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The State of Black Women in Politics Under the First Black President

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Polyphonic Feminisms: Acting in Concert

The State of Black Women in Politics Under the First Black President

Duchess Harris

History was made in November 2008. Record breaking numbers of voters lined up to vote the first African-American President into office, with Barack Obama handily beating Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, winning 52% of the electoral vote, a clear mandate for change.[1] African-Americans made up 13% of the electorate, a two percent increase from the 2006 elections,[2] and approximately 95% of black voters cast their ballots in favor of Obama.[3] Within that 13%, black women had the highest voter turnout rate among all racial, gender, and ethnic groups.[4]

As the election results were posted, the media and the President-elect himself made grand proclamations about the significance of the election, as well as what it portended for the country's future. *New York Times* writer Adam Nagourney described voters' election of Obama as "sweeping away the last racial barrier in American politics," continuing with a quote from Obama's victory speech in Grant Park, Chicago:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.... It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment, change has come to America.[5]

It would be nice to think that Obama's election was the positive end note to over four hundred years of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and institutionalized racism—that the promise stated by our founders, "All men are created equal," has finally been realized. And there is a certain quintessence that now a black family lives in the White House, a national monument primarily constructed with the use of slave labor. For a nation weary of its own racist history, the Obama administration is a historic marker that many, especially those on the Right, can point to and say, "See, it's over." In fact, many political commentators have gone so far as to say that America has entered a "post-racial" phase with President Obama, its first "post-racial" President.

Black women may beg to differ. And on closer examination, particularly with regards to the status of Black women in the political sphere, the past two years have been a dismal replay of the mistakes made by the much lauded Clinton (the "first black president") administration. That's not to

dismiss the many accomplishments of President Obama. We have the most ethnically diverse Cabinet in history, the successful passage of a health care reform bill, and the military withdrawal from Iraq, all significant achievements. Nevertheless, President Obama and his administration continue to shy away from conversations about race, and seem almost alienated from, or ignorant of, the rich history of Civil Rights activism in general, and of Black women's organizing in particular.

While the Obama presidency began positively, with several positions within the administration offered to Black women during the initial wave of change, since then there have been two incidents comparable to Bill Clinton's betrayals of Lani Guinier and Dr. Joycelyn Elders. President Obama failed to stand up for Press Secretary Desiree Rogers; then, he left Shirley Sherrod (formerly of the USDA) to fend for herself in a crucial and very public incident in which his support could have changed the unfortunate course of events. And remarkably, given the opportunity to appoint two Supreme Court Justices, not a single qualified Black woman moved from the nominee list to face-to-face interviews with the President in the nomination and review processes.

And this speaks to why this president has been a source of disappointment for black women. Yes, there are numerous African-American women in his administration, but few of them have been assigned to positions that have true power. And for those chosen few, the new President seems unwilling to defend them, even in the face of misconstrued or erroneous reports. It appears that the price of having the first African-American President is that he cannot, or will not, address issues of race beyond the vaguest allusions that construe slavery as just another immigrant story, in effect dismissing the context of his singular achievement, which was accomplished only through decades of political struggle by African-American men and women and organized anti-racist activism. Tellingly, even Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson noted then-candidate Obama's alienation from African-Americans, criticizing Obama in 2007 for not bringing more attention to the Jena 6 incident in Louisiana, and again stating in 2008 that Obama seemed to be "talking down to black people."

So it is becoming increasingly difficult to believe that change has come to America in a meaningful way, especially for black women.

The Obama Women

The administration began with such promise. With the election of Obama came the appointment of the most diverse cabinet in history.[6] According to Sam Ali, writing for *Diversity Inc.com*, 30 percent of Obama's cabinet appointments were women and 39 percent were Black, Latino and Asian. Among these appointments were many black women, including Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett (a Chicago colleague of the Obamas, who served as a top advisor on Obama's campaign, then as co-chair of his transition team) and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice (Rice was Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during Clinton's second term). Desiree Rogers (another Obama Chicago colleague) was hired as Social Secretary, and Lisa P. Jackson was made the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (she was the former Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection). Several of these women were the first black or biracial women in their positions: Jackson, Melody Barnes (Director of the Domestic Policy Council), Mona Sutphen (Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy) and Margaret (Peggy) Hamburg (Food and Drug Administration Commissioner).[7] Krissah Thompson, writing for the *Washington Post*, said African-American women occupy about seven of three dozen senior positions in Obama's administration and that the women who are new to the Washington, D.C. environment find a supportive network extended by their predecessors. Those women include

Donna Brazile, political strategist and the first African-American woman to direct a political campaign (Al Gore's in 2000), and Cheryl Mills, who was the first black woman Deputy White House Council, during Clinton's administration. Such a support network is important in an arena that is still largely white and male.

