

# OBAMA AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS



By Christopher Z. Hobson

*Author's Note: My friend and teaching colleague Nicholas Powers first had the idea of writing an essay applying "double consciousness" to Obama. Unconsciously I picked up his idea. However, his approach, focusing on Obama's autobiographical writings, is distinct from mine. What is here, including its errors, is my own responsibility.*



When I try to sort out my sense of events since the election of President Obama—my senses both that this election was a major watershed in U.S. politics and society, and that Obama's presidency will realize few if any of the hopes people had in voting for him—I find myself drawn to a fundamental idea in African American writing about the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness.

To set out my argument for this article in the beginning, I see Obama's election in a dual way. On one side, I see the election as a continuation of the historic African American struggle to be fully part of the United States while remaining mixed (partly distinctly African American and partly "mainstream" U.S.) in culture. And I think the election represents a milestone in this struggle. On the other side I think the election

was also the expression of desires by both African Americans and others for greater economic, political, and racial justice: fairness to working peoples and minorities and, not least, for the end of useless wars fought only for U.S. domination, not self-defense, at a major cost in human lives. And here I think people's hopes have not been realized and are not going to be.

To understand the first point it's necessary to look at the majority African American attitude to the U.S., particularly as expressed in and through ideas of double consciousness; the first part of the article will do this in some detail. To understand the second point it will be necessary to apply double consciousness thinking in a somewhat distinct way, to get across the idea that the United States can change over time in a more inclusive direction and yet remain class divided—and race divided as well, since class in the U.S. has always intertwined with race. This part of the discussion will look at some of Obama's policies in arguing that someone operating within the limits of the U.S. political system, as he is, can't change these basics. I'm not sure I can explain why that is true except for the most obvious points: representative democracy fits a class (and race) divided society because (1) the people with more resources always have better access to power positions and (2) the economic health of the society does depend on the good functioning of business, so that whoever is in government acts to support the business system.

So "double consciousness" in this article will represent several ideas. One is a historic, majority African American way of looking at the United States—in effect, the U.S. is oppressive, but can change. The second is a way of looking at the functioning of the system (specifically with Obama in office) to see that there can be progress over time yet the system still remains unjust and oppressive—in effect, the U.S. has changed but remains oppressive. And finally, third, I'll argue that given these points, to try to use the political system to change the social system is not to truly understand double consciousness.

## Double Consciousness as an Attitude to the United States

As stated by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), double consciousness referred both to the way African Americans

looked at themselves and, less directly, to how they looked at the United States. Du Bois wrote:

“[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” (*Writings*, Library of America ed., 304-5)

Among the many ideas in this richly complex passage, three stand out for my purposes. First, Du Bois thought African Americans see themselves in a double way—as they appear to themselves and as they appear to the onlooking, contemptuous white world. Second, that African Americans actually have a double nature, as “American” and “Negro.” Third, that they don’t wish to sacrifice either part of this mix but to be “both a Negro and an American.” The ambiguities make double consciousness a rich and confusing conception. Is it looking at oneself as “an American” that represents the intrusion of external judgments, as Black Nationalists would say, or on the contrary looking at oneself as “a Negro” as that is understood by whites—and if so what is the relation to seeing oneself as “a Negro” in a positive sense? Is Du Bois’s idea semi-Black Nationalist (because “an American” is assumed to be a misconception based on internalizing white views) or integra-

tionist (because it is explicitly pro-American) or race-positive (because “Negro blood has a message for the world”)? Finally, is double consciousness a source of anguish, as Du Bois presents it at first, or of positive complexity, as the second paragraph implies? The idea has been seen in all these ways and means all these things, since the majority of African Americans have historically felt the doubleness of being a race with a specific history while being—or intending to be—full and equal citizens. Finally, if Du Bois meant first of all to explain how the African American looks at herself or himself, his discussion also implies a way of looking at the United States, as a country in which it is possible (or may become possible) to be in reality “both a Negro and an American.”

