

Two Speeches on Race

Of the two speeches discussed here, Senator Barack Obama's speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, is available at www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obama_53.php and Abraham Lincoln's at the Cooper Union in New York on February 27, 1860, is available at showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/cooper.htm.

Garry Wills

Two men, two speeches. The men, both lawyers, both from Illinois, were seeking the presidency, despite what seemed their crippling connection with extremists. Each was young by modern standards for a president. Abraham Lincoln had turned fifty-one just five days before delivering his speech. Barack Obama was forty-six when he gave his. Their political experience was mainly provincial, in the Illinois legislature for both of them, and they had received little exposure at the national level—two years in the House of Representatives for Lincoln, four years in the Senate for Obama. Yet each was seeking his party's nomination against a New York senator of longer standing and greater prior reputation—Lincoln against Senator William Seward, Obama against Senator Hillary Clinton. They were both known for having opposed an initially popular war—Lincoln against President Polk's Mexican War, raised on the basis of a fictitious provocation; Obama against President Bush's Iraq War, launched on false claims that Saddam Hussein possessed WMDs and had made an alliance with Osama bin Laden.

Neither man fit the conventions of a statesman in his era. Lincoln, thin, gangling, and unkempt, was considered a backwoods rube, born in the frontier conditions of Kentucky, estranged from his father, limited to a catch-as-catch-can education. He was better known as a prairie raconteur than as a legal theorist or prose stylist. Obama, of mixed race and foreign upbringing, had barely known his father, and looked suspiciously "different."

The most damaging charge against each was an alleged connection with unpatriotic and potentially violent radicals. Lincoln's Republican Party was accused of supporting abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, who burned the Constitution, or John Brown, who took arms against United States troops, or those who rejected the Supreme Court because of its *Dred Scott* decision. Obama was suspected of Muslim associations and of following the teachings of an inflammatory preacher who damned the United States. How to face such charges? Each decided to address them openly in a prominent national venue, well before their parties' nominating conventions—Lincoln at the Cooper Union in New York, Obama at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

1.

Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln followed a threefold strategy in his speech, arguing (1) that he was more observant of the Constitution than were his critics, and (2) that Republicans were more conservative than their foes

(here he addressed the John Brown issue), and (3) that he was not opposed to the judgment of the Supreme Court but to its information (here he addressed the *Dred Scott* issue).

The Constitution

Making a refrain of Stephen Douglas's contention that "the fathers" understood slavery "as well as, or better than, we do," Lincoln admitted that the Constitution made it impossible for the federal government to tamper with slavery where it existed, in the states. But Douglas and others imported into the Constitution a prohibition of their own invention—against federal control of slavery in territories not yet admitted as states. With law-



Barack Obama delivering his speech on race at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, March 18, 2008

yerly precision Lincoln proved that—before, during, and after framing the Constitution—"the fathers" did actually prohibit or limit slavery in the original (Northwest) territory and in subsequent territorial acquisitions. It was unfair, Lincoln said, to accuse Republicans of disobeying a constitutional requirement that never existed.

To conclude his appeal to the fathers, Lincoln said that he was not advocating a blind submission to what had gone before—that would preclude all chances for progress or improvement, for benefiting from "the lights of current experience."

[But] what I do say is, that if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers in any case, we should do so upon evidence so conclusive, and argument so clear, that even their great authority, fairly considered and weighed, cannot stand; and most surely not in a case whereof we ourselves declare they understood the question better than we.

In accord with this view, Republicans observed the Constitution even when they disapproved of the result—protection of slavery in the states: "Let all the guarantees those fathers gave it, be, not grudgingly, but fully and fairly maintained." Southerners had no right to demand, over and above this observance of the Constitution, a submission to what was never contained in the document. The claim that Republicans were extremists was made by men who were themselves innovators.

What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against

the new and untried? We stick to, contend for, the identical old policy on the point in controversy [slavery in the territories] which was adopted by "our fathers who framed the Government under which we live"; while you with one accord reject, and scout, and spit upon that old policy, and insist on substituting something new.