In addition to the appointment of a number of black women to his administration and staff, during his first months in office, Obama took several actions that showed solidarity and support for women. The first bill he signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, which made it easier for workers to sue their employers after discovering discriminatory payment practices, rather than having to report incidents within six months of the first occurrence. The bill changed the initial Supreme Court ruling of *Ledbetter v. Goodyear*, which denied Lilly Ledbetter the right to sue her employer of nearly 20 years after discovering men in her same position received more money than she, because she reported the discrimination more than 180 days after its first occurrence. Obama's signing of the bill allowed workers who discover pay discrimination to sue within six months of learning of the discrimination, regardless of when it began^[8] (although without the passage of the Paycheck Fairness Act, which is currently pending in the Senate and whose passage would update the Equal Pay Act of 1963, women's pay will continue to lag behind men's. The pay gap is even worse for African-American women, who in 2008 made only 61 cents for every dollar men made^[9]).

Less than two months later, on March 11, President Obama signed an executive order to create the White House Council on Women and Girls, headed by Valerie Jarrett, with Tina Tchen, Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, serving as Executive Director. The Council consists of heads of every Cabinet and Cabinet-level agency, and its purpose, according to Obama, is "to ensure that each of the agencies in which they're charged takes into account the needs of women and girls in the policies they draft, the programs they create, the legislation they support."^[10] The White House website has dedicated a section to the Council, where Tchen, Jarrett, and others post regular updates about the effects of the administration's policies and actions on women. Most recently, Obama declared August 26, 2010 "Women's Equality Day," in commemoration of the ratification of the 19th amendment, which granted women the right to vote. In his proclamation, Obama reminded Americans of his administrations' commitment to "...advancing women's equality in all areas of our society and around the world."^[11] These efforts—the bill, the Council, the proclamation—and the diversity of his administration, at least show that Obama keeps women, black women included, in mind. But upon closer inspection, and as time has passed, these acts appear to be merely token gestures made to appease those who bought into the hope and change promised by the Obama campaign.

In November 2009, *Essence.com* posted a "Power List" of 20 black women in Obama's administration (including some who have since left the administration). The slide show presented photos of and blurbs about the "big names," like Jackson, Hamburg, and Jarrett, but the 20 black "Obama women" also included members of the First Lady's staff (Kristen Jarvis, Special Assistant for Scheduling and Travel Aide, and Dana Lewis, Special Assistant and Personal Aide); the Director of White House Events and Protocol, Micaela Fernandez; and Daniella Gibbs Leger, Director of White House Message Events.

While the work these women do should not be underestimated, Travel Aide to the First Lady and Ambassador to the UN or Surgeon General are very different positions. If looking exclusively at black women in the Cabinet or in Cabinet-level positions, the tally of 20 black women in the Obama

administration shrinks to two: Lisa P. Jackson and Susan Rice. Furthermore, in the selection of Surgeon General, the black woman who is in the position now was not the President's first choice. Regina Benjamin was only offered the job after Obama's first choice, CNN's chief medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta, turned it down. So while we see a diverse staff, there is still a telling lack of black women in positions of true power.

In a September 2009 article for *More.com*, Teresa Wilz, Senior Culture Editor at *The Root*, discusses this absence of black women in upper management and executive positions, despite the numbers of highly qualified black women available to serve in such capacities. Regarding the women selected to work in Obama's Cabinet and the White House, Wilz says, "Let me be clear: Not many individuals, black, white, brown or other, achieve that level of power, whether at the White House or at Xerox. And yet there are hundreds of thousands of us, highly qualified and highly educated, available to be tapped."^[12] Of the associate and bachelor's degrees awarded to black students, women earn approximately two-thirds, according to the National Center for Education Statistics,^[13] and between 1996 and 2007, the number of black women getting master's degrees grew by 130 percent, while white women's increase was only 38 percent.^[14]

Krissah Thompson also illuminated the shortage of black women in visible positions of power, citing the Bureau of Labor's statistic that more than 2.6 million black women were in management and professional jobs last year, yet "women and minorities still lack representation in proportion to their numbers on the federal level. In Congress, only 90 members are women, 42 are African-American, 28 are Latino and nine are Asian."^[15] And, from Wilz again:

According to *Catalyst*, a New York-based research firm that studies women in business, African-American women hold only five percent of all managerial, professional and related positions; white women hold 41 percent. Women of color are similarly scarce on corporate boards. And until Ursula Burns was tapped earlier this year to head Xerox, there were no black female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.^[16]

Wilz pointed to the long-held belief in the black community that education was the only way to excel as the reason behind this pool of highly-educated and qualified black women. She blamed their under-representation in upper level positions both on a lack of enforcement of company diversity policies, as well as quotas: "...whenever one of us does manage to break through, her very presence may provide an excuse for keeping other black women out," she wrote.^[17] Frequently, once a company hires one black woman, the feeling is that one is enough, and there is no need to hire another.

