks on black people had subsided somewhat of late. We got the occasional rising tide lifting all boats which meant that we should shut up about our unemployment already or be told that he wasn’t the president just for black people and yes, we should still shut up. Benign neglect was the order of the day after his election. But in one fell swoop, not just POTUS, but FLOTUS delivered a one-two punch to black America.

Both the president and first lady gave back to back commencement addresses to historically black colleges. At Bowie State University in Maryland Michelle Obama told the proud

graduates that they in fact had little reason for celebration. Obviously they got the memo about the importance of education, hence the caps and gowns. Mrs. Obama didn't care because she warned them about the mythical black people who deride the educated as "[acting white](#)." Having resurrected those phantom creations she turned her attention to those misled black children who want to be "ballers" and "rappers." Assuming that her audience had such dubious career plans, they clearly decided to get college degrees as a hedge against failed sports and entertainment careers.

The next day her husband did her one better at [Morehouse College](#) in Atlanta. The poor graduates were not only forced to sit in a driving rain but were also insulted by a rank and ambitious politician. Just as his wife refused to congratulate the young people for their success, the president felt compelled to point out that there are black people who make excuses, and don't take care of their kids, and make bad choices and blah, blah and oh yes, blah. As in 2008, the black people in the audience were part of the stage setting for the real audience, which was totally white.

In case anyone had hopes that the lame duck would feel free to do what his most loyal supporters wanted, he made it clear that no such thing was ever going to happen. Unlike George W. Bush, he isn't changing his tune because he can't run for office again. If the point of his second term policies was lost on anyone (cutting Social Security, claiming the right to kill American citizens, subverting sovereign nations, bringing harsh austerity measures which guarantee recession and unemployment) he made his intentions crystal clear.

There won't be any namby pamby liberalism coming from the Barack Obama White House. He is making every right wing dream that he loves come true and he wants it so badly he will not equivocate one inch in his lame duck term. He isn't backing away from the damage he has already done. He is going to double down and he wants white people to be assured that he is still their guy.

There appears to be no depth too low for black America to fall in the age of Obama. Most of us still worship a man who has nothing but contempt for us, our history and our aspirations. We can be used as pawns in a dirty game and be deliriously happy with the man doing the using. We haven't seen anything yet. The second term will be even uglier than the first.

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