John Brown

To brand Republicans as revolutionaries, Southerners blamed them for John Brown's armed insurrection to free the slaves—though no formal member of the party had been identified as a supporter of Brown.

If any member of our party is guilty in that matter, you know it

or you do not know it. If you do know it, you are inexcusable for not designating the man and proving the fact. If you do not know it, you are inexcusable for asserting it, and especially for persisting in the assertion after you have tried and failed to make the proof. You need to be told that persisting in a charge which one does not know to be true, is simply malicious slander.

Lincoln dismissed Brown's raid as "absurd" and feckless:

It was not a slave insurrection.... In fact, it was so absurd that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed.... In the present state of things within the United States, I do not think a general, or even a very extensive slave insurrection, is possible.

The slaves lacked the means of communication, supply, organization, and assistance that would be required. So raising a general panic over John Brown was practicing the politics of fear, making Republicans' foes the real extremists.

Dred Scott

Lincoln, while denying a general disrespect for the Supreme Court, said that the Court erred in its *Dred Scott* decision, not by illicit opining on the facts, but from an initial misapprehension of what the facts were. The Court asserted that "the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution." Using the

skills at definition that made him so clear and convincing before juries, Lincoln spelled out what that statement meant:

[The Justices] pledge their veracity that it is "distinctly and expressly" affirmed there [in the Constitution]—"distinctly," that is, not mingled with anything else—"expressly," that is, in words meaning just that, without the aid of any inference, and susceptible of no other meaning.

Lincoln points out that slaves are never called property in the Constitution—they are not even called slaves. They are referred to only as "persons" who perform a "service or labor." This is hardly a distinct and express statement of property in them.

The Court might have had an argument if it had claimed that an inference could be drawn about slavery. It had no right to assert a distinct and express grant of power. And will Southerners dismantle the Union on an inference?

Under all these circumstances, do you really feel yourselves justified to break up this Government, unless such a court decision as yours is, shall be at once submitted to as a conclusive and final rule of political action?

The Southerners thus prove that they are the radicals and extremists:

Your purpose, then, plainly stated, is, that you will destroy the Government, unless you be allowed to construe and enforce the Constitution as you please, on all points in dispute between you and us. You will rule or ruin in all events.

Lincoln advises Republicans, by contrast, to grant all the good faith that they can to the other side. "Let us calmly consider their demands, and yield to them if, in our deliberate view of our duty, we possibly can." But Republicans have a right to expect a reciprocal respect for their own just demands. The Southerners, far from doing this, demand that Republicans change not only their arguments but their views and values:

Thinking [slavery] right, as they do, they are not to blame for desiring its full recognition, as being right; but, thinking it wrong, as we do, can we yield to them? Can we cast our votes with their view, and against our own?

Threatened with destruction of the Union, Lincoln urges his fellow Republicans: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it."

2.

Barack Obama

Obama has labored under prejudices at least as severe as those against Lincoln. Lincoln was considered uncouth, uneducated. Obama was vaguely considered un-American because of his foreign upbringing, his exotic background, his very name. His middle name is Hussein—the given names of both his father and his grandfather: a common name in much of the world; a name not exclusively given to Muslims or defining its bearer in religious terms,

Natural Wonders

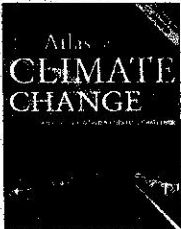


Trees

A Visual Guide

TONY RODD AND JENNIFER STACKHOUSE

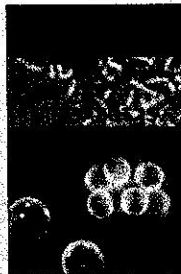
Beautifully illustrated and designed, this gorgeous book explores the world of trees—from the world's great forests to the lifespan of a single leaf. With clear diagrams, illustrations, and intriguing sidebars, this unique volume is a complete visual guide to the magnificence of the arboreal world.