Building on that dual view of the U.S., in *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison, who saw double consciousness’s ambiguity as a source of positive insight rather than debilitating tension, described his first person narrator’s attitude to the country this way:

“So it is that now I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no. I denounce because although implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I have to love.... [T]oo much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love.” (579-80)

Ellison captures what I think is a majority African American attitude to the United States—there has always been an important rejectionist, Black Nationalist conception as well—that “denounces and defends,” “hates and loves” the country. This majority attitude may I think lie behind the scene reported to me by a friend who was on 125th Street in Harlem on November 4 in the moments when Obama’s victory became sure. According to his report, the packed crowd broke into a chant, “USA! USA! USA!”—as if for victory at the Olympics.

It would be easy to see this chant in a reflexively “left” way as reflecting illusions in the political system. In such a view the crowd permitted itself to believe what we, the left, know to be

untrue—that the U.S. system can provide (now provides?) full equality. To avoid oversimplifying in this way it is important to remember some basics about African American history; I hope I am not myself oversimplifying or condescending to readers. These start with the fact that African Americans did not come here voluntarily but as prisoners, captives—those who lived to reach these shores at all. Surely, indeed, each person in the 125th Street throng had not forgotten but was aware of this fact; had it more in mind than any other. At the

time and again by others. African Americans, then, were not just enslaved in Africa and transported to the United States but, in their majority, made the decision to become “Americans” in an affirmative way, to view the U.S. as “mother country.” Third, in doing this they were not so much thinking of the U.S. as it was but imagining it transformed into a more democratic, inclusive society—partly by themselves. (And also, many believed in their prophetic version of Christianity, in accordance with God’s will). Thus, a generation after the Civil



same time, another fact is equally basic: at a certain point, no one can say just when, the majority of African Americans—both free and slave as far as we know—came to view themselves not as Africans in forced exile but as Americans. (As just noted, there have always been those who thought otherwise.) Thus in 1827 Richard Allen, founder and first bishop of the A.M.E. Church, arguing against proposals to repatriate to Africa, stated, “This land which we have watered with our *tears* and our *blood* is now our *mother country*, and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds, and the gospel is free.” This “tears and blood” idea became foundational, repeated

War, William J. Simmons, founder of what became the National Baptist Convention USA and author of the African American biographical encyclopedia *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising*, forecast:

“Here in this new South the Negro shall shine in the constellation of nations, and by his words and deeds hand down to unborn ages the glittering pages of our history. We shall in some prominent way mount the ladder of difficulties, scale the cliff of prejudices and hide our heads among the stars.”

These words were spoken (at an Emancipation Day celebration, Jan. 1, 1887) when the segregation system was already solidifying, but Simmons's eye was clearly on long historical time. Something like this vision, I would guess—a vision simultaneously of civil equality and of a U.S. transformed as a whole into a place of justice—was in the minds of those who chanted “USA!” on Nov. 4. From this point of view what the election represented was simple: We, who made the decision long ago to become Americans but were for so many years locked out and seen as noncitizens, have now secured our right to be citizens to the point where one of our members has become president. That idea, in my opinion, explains why, on TV that night, the tears were streaming down Jesse Jackson's face, and many more faces besides.

This persistent belief that African Americans can transform their own situation and help the United States transform itself into something better—over time and with unremitting efforts both of political reform and of individual and family improvement—may be right or wrong but is not stupid or naïve. A version of militant reformism, it rests on the underlying assumptions, first, that there is a democratic component in the U.S. foundational ideas and, second, that this component can be used strategically against the oppressive current reality. This belief is also a version of double consciousness thinking—it holds that the U.S. is both an oppressive nation and also a potentially freer society. This idea, and the efforts it led to, have certainly brought about substantial democratization in the U.S. in the epoch since World War II. (Not these ideas alone, of course.) If this vision seemed to have given way to a kind of weary skepticism in the long years of retrenchment after the civil rights movement, it still showed its persistence in the response to Obama.

