

Grano Series – Race to the White House

The 4th annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the key issues on the 2008 US election from four different perspectives

October 25, 2007

On Barack Obama

Shelby Steele

The following is an edited transcript of Shelby Steele's talk at the Grano Series. Professor Steele is Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute at Stanford University and author of a number of books including 'White Guilt'.

I know your series is on politics and so that's what I want to talk about, primarily focusing on Barack Obama. But I'd like to put him in a little context first, and talk about white guilt and then move more directly into Obama himself.

I think one of the truly great and unacknowledged forces at work in American society today is white guilt. White guilt, I think, comes from this great post-war series of revolutions around the world, not just in America but in India with Gandhi, across Africa and across Asia where Europe was pushed back into its boundaries. In the United States, there was the civil rights movement.

Though many of these wars flew under the flag of communism or nationalism, they were basically wars against the principle of white supremacy—the idea that being white constituted a moral authority in and of itself. If a white man and a black man met on a path in Africa, the black man was expected to carry the white man's baggage.

That was the idea that prevailed for centuries, and so I think most of the revolutions after World War II were against that single idea: the idea of white supremacy. They were in argument with the idea that white supremacy constituted an authority, that it gave whites an entitlement. And so all those revolutions set out to defeat that larger idea of authority. They all succeeded. Every single one of those revolutions prevailed. There's no record of any defeat. White supremacy was defeated *as an authority* around the world.

In the United States, at the height of the civil rights victories in the sixties, the idea that whites were superior no longer carried any weight. This was a marvelous human achievement that has pretty much gone unremarked in the world. The other side, of course, is that once you

acknowledge that white supremacy is wrong, that it is an illegitimate source of authority, and you say, "Oh, we're sorry. We were wrong," then you become stigmatized with that idea. So now, having admitted that racism was practiced, the stigma of being racist falls on whites.

Now any black in America could walk up and say, "You're a racist." There's really no convincing way to say, "Well, no I'm not. I really am not." This circumstance of presumed guilt is white guilt. Living with the presumption of guilt forces whites to act guiltily even if they feel no guilt.

That became an enormous power for black Americans that we still, of course, wield and rely on today, sad to say, and it has changed the very nature of our society: whites are now stigmatized as racist and are in the position of forever having to prove a negative that, "I'm not racist," which of course is impossible to do. We blacks delight in that impossibility and exploit it to its maximum. This is the state of affairs.

Whites have been in this position, I believe, since the mid-sixties where, in order to establish their decency as individuals, their legitimacy as institutions, they had to find a way to conspicuously dissociate themselves from this racist stigma. "No, not me. I'm not racist."

I think much of our domestic policy dealing with race in the United States—all of it, really—is what I call "dissociational" policy. It has no real purpose other than to dissociate institutions from the stigma of being seen as racist.

The Great Society was the first dissociational program. "We're going to end poverty in our time. And we're going to throw billions of dollars at it," and so forth. Well, was the goal at that point really to end poverty or was it to dissociate the American government and society from its history of racism?

Affirmative action is another example. The welfare policies that came out of the late sixties and early seventies whereby the government simply gave out a little better than a subsistence living primarily to blacks, and then asked absolutely nothing whatsoever of them: "Here's money. The only rule you have to follow is that you can't be married." A wonderful incentive to form a stable family life.

Well, how thoughtless. What a mindlessly cruel social policy. Of course, it had a more negative impact on the black family than segregation did. Even slavery was not able to defeat the black family in the way these welfare policies did—Uncle Sam saying, "The man that is in your life is iffy. I'm here every month, first of the month. I'll be there for you. So what would you want him for?" As I like to say, if you instituted that same policy in Pebble Beach, California you'd probably break the family there as well.

The human blindness of these policies makes the point that their purpose was to dissociate the society, the government and its institutions

from the stigma of racism rather than actually help the people who were poor and in need.

Universities must have diversity programs, must have affirmative action programs. They don't care one bit whether they help blacks or not. If you're black, you're going to get affirmative action whether you want it or you don't. It's going to be imposed on you. "If it stigmatizes you, too bad. If it ruins your reputation for excellence, too bad. Its purpose is not you. It's about us. We need to be seen as a legitimate institution and, in order to do that, we have to practice these kinds of dissociational policies."