The Atlas of Climate Change

Mapping the World's Greatest Challenge
KIRSTIN DOW AND THOMAS E. DOWNING
Revised and Updated Edition

Rigorous in its science and insightful in its message, this atlas examines the causes of climate change and considers its possible impact on subsistence, water resources, ecosystems, biodiversity, health, coastal megacities, and cultural treasures.



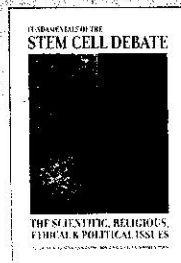
Life as It Is

Biology for the Public Sphere

WILLIAM F. LOOMIS

"Wide-ranging, easily accessible and thought-provoking... This profound and beautifully explained celebration of life deserves wide readership."

—*New Scientist*



Fundamentals of the Stem Cell Debate

The Scientific, Religious, Ethical, and Political Issues

KRISTEN RENWICK MONROE, RONALD B. MILLER, AND JEROME S. TOBIS, EDITORS

"The book is well-informed, sophisticated, and attends to the moral and scientific complexities of stem cell research, rather than sweeping them under the rug."

—Jason Scott Robert, author of *Embryology, Epigenetics, & Evolution*



Skin

A Natural History

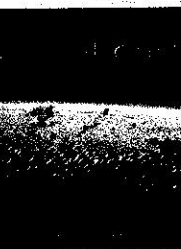
NINA G. JABLONSKI

New in Paperback—"Jablonski's fascinating book is as all-encompassing as skin itself."

—*Financial Times*

"Jablonski shows us that skin, be it thick or thin, is the true mirror of the soul."

—*Science*



Undermining Science

Suppression and Distortion in the Bush Administration

SETH SHULMAN

Updated Edition with a New Preface

"Exhaustively sourced and researched, Shulman's book leaves no doubt that the integrity of government research is under attack... A work of timely muckraking."

—*Discover Magazine*

Planet Earth

As You've Never Seen It Before

ALASTAIR FOTHERGILL

Foreword by David Attenborough

"Read this book and you may never think of Earth the same way again."

—*Alaska Airlines Magazine*

At bookstores or www.ucpress.edu

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

but one that sets him apart in exploitable ways.

Obama began his speech as Lincoln had, with an appeal to the Constitution. The editor of the law review at Harvard, he had been a respected teacher of constitutional law at the University of Chicago. In addressing the Constitution, he knew what he was talking about. Lincoln, while professing obedience to the Constitution, said that this did not preclude its improvement from "all the lights of current experience." Obama went further, saying that the preamble's call for "a more perfect union" initiated a project, to make the Constitution a means for its own transcendence. This was a view Lincoln articulated often. The founding fathers, he said,

meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated.

As Obama put it in his speech: "This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected." This is possible, however, only if people concentrate on the goals that unite them rather than the grievances that divide them. He admitted that the grievances are real—on many sides, not just one. Blacks must deal with the legacies of slavery and segregation, but whites have their own discontents:

When they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

While conceding that many kinds of grievance are in play, Obama had primarily to deal with the expressions of black anger that he was familiar with from his days as a community organizer in Chicago, from racial feelings which he had encountered in his own family and in his own church. Especially in his church.

Jeremiah Wright

Jeremiah Wright was Obama's John Brown. Lincoln had to dissociate himself from the fiery and divisive Brown. He did so, and called attempts to link him with Brown "malicious slander." But some thought that he did not go far enough in denouncing Brown. Lincoln did not call him a fanatic or insult those who sympathized with him. He said Brown's attempt was "absurd" because it could not work. The reason he was so circumspect is not far to seek. Though he said no Republican was officially connected with Brown's raid, many Republican sympathizers favored Brown, including such respectable figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson. In fact, the particular hero of Lincoln's own law partner, William Herndon, was the Unitarian minister and reformer Theodore Parker, who secretly helped fund Brown. Lincoln had carefully avoided contact with Parker, an outspoken abolitionist. But he clearly knew and liked his work, es-

pecially his often used formula for democracy—government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Lincoln's political responsibility was not to inveigh against abolitionists, but to take the practical steps possible toward opposing slavery. In this situation, he pleaded with each side in the dispute to respect the good faith of the other side and work toward acts that would be both in accord with the Constitution (as it then existed) and respectful of the moral objections of those opposing slavery. As Lincoln would not denounce those sympathizing with Brown, Obama did not reject the black community that felt a sympathy (though not an agreement) with Reverend Wright. This was especially important to some blacks because Wright's main message was that blacks