Finally, she wrote that black women are rarely hired for or encouraged to pursue positions that put them on an executive track, like sales or profit-related positions. Instead, companies hire them into static positions like community outreach or training jobs. Looking to the Obama administration, we see this trend perpetuated with the appointment of black women to primarily non-Cabinet level positions. And for the few appointed to positions of power, when it came time to defend these black women, the efforts made by the Obama administration were too little (in the case of Desiree Rogers, the former Social Secretary), or too late (for Shirley Sherrod).

Tellingly, the administration did stand up for Supreme Court nominee Elena Kagan, despite concerns regarding her own lack of diversity hiring practices and apparent racial insensitivity.

Appointing Kagan, Overlooking Black Women

Since President Obama has taken office, he has had the opportunity to appoint two justices to the Supreme Court, replacing Justices David H. Souter and John Paul Stevens. In May 2009, he selected Sonia Sotomayor, a Hispanic woman who Clinton appointed to the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, to take the place of Souter. In May 2010, he announced Elena Kagan, Solicitor General and former Harvard Law School Dean, as his choice to replace Stevens. While the appointment of the first Hispanic to the court was a notable and historic accomplishment towards diversifying the Court, it is disappointing that not a single qualified black woman made it past the initial nominee list. This oversight on Obama's part emphasizes Wilz's point on the lack of black women in upper level positions, despite the number of qualified candidates, as does Kagan's own hiring history while dean at Harvard Law School between 2003 and 2009.

Prior to the announcement of Kagan's nomination, civil rights groups, bloggers, and black female attorneys expressed concern about both Kagan's hiring record and her failure to take action against racism within the law school. In a *Salon.com* piece, four law professors from different schools examined Kagan's record, praising her for the number of faculty members she hired. Yet:

"[o]f these 32 tenured and tenure-track academic hires, only one was a minority. Of these 32, only seven were women.... When Kagan was dean of Harvard Law School, four-out-of-every five hires to its faculty were white men. She did not hire a single African-American, Latino, or Native American tenured or tenure track academic law professor. She hired 25 men, all of whom were white, and seven women, six of whom were white and one Asian American. Just 3 percent of her hires were non-white...."[18]

After Duke University's Guy-Uriel Charles, one of the *Salon.com* authors, wrote a blog post expressing the group's concern, the White House released talking points in Kagan's defense. As indicated in the professors' essay, the White House defense does not contest the numbers the essay cites. Instead, it presents the number of visiting professor offers Kagan made, with percentages of how many of these offers were made to minorities and women. Numbers on tenure-track offers made to minorities and women were not included. The authors also point out that at Yale Law School, the Dean (who served at approximately the same time as Kagan, from 2004 to 2009), while hiring only 10 professors compared to Kagan's 32, "...still managed to hire nearly as many women (five of 10 at 50 percent), and just as many minorities (one of 10 at 10 percent) as Dean Kagan." [19]

In addition to the clear lack of diversity in Kagan's hiring record, there has been criticism of Kagan's reaction to a Harvard Law School parody, a skit performed by students and professors in which they "roast" other students. In a guest post on the blog *Feministe*, Diane Lucas, a Harvard graduate and now an attorney in New York, wrote about the parody that took place while she was at the school in 2006 during the time that Kagan was Dean. She describes how the parody portrayed at least four women of color in an offensive manner:

One of my friends who is a very articulate, intelligent, black woman, was made to sound like a Shanaynay-like character from the show, *Martin* (I love Shanaynay—who doesn't? But, really?!). Another woman, who is Cuban-American was depicted as having very large breasts, which were actually balloons that were violently popped during the play. They portrayed another woman, who is Dominican-American and speaks fluent English, as barely speaking a word of English. Another black woman was depicted as being sexually promiscuous with classmates and professors. [20]

Lucas says when students brought their concerns to Kagan, she refused to make a statement or issue an apology for the play. After pressure from students, two other professors organized a meeting to discuss the parody, but the school's effort to create a conversation on race ended there, despite students asking Kagan to implement diversity sessions. Kagan's disregard for legitimate concerns about racism in her school clearly demonstrates a lack of sensitivity and awareness to the experience of minority women, and her inability to find an African-American professor for tenure (but 25 white men) during her time at Harvard further suggests an indifference to the creation of any real diversity in the faculty or the experience of Harvard Law students.

When it became apparent that Obama would move forward with Kagan's nomination, many parties protested. They questioned not only Kagan's diversity record but the dearth of black women considered for the nomination.