This is the landscape that someone like Barack Obama enters when he enters American politics. He enters a society that is wracked, not with a genuine guilt of conscience, "Oh, I'm anguished over what happened to blacks"—that's not how white guilt works—but a stigma of racism, a society that must fight and struggle in everything it does, in all of its endeavors, to prove that it is not racist.

I've written some pieces on war and white guilt is even a factor in the way we now fight wars. When we go to war as a society, we're now in the position of having to fight for our legitimacy, our right to go to war, our right to fight, more than we fight to win the war.

What's important is that we establish America's legitimacy; that we're not this old, racist, imperialist Western society beating up on this third world nation of brown people who are weak. If it takes losing the war in order to make this point, then maybe it's better to lose. Better to lose than be judged racist.

White guilt is, I believe, an extraordinarily powerful force and exerts itself in every level of society. I'm going to come back to this in a minute.

So Barack Obama comes on the political scene. Let me talk about him just as a man for a moment, as an individual. The one thing I think that's obvious to most people is that Obama is enormously talented as a politician. Few people have come on the political scene with those kinds of skills, with that ability to articulate complex issues easily, fluidly. There's no other candidate on either side of the aisle who has that ability.

He has written two books. His second book, I think, is just sort of the usual political book but the first book is a marvelous, beautifully written, honest, courageous memoir in which he looks at the most difficult aspects of his life, the deepest conflicts, the beginnings of his family, his abandonment by a father at the age of two, his circumstances of being raised by a white mother and grandparents in Hawaii and so forth. And he looks at all this with the courage that you would expect a really good writer to have. He finds his strength in his honesty. It's a marvellous book and I recommend it to you.

Again, I'm impressed by somebody with that kind of facility, that kind of talent, entering American politics. Certainly his talents are part of what have made him an exciting and charismatic figure in many ways.

Another aspect of Barack Obama that is important is the fact that—like all American blacks—he is at risk of being stigmatized by affirmative action. For example, suppose you see in the paper tomorrow morning that somebody has been appointed superintendent of schools in some city and the face in the picture is black. Instantly, reflexively you say, "Well, of course. Affirmative action. He got the job in part because he's black."

And so then we say, "Well, all right. You know, we have to live with that. That's the way things are." I think that would have been the case for Barack Obama. There was no way for him to avoid the affirmative action stigma. It is an imposed policy. Everybody gets it, even those blacks who don't remotely need it. Bill Cosby's kids get affirmative action and carry the stigma of affirmative action.

So he got it as well. There was nothing he could do about it. But then he did something remarkable. He became the editor of the Harvard Law Review. The only way you can get that position is through merit. This was the birth of the Barack Obama that we know. This achievement separated him from the stigma of inferiority that goes with affirmative action. The Harvard Law Review is rarefied intellectual territory for anybody. Very few political candidates have that in their resume.

That launched his career automatically, instantly. Offers came in from publishers to write books. His first memoir came from that achievement. The publishers said, "You became the editor of the Harvard Law Review and you're black too? Here's a book contract."

It was these two qualities, his natural talent and his separation from affirmative action, that made Barack Obama the first black in American history to plausibly run for the presidency. That is to say, here was somebody who was really in the game, who if things went his way would actually become the president of the United States. Jesse Jackson had run, Shirley Chisholm and Al Sharpton had also run. But everybody knew they were never going to win. They were never even going to get the nomination of their party and, of course, they didn't.

Barack Obama is the first to have a real chance at it. I think the first black in this position was Colin Powell who I firmly believe would have actually won the White House had he chosen to accept destiny when it came to his door, but he didn't. He demurred and so we'll never know.

So Obama is a phenomenon. The stars have aligned to give him a kind of magic and a presence that no other black in American history has ever had.

I'll move away from him for just a minute to talk a little about the existential circumstance of being a minority in any society. If you are a

minority in any society, you are born into a collective experience of insecurity. We all are insecure as individuals. But if you are a minority, you also have a collective insecurity. You are born into a group that is nervous, wary and watchful as it makes its way in a society where it is outnumbered and vulnerable. And so there's going to be a different group psychology for minorities than for the majority. They're going to be looking at each other and thinking, "What my fellow minority does may jeopardize me. And so I've got to monitor him and watch him a lot more closely. I've got to make sure he doesn't step out of line, because if he does he's going to put me at risk." That's the Uncle Tom label, the idea that you are betraying the race.

Well, you don't have to do much in black America today to be an Uncle Tom. We are quick to label each other that way because we are trying to herd everybody into this singular position, this mask, this face that we're going to present to the larger society.

Minorities, by definition, have to wear masks. Inside the group, they figure out a mask that they're going to present to the larger society. Of course, the mask has a purpose: "They have more power than us, but we're going to present a mask that we hope will offset some of that power." Masks try to correct the imbalance of power between minorities and the majority.

So we're always trying to find out what kind of mask we're going to wear. Certainly, this goes back to slavery and segregation in black America. If you live in a society where everybody is more powerful than you, then you obviously are going to present yourself in a way that you hope will be strategic. And the result is that we rarely tell the larger society the truth.

One of my favorite lines in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* comes as the invisible man is being kicked out of college by the college president because he has let a white man see the dark side of black life in Alabama. So the president calls him into his office and he says, "Listen, every nigger in the cotton patch knows you're supposed to lie to a white man. How did you get this stupid?" And then, of course, he says, "Well, you're so stupid I can't afford to have you around here." And he sends him away because he was naïve enough to tell a white man the truth—an unforgivable sin.

There are two great masks in black American history, I believe. One is called "challenging." The other is called "bargaining." The challenging mask appears when blacks stand before whites and they say, "I know you are a racist. You know you are a racist. History proves that you are a racist. Now, you must prove to me that you're not one and here's what I want you to do. I want you to give me affirmative action. I want . . ." and there's a long, laundry list of demands that are then made.

Challengers? The great ones at the moment are Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who are always saying, "I start with the presumption that you're racist. You prove to me that you're not a racist." Well, these are extremely

annoying figures in American life because it's painful and disconcerting to meet someone who doubts your moral character just on the basis of the color of your skin. "You don't know I'm a racist." "Yes, I do." It's that sort of Kafkaesque accusation where the accusation becomes the truth. Then whites frantically try to prove to the Jesse Jacksons of the world that they're not racist—to the point of several billion dollars. \$750 million from Texaco. \$750 million from Toyota. \$400 million from Coca Cola.

The other mask is much more effective for the most part. Bargainers always say to mainstream America, "I will never rub your face in America's odious history of racism. I will never presume that you a racist, if you never use my race against me." Fair deal.

Most white Americans, under the pressure of white guilt, are ever so happy to take that bargain. "Oh, thank you. A black who is going to give me the benefit of the doubt, who's not going to presume that I'm immoral, racist and so forth, but who's going to presume that I'm a decent person before I do anything."

That leads to what I call the gratitude factor. Toward blacks who bargain, whites then have an attitude of, "Oh, thank you. I'm so grateful that I'm going to be given a chance to be a decent person. I don't want to be seen as a racist. I'm not one. I'm so grateful." The gratitude factor rebounds to the benefit of the bargainer, who is then probably going to be held in higher esteem than they otherwise would be.

There have always been great bargainers. One of the first famous ones in the twentieth century was Louis Armstrong, who came along at a time when Jim Crow was entrenching itself. This was a virulently racist society. On the other hand, Louis Armstrong was a genius, was in every way a musical genius. His talent took him out into the larger world.

Well, how do you go out into the larger world that hates people of your color, that sees you as inferior, that despises you, and make a living as a musician? Well, here's what he did. He adapted an exaggerated grin. He always had a white handkerchief around his trumpet. He was always sweating. He bowed way too much, too deeply, too often.

In other words, what Louis Armstrong said is, "I know you people see me as inferior. I'm going to go along with that. I'm going to give you a little gesture of my inferiority, just to put you at ease, just so you will let me come in this hotel ballroom and play my music." That was the bargain he had to make in a racist society. It worked very well. People fell in love with Louis. Virulent segregationists loved Louis Armstrong.

The tragedy, of course, is that a black man of that level of genius, who virtually invented jazz, invented the jazz solo, had to make that offering of inferiority in order to be successful, in order to practice his art. God bless Louis Armstrong. When I was a kid, we held him up—but as I say, the tragedy was that he lived into the era of Miles Davis.

Miles Davis wore a mask too, and it was the exact opposite. He turned his back on the audience. He wouldn't speak. He didn't want even liner notes on his albums. His attitude was, "I'm not an entertainer. I'm an artist." His mask worked well too because, again, this was after World War II. Integration was beginning to happen. America was beginning to acknowledge its history of racism and what an honor it was to go to a nightclub and be cursed out by Miles Davis.

A friend of mine in Monterey is a jazz nut, and every time I see him I hear the story of him being cursed out at Shelly's Manhole back in the sixties by Miles Davis. It's one of the great moments of the man's life. Well, again we see a mask that was designed, that was calculated, that was based on a reading of white Americans and where they were at, what they really wanted. And what genius on Miles's part. He knew white America had changed. He knew they wanted now to think of themselves as liberal and sophisticated. "So I'll curse them out. They'll really dig it." It worked.

Well, those masks still pertain today. The great bargainer of our time is Oprah Winfrey, who's an absolute genius at it. Before her, there was Bill Cosby in the eighties with the Cosby Show. Bill Cosby said, "If you watch my family show every week, I will not embarrass you. I will not shame you. You can watch it in comfort. Do not hold my race against me. I won't hold yours against you." It was a wonderful bargain.

You can always tell bargainers because they sell things very well. People love to put them in commercials. Bill Cosby sold mountains of Jell-O. With Oprah Winfrey, you know every writer longs to have an Oprah sticker on their book. It's just an automatic bestseller. Whatever Oprah says read, people read by the millions.

What happens with bargainers like that, and Oprah is again a good example, is that they tap the gratitude factor in white Americans. White Americans are proud of the fact that they like Oprah Winfrey. That's something you can brag about, that you can feel good about. You can say, "This is evidence that I'm not racist, that the stigma that history tries to put on me is not true. I like Oprah Winfrey. I respect her. I'd love to be her friend. I'd love to know her." And Oprah then respects her audience back.

So over time, a kind of reciprocity develops between the bargainer and white Americans. And that reciprocity intensifies in someone as famous as Oprah Winfrey and it gets to the point where they become what I call iconic Negroes. An iconic Negro is sort of a super bargainer. You feel sorry for people who have to compete with them. Poor Phil Donahue had to compete with Oprah. He had no chance against somebody who has that kind of reciprocity with Americans. Tiger Woods is another example of someone who is a kind of iconic Negro. Michael Jordan, to some extent, is

the same way. These people are obviously very talented, but there's also a reciprocity between them and America and it works very well.

I mentioned all this because Barack Obama is the first person who has tried to take the iconic Negro archetype into politics, into the dirty, muddy, back-alley business of American politics. That's the gamble that surrounds Barack Obama. In America you frequently see "Oprah for President" bumper stickers. But Oprah's not really going to run, not really going to risk all that money on something as lowly as the presidency.

But Barack Obama is doing precisely that. The question is, "Will that model work? Will that bargaining mask—and it is a mask—work?" I think a lot of the appeal of Barack Obama comes from the fact that he is a natural bargainer. Even his interracial background plays a role in that.

He comes from a white mother and a black father, an African father. Whites instinctively know that if he has got a white mother, they can think, "How much is he really going to beat me up with that racist stigma? Because he knows that all white people are not racist." That's a great source of appeal. That's something that makes him much more endearing as a bargainer.

This is his charm, his charisma. He makes whites feel comfortable and hopeful. So he seems to be a transformative political figure, someone who might take America beyond its racial tragedy. He's the guy who might deliver us.

But there's another side to Barack Obama. And again, there's so much gratitude factor at work surrounding him that he becomes almost invisible. It's very difficult to see the real guy. The real man is somebody who was abandoned by his father, almost immediately. He never knew his father. He had met him for two weeks when he was ten. Like many people, one of the driving forces of his life was to conjure this grand image of his father and emulate it, and this propelled him forward. Yet he's driven by a kind of emptiness inside himself because there was, in fact, no father there.

Of course, his father was black and so, if the father was absent, so was the black identity. Here he was, a black kid being raised by a white mother and white grandparents in a white neighborhood in Hawaii. When he was around blacks, they teased him. "You're not really black. You speak standard English and that's not black."

From the very beginning, on the deepest psychic level, Obama has been driven by the need to get to know his father. Yet when he finally learns who his father really was, he is shattered. The man was a drunk. He was a ne'er-do-well. He had several families, children from several different women. He supported absolutely none of them. He failed in his career. And so Obama endured a real, almost psychic, collapse when he learned that this man who he thought was like Martin Luther King was really a rather tragic figure.

He then focused on establishing his black identity even more intensely. The question circling Obama has been, "Is he black enough?" But what does it mean if you're black enough?

Well, ideally it means that there's a kind of transparency; that when people see you, they see blackness. So you are one and the same thing; if you see a drug dealer on the corner who has got the sort of hip-hop regalia on, that's a black guy. There's a human being in there, but what we see is blackness.

Obama wants that on some level. He wants to be completely black. He wants the psychic solidity, the solidarity with other blacks that has always been denied him and is denied him to this day. The first thing Jesse does, when he wants to get Barack Obama mad, is say, "He acts like a white man. He's not really black." And Obama goes crazy because you're touching a very deep wound. So he's in a very difficult position. On the one hand, his inner needs are to have a real transparent racial identity.

On the other hand, America loves Barack Obama precisely for the opposite reason, precisely because he seems to be beyond the need for racial identity. In fact, it is very important to him. This is a man who spent twenty years in a black nationalist church on the south side of Chicago, a church his own mother could never feel comfortable in. So he is a divided man.

Again, on the one hand he appeals very much to whites but, when he does that, there's probably a voice inside him saying, "I'm not being black now. They're going to make me pay." And then, when he goes on the other side and he actually joins churches like this and goes every week and pretends to be super black he's saying, "What about my mother? What about my grandfather? What about my grandmother, the people I love, who raised me, who made me what I am?" They wouldn't be welcome in this church.

The title of my book is *A Bound Man*. How does a true self emerge from that kind of conflict? Very, very difficult. Every time he appeals to blacks—the black identity today being based on challenging—he has to be a challenger. So every time blacks like him, whites don't like him. They back away. "That's not the bargaining deal we bought with you. We don't want to see you in photo opportunities with Al Sharpton. We wanted you to be an anti-Al Sharpton."

If he then goes to whites and says, "Okay. I'm a bargainer and I'm a transformative figure. I'm going to take you beyond all this racial conflict and so forth," blacks stand back and say, "He's not really black. He's not black enough. He's a white man in disguise."

So he's bound again. Either way he goes, he loses. Is there a way out for Barack Obama? Yes. He has to become a man. He has to grow up and tell both white people and black people to go to hell. And he has to

decide what he really believes and who he really is and what his convictions are and what he's willing to stand for and take his chances on.

Is he likely to do that? Sadly, I have to say there's not a lot of evidence to suggest that he is. A lifetime of being caught in a bind like this means that not much attention has been paid to an inner self.

So my own sense is that there is not much of a self there. He doesn't get angry very often, and that's not necessarily a good sign. Oftentimes when you get angry the real stuff comes out, and you get to know who you are a little bit. He never gets angry. And so, again, my sense is that he has paid a price.

Is he alone in this? No. I think in many ways much of my generation of black Americans— his generation of black Americans as well—have been stunted by this boundedness, this conflict between ourselves as individuals and our racial identity. Most of us, in the last forty years or so, have given much more emphasis to our racial identity than to ourselves as individuals and it has hurt us profoundly.

This is the weakest generation of black intellectuals in American history. You compare black writers today to people like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright and James Baldwin, and we're a pretty paltry gang. I think a lot of it has had to do with the sacrifice of self, of individuality we have made simply to be able to say we're black. I hope we can move beyond this.

Has anybody of our generation moved beyond that? Yes. The freest black man in American, I believe, is Clarence Thomas, who wears absolutely no mask for anybody. He is his own man. Do you want to know what Clarence thinks? He'll tell you. You may or may not like it. He's a rare breed but, again, look at the price he pays. White people can't stand him. Black people can't stand him. Blacks say, "You're jeopardizing us." Whites say, "We can't stand next to you because, if we do, then we'll be seen as racist. So you're on your own, buddy."

And he is. And he's strong enough to carry that weight. But look at what sacrifices a minority has to make in modern America simply to be an individual, to think for themselves, to be who they are. That's the larger tragedy and, I think, the Achilles' heel of Barack Obama.