Nor is this view of things a mere illusion. What has been achieved is a limited but real breakthrough in the racial inclusiveness of the U.S. social system. I emphasize this point because the tendency of leftists is to discount the possibility of such breakthroughs. The breakthrough I think is not just in the inclusiveness of the political elite or even the political system as a whole—though these are real—but in the inclusiveness of the social system. It is obvious that the political elite has been becoming somewhat more racially inclusive for some time, as cabinet appointments and Supreme Court member-

ships show. Obama's election also marks a move to somewhat greater inclusiveness in the political system as such. Since the 1970s, it has opened up to the point where it's no longer remarkable to see African American, Hispanic, and other minority members of Congressmen, mayors, appointed and civil service officials, judges, etc., some with substantial accumulated power. Obama's election belongs to this trend—let us recall, as Sen. McCain did in his concession speech Nov. 4, that 107 years earlier, in 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt was vilified in much of the country for merely inviting a Black man, Booker T. Washington, to dinner in the White House.

Obama's election also represents a broadening of the social system as a whole. To state what should be obvious: never again will it be possible to wonder, as a future speculation, whether an African American can ever be elected president; and, for the children just now becoming conscious of the world, Obama's presidency is normative—“the president” is a Black man. Over time, these changes must necessarily have an effect on how people look at the mix of cultures that is the United States.

For all these reasons the enormous spontaneous festival of African American freedom that greeted the election and the inaugural week, and the sense that a moment awaited for 145 years was now here, were not wrong, not naïve, and not misplaced. These perceptions were real, accurate, and true.

## Double Consciousness and Obama's Presidency

The election then, in my view, does represent a milestone historically; that is one lens of double consciousness for looking at its significance. The other lens looks at what the election represents politically and socially—what is likely to change in government policy and future social reality. In my opinion this a distinct question. What has been achieved in terms of the historical struggle for African American equality is considerable, if limited; what is likely to change in government policies and the economic and social structure of the United States is negligible. It's necessary to hold both these contradictory ideas in mind.

Looked at through the lens of the hopes invested in him for substantial change in U.S. society, Obama's administration so far has been a flat-liner and I believe will remain one. What has changed or is slated to change is a series of policy and appointment issues that are important in themselves but that don't involve major shifts in society and are also ambiguous—some good, some bad. Specifically, Obama has moved more aggressively than Bush to rescue banks and big corporations, in a pro-business way that sets aside workers' rights, including the right to jobs. (As of July, the economy was still shrinking, and the main effect of Obama's policies may have been to slow the shrinkage.) Obama has proposed a relatively ambitious health care package that may include a government-run plan alongside private plans; we'll see in coming months if this passes intact (or at all). He has also proposed good measures on energy and stem cell research, and has rolled back

replacing; she will probably maintain, but not shift, the liberal-conservative balance on the court.

Alongside these somewhat ambiguously liberal steps are more conservative ones. It's become common to read in the morning paper that Obama has embraced or extended Bush policies that he previously pledged to reverse. Two examples are "national security" and immigration. Obama has proposed a new system of detention without trial for Guantanamo prisoners who are "hard to prosecute [meaning the evidence was obtained illegally] and dangerous to release"; he has defended using a "state secrets" privilege to keep some cases out of the courts. On immigration, the new administration is "vastly expanding" Bush's effort to deport illegal immigrants in local jails, has "expanded a program to verify worker immigration status that has been widely criticized as flawed," and has rejected proposals for legally binding



some of Bush's antienvironmental actions. His first Supreme Court nominee, Judge Sonia Sotomayor, confirmed Aug. 6, is a centrist-to-liberal jurist, more liberal than a Bush nominee or, probably, a McCain nominee would have been, but not in fact more liberal than Justice David Souter, whom she is

standards for detention centers. He recently recommitted himself to proposing a comprehensive immigration bill in the future, but, besides raids and deportations, the major additional element this would contain is an amnesty for undocumented immigrants—hardly a radical measure, and one earlier presidents have adopted