And black women made some noise. Following in the footsteps of vocal black women's movements and organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization, on May 9, 2010, 28 women from the Black Women's Roundtable network of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation (NCBCP) sent President Obama a letter, stating their unease regarding Kagan's possible nomination. In the letter, they reminded the President of the important role African-American women played in the 2008 election and stated their concern over Kagan's "...lack of a clearly identifiable record on the protection of our nation's civil rights laws."^[21] The letter continues:

Especially disconcerting is the perceived lack of real consideration of any of the extremely qualified African-American women as potential nominees. While we were very pleased to witness the placement of the Honorable Leah Ward Sears and Judge Ann Claire Williams on the reported lists of potential nominees, there did not appear to be any serious consideration of their candidacy, once again ... Mr. President, the nominations and appointments you make today will be far-reaching, particularly for the Supreme Court. As we continue to promote the legacy of our late founding leader and Co-Convener, Dr. Dorothy I. Height, we will always seek to highlight the concerns of Black women, our families and our communities. Thus, as Dr. Height stated in our previous meeting with your Administration, we believe it is time for African American women to be represented in all sectors of government—including the Supreme Court of the United States, which in its 221 year history has not had a Black woman nominated to serve on our highest court in the land.^[22]

The letter mentioned Justice Stevens' emphasis on the protection of civil rights, saying he should be replaced with someone who holds similar views. The letter was signed by Melanie Campbell (CEO of the NCBCP and convener of the Black Women's Roundtable, "an intergenerational civic engagement network"^[23]) and 27 others. The letter came too late. And the President didn't listen. The very next day he announced Elena Kagan as his nomination, a move that further distanced him from the support of black women's organizations and civil rights groups.

Just two days later, upset NAACP leaders and other legal groups met with Senior Advisor Valerie Jarrett to voice their concern about Kagan's nomination. After the meeting, the Reverend Al Sharpton said Jarrett described how civil rights groups could be involved in supporting future solicitor general and district and appellate judge nominees.^[24] Considering how infrequently Supreme Court nominations occur, the weak response from the Administration was too little, too late. On his blog, even CNN political analyst Roland Martin linked the lack of serious consideration of a black female candidate and the role black women voters played in Obama's election to the

discontent expressed at Kagan's nomination. He pointed to the lack of prominent African-Americans at Kagan's nomination unveiling (only Harvard professor Charles Ogletree, who taught the Obamas and worked with Kagan, and Wade Henderson, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights President were present) and the "lukewarm" press statements on the nomination announcement from the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and the National Urban League as further evidence of African-Americans' general frustration with the Obama administration's refusal to address race.[25]

And that frustration exists for good reason. There were a number of qualified African-American women for President Obama to consider for nomination, in addition to the two who made the list of potential nominees, former Georgia Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears, and Judge Ann Claire Williams, the first African-American judge in the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, nominated by Ronald Reagan. Sonia Nelson, founder and chair of the board of iask, Inc (I Am My Sister's Keeper, an organization dedicated to supporting and encouraging professional black women) provided a short list of a few women she thought should make the list:

...Marian Wright Edelman, longtime President of the Children's Defense Fund and the first black woman admitted to practice in the state of Mississippi in the 1960s; Judge Janice Rogers Brown, who sits on the U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit, and who Obama supported while he was a Senator; Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier, who, despite the controversy when she was nominated by President Bill Clinton to be an assistant U.S. attorney general, is an excellent legal scholar; and Elaine R. Jones, formerly of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, who has three decades of experience as a litigator and civil rights activist.[26]

It is no wonder then that black women are frustrated with the President—especially so since Kagan's nomination and tapping fell between two egregious instances of Obama neglecting to defend prominent black women: Desiree Rogers' resignation after the White House party crashers fiasco and the firing of Shirley Sherrod, USDA's Director of Rural Development for Georgia.

Desiree Rogers

An original "Obama woman," appointed as White House Social Secretary in November 2008, Desiree Rogers is a New Orleans native, Harvard graduate, and a personal friend of Michelle Obama. Rogers successfully promoted what she called the "Obama brand"[27] for a year, making the White House seem like a fun, welcoming place by planning events like an Easter Egg Roll on the White House lawn, inviting local children to trick-or-treat at the White House, and hosting dinners with dance floors and music provided by bands like Earth, Wind, and Fire. She drew criticism for her expensive fashion choices, as well as for attending events like New York Fashion Week, but it was uninvited guests at a White House dinner that resulted in a media fiasco ending with Rogers' resignation.