Abraham Lincoln on the day of his address at the Cooper Union, New York City, February 27, 1860; photograph by Mathew Brady

should achieve their own goals without begging for a handout from whites. Obama, who had seen the results of this message in his community organizing, rightly said that this is a particularly American approach:

It means taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism: they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Ironically, this quintessentially American—and, yes, conservative—notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright's sermons.

It is clear that Reverend Wright's church, which was fully supported by the Church of Christ's white national leadership, was much more than the wild statements of its former pastor. Some suggested that any decent person would storm out of a church that had known such a pastor. But many decent persons, and not only blacks, had refused to do just that—and such people were also being denounced. Martin Marty, the respected church historian at the University of Chicago, had often attended Wright's services and found inspiration there. In some ways, Marty is to Jeremiah Wright what Emerson was to John Brown.

Obama denounced the specific statements of Wright that were

indefensible. "They expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country." They were "not only wrong but divisive." That is, they hurt the cause of joint progress on which Obama based his campaign. As Lincoln said of Brown, Obama made it clear that Wright's approach just could not work. There was no reason for Obama to analyze all of Wright's statements, much less to defend them. But many blacks found them less offensive than whites did. The charge that AIDS was a white plot against blacks is obviously unjustified, but to some blacks it did not seem crazy, since their accurate oral history remembers a time when syphilis went untreated among blacks so as to study its effects. One of the least sensible charges against Wright was the claim of Michael Gerson, President Bush's former speechwriter, that his statement would expose more blacks to AIDS. Wright's aim was clearly apotropaic—to warn blacks off from anything suspected of white exploitation. It reminded me of the way the pacifist David Dellinger used to shout back on a bullhorn at antiwar demonstrators calling for violence—he said, "Pay no attention to those calls, they are coming from police provocateurs."

But if Obama did not go into the specific outrages of Wright, his criticism of him was profound and instructive. He praised the concern for the community that Wright had shown. That has always been a mark of black religion in America. Unlike the Calvinist stress on individualism, on the private experience of being saved, blacks thought in terms of the whole people being saved—all of them riding on the Ark, all reaching the Promised

Land. This journey of the people is deeply embedded in the spirituals. As Jacob wrestled the angel till the break of day, "and never let him go," so:

*I hold my brudder wid a tremblin' hand;
I would not let him go!
I hold my sister wid a tremblin' hand;
I would not let her go!*

It was this aspect of black religion that impressed Abraham Lincoln, who became an instant friend of the former Sunday school teacher Frederick Douglass. Lincoln's Second Inaugural would eloquently argue that the whole people had sinned in slavery, was being punished together, and would repent and be saved together.

Obama's deepest criticism of Wright was not in terms of personal attack. On that, he would hold his brother with a trembling hand. The problem was that Wright saw the whole people as the black people, while Obama sees the people as the entire nation. Wright did not reach his hand to the wider circle of brothers and sisters. His view of the world was static. He would freeze the Ark's motion, though the spiritual tells us "the old Ark's a-moverin', a-moverin'".

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich

and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.

When Obama listed all the things that are still to be accomplished by a united America, he spoke with the optimism and pragmatism that are American traits. This was not a sappy optimism. With Lincolnian modesty he said:

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.

But the very things that made some think him un-American were what made him most especially American:

I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible.