## PROMISE HER ANYTHING, BUT GIVE HER ARPÈGE

(Old advertising slogan)

“As a senator, Mr. Obama ... voted against a 2006 bill authorizing military commissions, but it passed anyway. While Mr. Obama initially halted the trials, he has since proposed reviving them in a revised form.” (Charlie Savage, “Obama’s Terror Policy Looks a Lot Like Bush’s.” *New York Times*, July 2, A14.)

“On the campaign trail and in more recent statements, President Obama has indicated that he wants to limit the use of the state secrets privilege. In courtrooms, however, there has been little evidence of a new approach.” (Adam Liptak, “Obama Administration Weighs In on State Secrets, Raising Concern on the Left.” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, A11.)

“The time to fix our broken immigration system is now. It is critical that as we embark on this enormous venture to update our immigration system, it is fully reflective of the powerful tradition of immigration in this country and fully reflective of our values and ideals.” (Obama Statement in U.S. Senate, May 23, 2007. From “Barack Obama and Joe Biden: Fighting for Comprehensive Immigration Reform,” Immigration Fact Sheet, [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com).)

“Barack Obama supports a system that allows undocumented immigrants who are in good standing to pay a fine, learn English, not violate the law, and go to the back of the line for opportunity to become citizens.” (Same.)

“The Obama administration is vastly expanding a federal effort begun under President George W. Bush to identify and deport illegal immigrants held in local jails.... ‘We are interested in identifying and removing all offenders if we can,’ Mr. [John T.] Morton [assistant secretary of homeland security] said in an interview. ‘But we have limited resources, and in a world of limited resources we are focusing on violent serious offenders first.’” (James C. McKinley Jr., “Debate Intensifies as a Federal Deportation Program Is Set to Expand,” *New York Times*, July 26, 13.)

A “review of the illegal immigrants selected for deportation in jails in Harris County, Tex.” shows that out of a total of 2,313, some 2,173, or 94 percent, were arrested on the following charges: 670 for drunk driving, 670 for drug possession, 446 for simple assault, 150 for various traffic violations, 101 for running from the police, 81 for not having identification, and 55 for not giving an officer information. 140, or 6 percent, were arrested on more serious charges: 90 for aggravated assault, 30 for aggravated robbery, 13 for sexual assault on a child, and 7 for murder. (“Charges Against Immigrants Sent Home,” sidebar, same article.) No information was provided on convictions; arrestees found to be illegal immigrants can be deported whether or not they are convicted on the arrest charges.

“After early pledges by President Obama that he would moderate the Bush administration’s tough policy on immigration enforcement, his administration is pursuing an aggressive policy for an illegal-immigration crackdown.... That approach brings Mr. Obama around to the position that his Republican rival, Senator John McCain, espoused during last year’s presidential campaign, a stance Mr. Obama rejected then as too hard on Latino and immigrant communities.” (Julia Preston, “Firm Stance on Illegal Immigration Remains Policy Under Obama,” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, A14.)

“The Obama administration intends to announce an ambitious plan...to overhaul the much-criticized way the nation detains immigration violators, trying to transform it from a patchwork of jail and prison cells to what its new chief called a ‘truly civil detention system.’ ... The government will stop sending families to the T. Don Hutto Residential Center, a former state prison near Austin, Tex., that drew...scathing news coverage for putting young children behind razor wire.... Hutto will be converted into an immigration jail for women.” (Nina Bernstein, “U.S. to Overhaul Detention Policy for Immigrants,” *New York Times*, Aug. 6, A1, A4.)

from time to time. (See *New York Times*, July 2, July 26, Aug. 4, Aug. 6, Aug. 11; see sidebar article for more information).