On November 24, 2009, the Obamas held their first state dinner in honor of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife, Gursharan Kaur. During the event, Virginia socialite couple Tareq and Michaela Salehi slipped past security, even though their names appeared on no guest lists. The couple joined the party, posing for photos with Vice President Joe Biden, and even shaking the President's hand. The security breach led to a Secret Service investigation and heavy criticism of Rogers. According to *The New York Times*, in planning the party Rogers consulted and followed records from two of Laura Bush's dinners, stationing someone at the East Portico of the White

House to ensure guests were on the Secret Service list; at this dinner, however, no one was placed at an outer checkpoint as had been done in the past.[28]

Despite the ensuing investigation, it appeared at first that the administration was standing fully behind Rogers. During a White House briefing, Robert Gibbs, Obama's Press Secretary, in response to a question regarding Rogers' planning, said, "The first family is quite pleased with her performance." [29] When Rogers' resignation was announced at the end of February, barely two months later, she publicly asserted that she felt her work in creating a "people's house" was complete, that it seemed like a good time to examine her prospects in the corporate world and that "the incident at the State Dinner was not a deciding factor ... but it did show me a side of the job and of Washington that I had not seen before." [30]

News of her resignation began leaking before she planned to make it known, [31] and the speed in which her replacement, Julianna Smoot, was announced suggests that her departure was not solely of her own volition (Rogers' resignation was announced on February 26, and Smoot was confirmed as her replacement later the same day).

Writing for *The New York Times*, Peter Baker said that trouble for Rogers began before the Salahi's crashed the White House dinner. She met with Senior Advisor David Axelrod after her May 2009 appearance in *WSJ Magazine*. Axelrod reprimanded her both for referring to the President as a brand and for her lavish dress and jewelry in the spread during an economic recession. Baker wrote, "her profile was deliberately lowered." [32] After the White House security breach and the following public scrutiny of Rogers, she felt that no one in the White House did much to defend her or correct the record, said Baker, quoting unnamed sources. He continued:

After the Salahi incident, these associates said Ms. Rogers was barred by the White House from testifying before Congress or giving interviews or even answering written questions. She was told she could not attend the Kennedy Center Honors, a major annual Washington event. And even her decision to finally resign leaked before she could secure a new job. [33]

Considering her success in planning White House activities—in 2009, she organized 309 events, while there were only 231 events during Bush's final year [34]—and the personal friendship she had with the Obamas, the lack of defense from the President and Mrs. Obama was both surprising and disappointing. Yet upon comparing the Desiree Rogers incident with Obama's overall record on African-American women within his administration, and race in general, the surprise is diminished. In fact, the reaction just seems standard.

Shirley Sherrod

On March 27, 2010, Shirley Sherrod, USDA's Georgia Director of Rural Development, gave a 40-minute speech at a NAACP event. During the speech, she shared her background with the audience, including the murder of her father in 1965 by two white men who were never indicted. She continued by relating an anecdote from her time working as the Director of a non-profit that aided black farmers. She spoke frankly about how Roger Spooner, a white farmer, came to her for assistance and at first she was unenthusiastic about helping him, directing him to a white lawyer so it would at least appear that she tried to help. She then went on to explain that when the lawyer ultimately failed to assist Spooner, she called everyone she could think of to find someone who could help her with the case (this took place over the course of two years). Sherrod said working

with Spooner taught her an important lesson and made her realize that class played as much a role as—if not more than—race in discrimination. She commented:

Well, working with him made me see that it's really about those who have versus those who don't, you know. And they could be black, and they could be white; they could be Hispanic. And it made me realize then that I needed to work to help poor people—those who don't have access the way others have.[35]

Four months later on July 18, conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart posted a 2 minute and 38 second clip of Sherrod's speech on his website, *BigGovernment.com*. Breitbart (also responsible for the edited videos that resulted in the anti-poverty group Acorn's loss of government funding) edited his Sherrod tape so it sounded as though Sherrod ended her aid to Spooner when she sent him to the white lawyer because she wasn't going to do all she could do for a white man. He also misrepresented the story as taking place while Sherrod was in her position at USDA. Breitbart used this doctored video, taken out of context, as proof that the NAACP—who had recently criticized the Tea Party, an extreme right wing movement, for racism among its followers—was itself a racist organization that approved of their guest speaker's unfair treatment of a white man.

Breitbart posted his video at 11:18 AM on July 19, 2010.[35] In the following hours, FOX News ran the video, posting it online and calling for Sherrod's immediate resignation. Conservative talk show host Bill O'Reilly taped his show that afternoon, discussing the "news" revealed in the video. By the time it aired that evening, Sherrod had resigned after receiving three phone calls in her car from Cheryl Cook, Deputy Under Secretary at USDA. Sherrod said that on the third call, Cook asked her to pull over and submit her resignation via her Blackberry because Sherrod was going to be on Glenn Beck that evening.[37] Even the NAACP didn't pause to ask questions about the source of the video. That evening, President Ben Jealous said on Twitter, an online social forum, "Racism is about abuse of power. Sherrod had it at USDA. She abused a white farmer because of his race. NAACP is appalled." [38]