Obama found grounds for his reasonable hope in the young people joining his campaign. They came to him not because he was a rock star but because they found it exhilarating to escape some of the prejudices that have bound their elders, their families, their churches, their schools. They too reject the static view of America voiced by Jeremiah Wright. One of them, named Ashley, told fellow campaign workers that she joined the Obama effort to work for better health care for women like her mother. When others at the meeting gave their reasons for being there, an elderly black man said, "I'm here because of Ashley." He held his sister with a trembling hand.

Obama's speech has been widely praised—compared with JFK's speech to Protestant ministers, or FDR's First Inaugural, even to the Gettysburg Address. Those are exaggerations. But the comparison with the Cooper Union address is both more realistic and more enlightening. It helps us understand each text better, one in terms of the other, since both speakers faced similar obstacles to their becoming president. Both used a campaign occasion to rise to a higher vision of America's future. Both argued intelligently for closer union in the cause of progress.

Lincoln faced a greater challenge—the threat of national disintegration—and he had to make commensurately greater concessions, like granting the South its claim to constitutional protection of slavery. The extremist in his attic, John Brown, had not only spoken wild words but taken up weapons and killed men. Lincoln was under strong pressures to trash Brown, but he knew this would serve no useful purpose.

In his prose, Obama of necessity lagged far behind the resplendent Lincoln. But what is of lasting interest is their similar strategy for meeting the charge of extremism. Both argued against the politics of fear. Neither denied the darker aspects of our history, yet they held out hope for what Lincoln called here the better "lights of current experience"—what he would later call the "better angels of our nature." Each looked for larger patterns under the surface bitternesses of their day. Each forged a moral position that rose above the occasions for their speaking. □

Tibet: The Peace of the Graveyard

Václav Havel, André Glucksmann, Yohei Sasakawa, El Hassan Bin Talal, Frederik Willem de Klerk, and Karel Schwarzenberg

The recent events in Tibet and adjoining provinces are cause for deep concern. Indeed, the dispersal of a peaceful protest march organized by Tibetan monks, which led to a wave of unrest that was brutally suppressed by the Chinese military and police, has caused indignation all over the democratic world.

The reaction of the Chinese authorities to the Tibetan protests evokes echoes of the totalitarian practices that many of us remember from the days before communism in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed in 1989: harsh censorship of the domestic media, blackouts of reporting by foreign media from China, refusal of visas to foreign journalists, and blaming the unrest on the "Dalai Lama's conspiratorial clique" and other unspecified dark forces supposedly manipulated from abroad.

Indeed, the language used by some Chinese government representatives and the official Chinese media is a reminder of the worst of times during the Stalinist and Maoist eras. But the most dangerous development of this unfortunate situation is the current attempt to seal off Tibet from the rest of the world.



Tibetan nuns protesting in front of the Chinese embassy in Katmandu, Nepal, March 26, 2008

Even as we write, it is clear that China's rulers are trying to reassure the world that peace, quiet, and "harmony" have again prevailed in Tibet. We all know this kind of peace from what has happened in the past in Burma, Cuba, Belarus, and a few other countries—it is called the peace of the graveyard.

Merely urging the Chinese government to exercise the "utmost restraint"

in dealing with the Tibetan people, as governments around the world are doing, is far too weak a response. The international community, beginning with the United Nations and followed by the European Union, ASEAN, and other international organizations, as well as individual countries, should use every means possible to step up pressure on the Chinese government to:

- allow foreign media, as well as international fact-finding missions, into Tibet and adjoining provinces in order to enable objective investigations of what has been happening;

- release all those who only peacefully exercised their internationally guaranteed human rights, and guarantee that no one is subjected to torture and unfair trials;

- enter into a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of the Tibetan people.

Unless these conditions are fulfilled, the International Olympic Committee should seriously reconsider whether holding this summer's Olympic Games in a country that includes a peaceful graveyard remains a good idea. □

—March 24, 2008

Václav Havel is a former president of the Czech Republic, André Glucksmann is a French philosopher, Yohei Sasakawa is a Japanese philanthropist, El Hassan Bin Talal is President of the Arab Thought Forum and President Emeritus of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, Frederik Willem de Klerk is a former president of South Africa, and Karel Schwarzenberg is Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic.