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The Obama Effect: A Radical Rorschach Test

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The Obama Effect

A Radical Rorschach Test



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Watching Barack Obama's presidential victory in November 2008, nearly every observer seemed to grasp the historic importance of the moment. Our nation, born amid ideals of human equality while economically tethered to black slavery—and then for a century more to federally-condoned, nationwide discrimination—had just elected its first black commander in chief. Clearly, America had taken another huge stride toward living out the meaning of its creed. After all, Obama unexpectedly beat Hillary Clinton in very white states like Idaho and Iowa to win his party's nomination. Then he picked up some unlikely victories within the former Confederacy, namely Virginia, Florida and North Carolina, to help him best John McCain in the general election by 7 percentage points. White people cheered, proud to play a role in this welcome sign of racial progress. People of color cried for joy, feeling finally, as Boise's Yvonne McCoy told the Idaho Statesman, a sense of genuine belonging in America. Perhaps all children could indeed become whatever they set their minds to. Four years of video footage showing the black First Family stepping out of the president's helicopter and strolling across the White House lawn has surely helped rewire our brains to perceive American power in a more multicultural package, and to normalize this reality.

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But beyond those moments, can Barack Obama's presidency reveal something deeper about the state of race in America, and even in a place like Idaho? Conservatives such as Dinesh D'Souza suggested in 2008 that an Obama victory meant we need not fatigue ourselves further with such questions; Obama's achievement made continuing complaints of racism bogus and more discussion unnecessary. Though his election sparked a surge of race-related death threats that rattled the Secret Service, we were assured that these were merely the aberrant actions of the lunatic fringe: They did not represent "us."

Genuine disgust at racist behavior generally triggers these quick, reflexive characterizations; but so too do personal desires to be deemed innocent of racism. This longing has particular saliency in Idaho, a state that still struggles to free itself from the 30-year-old stereotype that it tacitly welcomes white supremacists. Two decades of community resistance against the Aryan Nations, which operated a compound in northern Idaho from the late 1970s to 2000, belie the stereotype; nevertheless that history and a marked lack of diversity also formed a unique understanding of race in the state. Racism is easy to spot when manifested in the rare extremes of hooded white robe, neo-Nazi salute, or lynch rope—forms that clearly contrast with the views of most people we know. But by training our eyes only on such stark examples, and then merely dismissing, diminishing and distancing “us” from them, we forgo a chance to move into a more nuanced understanding of ourselves, our state and our nation relative to race. With some help from professional number crunchers, Obama’s last four years can shed considerable light on our situation if we are willing to linger, probe and ponder.

Part I: The National Scene

Back in 2008, polls found Americans wildly optimistic that Obama’s election would dramatically improve race relations. However, numerous studies since have confirmed that his presidency inspired little advancement on that front. Why? Because it has unwittingly exposed and galvanized lingering racial biases, tensions and resentments that normally remain cloaked, often subconsciously, in our post-civil rights society.

Racial tension wasn’t markedly apparent before Election Day, when in Gallup polls an almost equal share of whites said that Obama’s race made him more appealing (6 percent) rather than less (7 percent) as a candidate. Obama received 43 percent of the overall white vote, 12 percent less than John McCain, yet still a hair better than either John Kerry (41 percent) in 2004 or Al Gore (42 percent) in 2000. Does this mean Obama’s race was no real liability?

Knowing that self-disclosing polls about race tend to under-detect bias, Harvard’s Seth Stephens-Davidowitz tracked racist Google searches nationwide to see if areas registering more such activity correlated with places in which Obama underperformed in white votes relative to Kerry. Indeed they did. Calculations revealed that Obama actually lost a net of between 3 and 5 percent of the popular vote nationwide due purely to his race. In other words, if the president had been white, his victory over McCain would have been far more substantial. And, given that over half of modern presidential elections since 1952 have been decided by a 4 percent or less margin, racial bias can still be a game-changer.

Perhaps more shocking is Stephens-Davidowitz’s discovery that Google searches of terms like “nigger jokes” proved to be nearly as frequent nationwide as searches for “Daily Show,” and more common than googling “economist,” “migraine(s),” or “Republican.” Thus, racism is not as fringe as we might wish. This helps explain why both the Romney and Obama campaigns are quietly incorporating racial voting patterns into their 2012 strategies. Race still matters. Though white Americans make up only 62 percent of the population, they comprise 75 percent of expected votes in 2012. Experts have told Romney that he’ll need about 60 percent of the white vote to win the election; Obama will require somewhere between 38 and 40 percent while having to generate considerable enthusiasm and turnout among non-whites to clinch victory. Republican efforts to pass voter ID laws, despite only 86 recorded incidents of voter fraud nationwide between 2002 and 2007, make expedient sense in this context. These laws would mostly stifle those

who tend to vote Democratic and lack driver's licenses, including people of color, the young, the poor and city dwellers who prefer public transit. All told, about 11 percent of American adults are without an authoritative photo ID.

For example, see Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, which tracks this tactic over the centuries.



The same electoral math also reveals why Republicans in 2012 have quietly employed racially coded language to help move economically strained whites, partial to certain Democratic policy positions, into the GOP camp. Calling Obama the "food-stamp president" (Newt Gingrich), or framing his health care law as "reparations" (Glenn Beck), purposefully aggravates racially resentful scar tissue from the post-1960s era for political ends. Reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's use of the term "welfare queens" in the 1980s to paint a fictitious picture of lazy blacks bleeding white taxpayers dry during tough economic times, Romney's television ad charging Obama falsely with trying to gut the work requirements in current welfare laws attempts something similar. This effective tactic actually far precedes Reagan. Stoking racial resentments between struggling whites and people of color in order to poison potential interracial class alliances that might align against powerful entrenched interests has worked repeatedly throughout U.S. history. The fact that politicians still try to bait economically distressed whites with racial suspicions, albeit in coded and deniable "dog whistle" fashion, tells us that focus groups have signaled their continued political effectiveness. This alone confirms that racial tensions continue to boil under the not-so-colorblind surface. Meanwhile, some Republicans warn presciently that, though whites currently control three-quarters of America's eligible votes, rising minority populations are rapidly diluting that power. Thus, alienating non-whites will prove ever more costly in future elections.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing in *The Atlantic*, says, "In having to be 'twice as good' and 'half as black,' Obama reveals the false promise and double standard of integration."



Obama must court minority voters, too, while not ever appearing to give favor, lest he trigger latent white fears that a black president will condone reverse discrimination in a plot to even history's racial score. Indeed, Obama has learned that verbalizing only the mildest hint of empathy with victims of racial injustice, whether they be Trayvon Martin or his friend Skip Gates, sparks virulent charges of racial favoritism from conservatives. Thus, like baseball's Jackie Robinson, he must absorb repeated vocalizations of white racial panic without reciprocating or losing his cool. (Even cursing, as Clint Eastwood's improvised skit at the GOP National Convention made a fictitious Obama appear to do, would be politically unthinkable for the real Obama.) As noted in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, a study by Daniel Gillion at University of Pennsylvania discovered that Obama has actually mentioned race less frequently than any Democratic president since John F. Kennedy. Yet white fears distort perceptions of this reality, providing more evidence that just beneath America's new skin of racial progress festers unhealed racial friction.

Another ongoing study called Project Implicit, spearheaded by Anthony Greenwald of the University of Washington, measures unconscious racial bias and how this affects not only presidential elections but also perceptions of candidates and issues. Results from the Project Implicit tests, which anyone may take online, show that over half of eligible white voters exhibit automatic though unconscious "white preference." Unwitting involuntary racial bias occurs regardless of political party or whether one claims to be racially egalitarian (though, in general, conservatives exhibit stronger pro-white racial preferences than liberals, says Greenwald). The political impact here involves unconscious increased favor among many whites toward conservative and white candidates as well as their issues. Another scholar, Michael Tessler, even tested to see if Obama's race affected people's perceptions of his dog, Bo. Sure enough, respondents with implicit white preferences tended to think less of the dog when they knew it belonged to Obama than when they were led to believe it was Ted Kennedy's. This has implications for how Obama's race affects perceptions of all policy issues tied to him, including health care. Tessler

and others have suggested that everything he touches becomes racialized in a way unseen when white candidates say or do the same thing. Again, this reveals not only unconscious white preferences, but an underlying white panic about what a black person in power might do to negatively affect whites.

The studies cited above work hard to separate these reactions from purely partisan rancor or economic stresses. Race alone still matters. Though America has clearly progressed, race continues to shape our motives, fears and preferences, all of which operate within a historical memory that binds us together. Obama's mere presence in the White House has flushed more of these concealed and subconscious dynamics out into the open, despite his pragmatic efforts to defuse them. And these racial dynamics involve far more than Tea Party signs portraying Obama as a witch doctor with a bone through his nose, or the Birthers who deny that America even has a legitimate black president.

Part II: The Idaho Scene

What can Idahoans' reactions to the Obama presidency tell us about racial consciousness in the Gem State? Idaho's struggle against the Aryan Nations and to repair its tainted image still affects how locals deal with questionable anti-Obama protests, as well as how the nation sees Idaho. When Idahoans have lobbed racial threats or slurs at Obama, they've made international news, and served as media proof-points that Idaho's racial maturity still lags behind much of the country. Numerous examples include a sign fixed to a tree in Vay offering a "free public hanging" of Obama, and public jokes made by the perennially unsuccessful Republican candidate for governor, Rex Rammell, about buying Obama hunting tags (as if Obama were prey). When the latter incident went viral, Idaho's elected officials quickly condemned Rammell. They declared him fringe and unrepresentative of Idahoans. Phil Batt, the former Republican governor and human rights advocate, framed the incident within Idaho's larger image crisis: "[The problem] haunted us for years. And each little indiscretion tends to magnify it. It's really too bad." Idaho's citizens, lawmakers, and Department of Commerce have worked for decades to undo the reputation that came with the Aryan Nations, for it has hindered local businesses' and universities' ability to recruit talent. Tourists of color still inquire on travel websites whether it is safe to pass through Idaho. Locals' replies often echo that captured on a Sandpoint real estate site, where a Bonner County daycare provider explains that race-based thinking doesn't occur to most native white Idahoans: "We aren't like the South where prejudice is a part of daily life. We didn't grow up even seeing blacks or Hispanics."

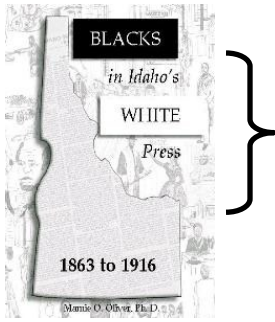
Put another way, with so little diversity (and the second fewest black residents in the nation at .08 percent), how could racial animus even germinate here?

Idaho's demography has certainly affected whites' racial behavior, but in mixed ways. On one hand, historically small black populations of far less than 1 percent, even in Idaho's cities, has meant that whites manufactured a low sense of threat from blacks in terms of competition for jobs, resources, power, or space. (A 20 to 30 percent minority rate correlates statistically with *peak* efforts to control and segregate.)

This resulted in a greater measure of safety and opportunity for blacks relative to some other regions. Whites tended to view black Idahoans as curiosities rather than usurpers. Several blacks garnered local fame and affection as pioneers, cowboys, hotel workers, basketball referees, caterers, and business people. Black Idahoan Dorothy Johnson was crowned Miss Idaho in 1964, while Les Purce became mayor of Pocatello in 1976. On the other hand, lack of significant diversity allowed racial stereotypes to run unchecked in the absence of social interracial relationships.

See Davidowitz: Three of the ten media markets with the highest racially charged search-Hattiesburg-Laurel, Biloxi-Gulfport, and Florence-Myrtle Beach-are between 20 and 30 percent black. Therefore, the relationship between racially charged search and percent black is consistent with racially charged search being a good proxy for racial animus.





Whites didn't remain unblemished blank slates amid homogeneity. Rather, disparaging racial stereotypes migrated into the Gem State with its growing population, and remained amply fed via media. Thus, despite few black residents, employment discrimination and housing segregation became ubiquitous in Idaho as in much of the West. The Boise Board of Realtors fought publicly against the Fair Housing Act of 1968, supposedly acting in the interests of its clients. And, though certain blacks could work in Boise hotels, in 1940, the renowned opera singer Marian Anderson was denied a room until she agreed to steer clear of public areas open to white patrons. Even Boise's beloved basketball referee, Aurelius Buckner, found a cross burning in his yard in the early 1960s after moving his family from the black River Street neighborhood into the white North End. Later, in the post-1960s era, Idaho's homogeneity attracted white flighters seeking to escape the growing diversity of other areas, like Southern California. According to Rich Benjamin's book *Whitopia*, it still does.



The Boise Board of Realtors opposed the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

We wish we could dismiss every Idaho racist as “fringe.” But that explanation was impossible to offer when a school bus full of second and third graders in Rexburg began to chant “assassinate Obama” the morning after his election. Clearly, these children had picked up a murderous mob’s cry from adults in their lives. As the Idaho Statesman asserted, this incident “is not some kids’ cutup but signals a serious underlying malady” that requires community education and self-reflection. When T-shirts inscribed with “Don’t Re-Nig in 2012,” complete with two lynch ropes dangling on either side, flew off the shelves in Nampa before media attention ended the spree, something more than mere fringe sentiment seemed at work despite widespread community condemnation of the slogan. Stephens-Davidowitz, who ranked Idaho 47th of 50 states and D.C. (among the lowest) in average frequency of racist Google searches, denotes on a map that those conducted in parts of northern Idaho rival the rate found in the most racist places in the West. And amid white Idahoans’ dearth of multicultural experience, the Southern Poverty Law Center gave Idaho’s school system a failing “F” grade for not requiring instruction about the modern civil rights movement. Yes, kids must learn about Martin Luther King Jr. as the namesake of a holiday. But grounding him in the fuller context of America’s struggle to advance civil rights is not explicitly required. Thus, despite the valiant work of the Idaho Human Rights Education Center, teaching Idaho’s kids about the black freedom struggle is not yet a system-wide priority.

Interestingly, Idaho was among the last five states to honor Dr. King with a paid state holiday in 1990. Reluctant legislators argued that King's work had little relevance to the state. Others who stood opposed saw King as a philandering communist not worthy of the honor. After a four-year effort, legislative success ultimately owed more to the holiday's symbolic value for countering Idaho's image problem relative to the Aryan Nations than to its honoring of King or the movement he championed. As one forthright lawmaker shared in an interview, "[I] don't think people in the West did really know Martin Luther King that well as to how important a person he was; I think there was a question in the minds of people, why him instead of someone else?"

Given that the 2012 election pits a religious minority against a racial one, a historical note about Mormonism and race is warranted. Many know that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints banned blacks from the priesthood and most temple ceremonies until 1978; it cited a biblical curse against Ham's descendents (interpreted to mean blacks) that supposedly justified discrimination against them. Mainline Protestant denominations used the same curse for similar ends; they just generally repudiated it sooner. New research by W. Paul Reeve explains the broader context. Prior to the Mormon migration to Utah, many Protestants perceived Mormons as racially suspect, using this to stoke persecution against them. Mormons' original acceptance of black converts as equals led to charges that Mormons condoned polygamous cohabitation with blacks and thus threatened white purity. In defense, Mormon leaders such as Brigham Young responded much like the Irish did when compared with blacks in antebellum America: They fortified their whiteness by emphasizing racial distinction and separation. The Irish accomplished it through race riots and anti-abolitionism; the Mormons used religious proclamations that eventually gave their church's racial caste system divine authority. Jim Crow America blessed such actions. Over time, perception of Mormons shifted from racially suspect to perhaps culturally the whitest of whites. And, with Americanism being bound tightly to whiteness, and dark skin to "foreignness," whitening helped Mormons gain acceptance over the last century. Today, Mitt Romney's church is embracing multiculturalism more eagerly and proficiently than his political party, in order to missionize effectively on the global scene.

Mormon whiteness has not escaped the pundits when drawing contrasts between Romney and Obama. This all stirs an interesting historical subtext in Idaho where, during territorial days, Mormons (whose numbers met the 20 to 30 percent "threat" threshold) lost their right to vote while its few blacks enjoyed 15th amendment protection. Later, during the legislative battle over Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Mormon lawmakers fought hard on both sides. Several identified with King's universal message. Others resented that King (who never set foot in Idaho) and blacks (who some surmised suffered little in their state) were gaining recognition ahead of many deserving westerners. The Mormons' own Pioneer Day had been demoted from an official state holiday during World War II, due to financial exigencies; its restoration remained a private passed-over hope.

While Idaho has never been the Aryan Nation dreamland that supremacists or media pundits painted, few white Idahoans have had to give regular deep thought to race, either at home or in the context of America's past, present, and future. This has hampered Idahoans' collective understanding and self-awareness regarding race, and allowed stereotypes and misinformation to exist unchallenged. Efforts to declare its population squeaky clean in the face of national media caricatures, rather than to probe, educate and discuss, have done little to amend our grasp of

America's racial dynamics. The fact that relatively few specific studies exist on race in Idaho, or the Intermountain West more broadly, leave the area vulnerable both to continuing media spin and to uncritical self-assessment.

Obama's presidency has operated like a racial Rorschach test for us, regardless of partisan feelings. Reactions to it reveal more about our own longings, fears, biases, disconnections and self conceptions with respect to race than they do about him. And politicians from both parties aim to play these to their advantage in November. Studies predict that race is as potent an undercurrent in 2012 as it was in 2008, though less so in Obama's favor since the historic moment of racial firsts has passed.

To help further our understanding of race in America, and generate more Idaho-specific data, consider taking Project Implicit tests yourself at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. And, if you have a story to tell about race in Idaho that might shed light on the state's complex racial life from territorial days to the present, please contact me about contributing an interview to the "Idaho in Black and White" oral history project.

*Jill K. Gill, professor of history at Boise State University, specializes in race, rights, and religion in U.S. history. Her book *Embattled Ecumenism: the National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2011) explores the anti-Vietnam War efforts of ecumenical Protestants and helps explain the Protestant left's decline in cultural and political influence. Her current book project focuses on the history of black/white dynamics in Idaho.*

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