By the next day, it became apparent that Sherrod had been wronged. In an interview with CNN, she explained that the story she told in the video took place 24 years ago and that she had worked with the Spooners to save their farm. When asked why she didn't tell the USDA this when they called her, she said, "I did ... but they, for some reason, the stuff that Fox and the Tea Party does is scaring the administration." [39] That evening, Democratic strategist Donna Brazile said on CNN that she had listened to the entire tape and that it had been taken out of context. By Wednesday afternoon, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack apologized, admitting that he had acted too quickly in ordering Sherrod's resignation. He asked her to return to USDA in a new position, but she demurred, saying she did not want to be entirely responsible for solving the department's race problems (Vilsack later offered her a different, outreach position at the USDA, but she again declined, saying the events that led to her resignation left "a sour taste." [40]) The NAACP also issued a statement saying that it had been "snookered by Fox News and Tea Party Activist Andrew Breitbart." [41] President Obama called Sherrod on July 22, 2010 to personally apologize. President Obama said that he thought Vilsack was being sincere both in his apology and his job offer. In interviews, Sherrod had expressed her belief that she deserved a call from Obama, but did not think he owed her an apology. She remarked:

I'd like to talk to him a little bit about the experiences of people like me, people at the grass-roots level, people who live out there in rural America, people who live in the South.... I know he does not have that kind of experience. Let me help him a little bit

with how we think, how we live, and the things that are happening.[42]

What Sherrod said here emphasizes a key issue that came into play in her forced resignation: Obama and his staff either lack the experience and point of view of African-Americans, or the courage to consider that experience and say anything about it. Despite his own racial background, the first African-American President seems to have little to say on matters regarding race, and fumbles every opportunity to provide leadership on the issue. In an op-ed column, Maureen Dowd suggested that anyone with knowledge of the civil rights movement would have recognized the name "Sherrod;" the Reverend Charles Sherrod was a civil rights leader who co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He is Shirley Sherrod's husband. Dowd quoted South Carolina Congressman James Clyburn, who said he didn't think a single black person had been consulted before the decision to fire Sherrod was made, and Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, who said, "The President needs some advisers or friends who have a greater sense of the pulse of the African-American community, or who at least have been around the mulberry bush." [43]

Sherrod's forced resignation brings to mind Lani Guinier's and Dr. Joycelyn Elders' snubs by the Clinton administration. Sadly, years later, little has changed, even under America's first black President. Granted, Obama was not directly responsible for Sherrod's expulsion. He only spoke with Sherrod on Thursday, two days after the full story was revealed, because he could not reach her Wednesday evening. Nevertheless, by missing several opportunities to fill his administration with a balanced group of people who could provide key insight in real time, Obama suffers the appearance of being out of touch with his core constituency in political skirmishes that should be child's play to any Democratic President, like why it might be unwise to so hastily dismiss someone based on a video publicized by a man who had previously used falsified evidence to support a Right Wing agenda. So who in Washington *did* come to Sherrod's defense? Donna Brazile—a black woman. Perhaps if a few more black women were in decisive positions within the Obama administration, Shirley Sherrod could have been spared the shoddy treatment she received, and the only embarrassed parties would have been the pundits at Fox News.

But then throughout his campaign and administration, Obama has tried to avoid any discussion about race, creating the space for the right to not so subtly play on the country's racist sentiments (who can forget Rush Limbaugh playing *Barack the Magic Negro?*). Bob Herbert wrote in a column about the Sherrod incident, "...President Obama seems reluctant to even utter the word black." [44] CNN political analyst Roland Martin discusses the Obama administration's avoidance of race conversations in his blog post on Kagan's nomination, saying, "...[Obama's] White House has been especially scared of touching anything dealing with race," because the President can't be perceived to favor African-Americans. [45] The fear is obvious when we look at how quickly Sherrod was pushed out of her job as a result of the accusations of racism from the conservative media. Said author and professor Ricky L. Jones, "If anything, [Obama's] horribly detached, 'I'm above it all' approach to race emboldens the mean-spirited xenophobes who long for the 'purity' of antebellum America." [46] Again, the Sherrod case proves this point—were conservatives not so aware of the Obama administration's reluctance to address race, would Breitbart have made such an impudent move? In her column, Dowd said:

The President appears completely comfortable in his own skin, but it seems he feels that he and Michelle are such a huge change for the nation to absorb that he can be overly cautious about pushing for other societal changes for blacks and gays. At some

level, he acts like the election was enough; he shouldn't have to deal with race further. But he does.[47]

The President proved Dowd's point when he commented on Sherrod's forced resignation in a speech he gave at the National Urban League Centennial Conference on July 29, 2010. He agreed that people should have frank discussions about "...the divides that still exist—the discrimination that's still out there, the prejudices that still hold us back...",[48] but he says these discussions should happen "...not on cable TV, not just through a bunch of academic symposia or fancy commissions or panels, not through political posturing, but around kitchen tables, and water coolers, and church basements, and in our schools, and with our kids all across the country." At water coolers and kitchen tables? So apparently Americans should talk about race, and the President may do so as well, but not in public forums? And when it comes to healing the 400+ year racial divide, and addressing the increasingly racist fever demonstrated by the extreme right, leadership, particularly by this country's first African-American President, is not required.

The White House may not want Obama to be seen as favoring African-Americans, but he neglects them at his political peril because it was African-Americans, and especially African-American women, who helped to elect Obama to the White House. There is no doubt that we want him to succeed. Even after the unfair treatment Sherrod received from the administration, she said, "We love him. We want him to be successful because we feel he thinks in some ways like we do." [49] Black leaders have tread softly in their criticism of Obama, fearing condemnation from their supporters and the White House, said Martin, but with Kagan's appointment and then Sherrod's dismissal, the feelings of love and the hesitation to criticize the President may be subsiding. The Black Women's Roundtable voiced their disappointment with Obama for once again overlooking qualified black women in his Supreme Court nomination choice. Sherrod, while professing her wish for the President's success, voiced her opinion on his lack of understanding of the experience of black women ("people like me"). [50] If Obama is not ready to address his "Black Woman problem," [51] as freelance journalist Jeff Winbush calls it, by showing them some of the love they've given him, the least he could do is acknowledge the racism that clearly still exists in America, even under a black President, and demonstrate leadership on the issue of racism at the national level.

American Racism 2.0

And that leadership is sorely needed. While it may be ironic that our first black President, who was able to mobilize the most impressive grassroots campaign in history, seems averse to open discussion of race or addressing the concerns of organized grassroots black rights organizations, a glimpse of this alienation was perhaps never more apparent than candidate Obama's carefully phrased statements surrounding the events of the racially charged Jena Six incident in Louisiana, which led to some of the largest Civil Rights protests in the twenty-first century.

When six black high school students in Jena, Louisiana were arrested after a school fight with a white classmate who suffered a concussion and multiple bruises, they were charged with conspiracy, attempted second degree murder, and faced up to 100 years in prison without parole. The fight was the result of black students sitting under a tree that was typically occupied by the white students; the following morning three nooses were found hanging from a tree. Ensuing tensions led to the confrontation.

Before the mainstream media picked up the story, it simmered for months in the online sphere of

African-American bloggers, eventually leading to signed petitions and the largest organized Civil Rights protests in years. The tradition of anti-racist activism had now made the leap to the twenty-first century, empowered by social media as Reverend Al Sharpton noted, "Ten years ago this couldn't have happened.... You didn't have the Internet and you didn't have black blogs and you didn't have national radio shows. Now we can talk to all of black America every day."

Fellow Democratic candidate, Senator Hillary Clinton, speaking out on the case at an NAACP banquet in North Charleston, South Carolina, forcefully said that "scales of justice are seriously out of balance for black Americans," and that, "There is no excuse for the way the legal system treated those young people."

In sharp contrast, Senator Obama released a maddeningly reductive statement that "Outrage over an injustice like the Jena 6 isn't a matter of black and white. It's a matter of right and wrong."

By effectively sidestepping the issue of race at the heart of the incident, Obama demonstrated a willingness to put the tactical considerations of his campaign over progress for racial justice in this nation, a theme that continues through the policies and appointments of his current administration. At the time, Jesse Jackson accused Obama of "acting like he's white," and it was a group of African-Americans who openly heckled candidate Obama at an appearance in South Florida, holding aloft a banner "What About the Black Community Obama?"

And there's good cause for concern. A closer examination of Senator Obama's campaign reveals the underlying reasons that President Obama doesn't address issues of race. In a February 2008 article on the *Huffington Post*, Jeff Chang writes:

One quote should raise worries. Here's his top advisor, David Axelrod, who seems to suggest that the campaign still views even African-Americans more as emergent—useful for votes and campaign donations—than insurgent—needing to be considered carefully in agenda discussions. "He believes you can have the support of the black community, appealing to the pride they feel in his candidacy, and still win support among whites," Mr. Axelrod said.

In essence, President Obama doesn't have to provide leadership on issues of race because he believes he can take the support of African-Americans for granted, and distancing himself from the language and history of Civil Rights activism in fact makes him more appealing to white voters who can only tolerate a "post-racial" President. It is the fear of losing the white voter that explains Obama's curious distance from the black community in general, and black women in particular. This fear explains why the Obama administration can't possibly appoint, or seriously consider, a qualified black woman for a Supreme Court nomination. And it explains why his administration is so quick to demand the resignations of black women at the faintest hint of failure or scandal. Obama's success is so tied to the white voter that during his campaign, he was reluctant to make even Michelle a central figure. It was his black advisors who pushed strongly for her inclusion: "It took Barack a while to agree, [b]ut we told him she had to be the one to confront the myths and fears of black voters."

The fact that the President himself couldn't confront the myths and fears of black voters speaks volumes. Perhaps he feels that America isn't ready to engage publicly in the kinds of conversations necessary to resolve racism, that he's pushing the boundary as far as he can just by occupying the Oval Office, and that by creating a more diverse staff at a lower level, less influential positions in his

administration, there will be a gradual move towards diversifying higher levels of power. But he should take note of history when it comes to failing to address racial injustice in a substantive way. When African-American communities feel alienated, they organize and create their own power base; it was this alienation that led to the Civil Rights movement in the 60s, it led to the creation of the National Black Feminist Movement in 1973, and it has led in 2008 to the creation of a new initiative that will, for the first time in history, grade presidential administrations on how their practices and policies affect African-Americans.

Presidential Accountability Commission and Looking Ahead

In 2008, at its State of the Black World Conference in New Orleans, the Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW) announced a new initiative: the Shirley Chisholm Presidential Accountability Commission (SCPAC), named in honor of the first black woman elected to Congress and the first black woman to seek the Democratic nomination for President. The Commission's members will grade presidential administrations on how their practices and policies affect African-Americans. The Commission is comprised of 11 members, including Syracuse University professor Dr. Boyce Watkins, and Dr. Julianne Malveaux, President of Bennett College for Women. Said Richard Adams, Chairman of the Board of IBW and Convener of the Commission:

The Shirley Chisholm Accountability Commission was not organized to react to President Barack Obama. As we indicated when the idea of the Commission was announced at the State of the Black World Conference, we need a mechanism that can monitor progress on the Black Agenda, no matter who occupies the White House. We finally have a structure that can fulfill that function in Black America.[52]

Of course, because of timing, the Obama administration will be the first to receive a grade from the Commission. In October 2009, talking to *Essence.com*, Dr. Malveaux shared a story of Franklin D. Roosevelt telling civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph and other black leaders concerned about jobs for African-Americans to "raise enough hell" so that Roosevelt had no choice but to address their needs.[53] She related the anecdote to the Commission and Obama: "He's our brother, and he gets it, but we're not his only constituency. He's not the President of Black America. We have to make him do right. He's not going to do right just 'cause. We've got to make him." [54]

In full disclosure, I am also a member of the Commission. It is our hope that the work of the Commission and letters like that of the Black Women's Roundtable will begin the hell-raising that needs to be done in order to get President Obama's attention, force him to address race, and compel him to create policies that clearly assist African-Americans. On June 18, 2010, the inaugural meeting of the Commission was held, featuring a discussion entitled, "Black America: The Economic State of Emergency," in which the problem of joblessness and unemployment in African-American communities was addressed. An issue that sadly, has not been covered by any major media outlet, championed by any presidential appointee, or even mentioned by the President himself.

Final Thoughts and Future Projections

In his 2008 inaugural speech, Obama said, "We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." But ironically for African-Americans, and black women in particular, the administration has not been as inclusive of the "we" that we had assumed it would be. Instead, in America's first black President, we have someone who is paralyzed at the very mention of race, we

have someone who is more concerned about appearing partial than providing leadership to a still racially divided nation, and we have someone who is unable to even defend himself in the face of egregious racist slurs, preferring to be "above it all" while letting his political opponents slay his popularity by tapping into the latent xenophobic and racist fears that have long plagued this country. His appointment of Sonia Sotomayor suggested a serious effort at diversifying the government, and immediately following his election, Obama's appointment of numerous black women to staff and cabinet positions within his administration seemed like the first rewards for the support African-American women gave him. Eleanor Holmes Norton, in speaking of Valerie Jarrett's authority, euphorically stated, "I'm not sure there's ever been a black woman who has enjoyed as much of the President's confidence as Valerie Jarrett. She has not been compartmentalized and is used in a variety of ways that I think is a first. The Obama women are a sign of how far we've come."^[55] But Obama's lukewarm and slow responses to the resignation of his Press Secretary and Sherrod's firing, and the exclusion of black female candidates for Supreme Court consideration, suggest the importance of those early appointments has been forgotten.

Perhaps Teresa Wilz's idea of trickle-down improvement is shared by Obama. She suggested that the mere sight of these successful black women in Obama's cabinet will make the notion of an educated, African-American woman less unusual, more mainstream. Based on Obama's aversion to talking about race, it seems that he is also hoping for the trickle-down effect, but Malveaux is right—we must force the conversation. The Shirley Sherrods, Desiree Rogers's, the Leah Ward Sears's and all the other black women who supported Obama in his campaign are ignored at the peril of his political future. If this is truly the post-racial America we were promised in 2008, then qualified black women should be sought for positions of power, and when attacked, should be defended with the same fervor of any presidential appointee. If this is truly a postracial America, there should be no fear or aversion to discussing issues regarding racism at a national level.

In other words, if this is truly a post-racial America, Mr. President, prove it.

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[Return to Top](#)

[Return to Online Article](#)

[Table of Contents](#)