Important as these and other issues may be, they all involve day-to-day management of the existing social relations in the coun-

try; none involves shifting the balance in the system. I’m not talking about revolutionary change but just about moving society by incremental steps in a fairer, more democratic direction—what Obama’s slogan “Change We Can Believe In” seemed to imply. Three issues can illustrate the point: rich and

poor; war and peace; black and white. Probably many who voted for Obama believed he would shift the balance between rich and poor a little, bring some relief for the poor and struggling working class and middle class people. Probably most believed he would end Bush's war in Iraq and emphasize peace and cooperation in foreign relations—his signature issue. And probably many hoped his election would bring steps toward greater fairness in race relations, even if this was an area Obama, for strategy reasons, avoided stressing in the campaign.

## RICH AND POOR

A pair of headlines on the same day said all that needs saying on this issue. The top story in the *New York Times* for July 13 was headed:

*Black-White Gap in Jobless Rate Widens in City  
Gulf Is Less Across U.S.  
Experts Uncertain Why Blacks Lost Jobs in New York Faster*

And below this story:

*For Goldman,  
A Swift Return  
To Lofty Profits*

The first story explained that unemployment for African Americans in New York City had gone from 6% to 15% between the first quarter of 2008 and the same period in 2009. The rate for whites had gone from 3 to 4% and for Hispanics from 6 to 9%. By April 1 “there were about 80,000 more unemployed blacks than whites” in New York City “even though there are roughly 1.5 million more whites than blacks here.” In the country as a whole, Black unemployment had gone from 9 to 14% over the same period, white from 5 to 8%. (Figures for Hispanics weren't given.) So, to put a slightly different spin on the figures, unemployment for everyone was soaring, both nationally and in New York. It should be no surprise (in the U.S.) that unemployment hits African Americans worse than whites, but whites aren't doing very well either. Nothing changed in July, when 247,000 more jobs disappeared (but the spin was that this was a sign of hope because the rate of loss was slower) and five million people, one third of the total unemployed, have been out of work more than six

months. (These figures list only those registered as looking for work. The real numbers are much higher.) Returning to Goldman Sachs, the investment bank, its actual second quarter profit, posted the next day, was \$3.4 billion. (That's correct, \$3,400,000,000.00.)

Obama is certainly not to blame for the economic collapse but, as the headline about Goldman Sachs shows, his strategy has focused entirely on nursing the giant banks and manufacturers back to profitability, hoping that will benefit everyone. An Obama official is supposed to negotiate with big companies about salary levels, but has little leverage. Putting all this together, the business collapse will eventually end, companies will start rehiring, some people will get good jobs back, most who lost jobs will get much lower-paying ones and be glad of it, many will be out of work for good, and multimillion dollar salaries will be back for those at the top. Really, multimillion? One recent story lists a “veteran bond salesman” recently given a two-year contract at \$6 million a year, an interest rate trader offered \$10 million a year for two years, and a former Goldman Sachs partner offered \$15 million a year for two years; but her new employer says the figure is “wildly exaggerated,” so perhaps it is only \$10 million. (*New York Times* Aug. 10.) This obscenity passes as economic health, and there's not a sign in the world that Obama will or can change it. Eventually, at incalculable human cost, about the same relative distribution of wealth will be restored—even more skewed toward big money.

## WAR AND PEACE

In overall outline, Obama's foreign policy looks a lot like Bush's, pursued with more skill. It's an imperialist foreign policy, aimed above all at projecting U.S. power and control all across the globe, but also at repairing relations with allies (Europe), rivals (Russia), and possible opponents (the leftist bloc in Latin America) that were disrupted by Bush's unilateral and overly military approach. Obama has kept the same list of troublemakers (Somalia) and favored dictators (Kyrgyzstan's Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who allows U.S. aircraft to operate in the country) because the policy goals are similar. Obama is deploying U.S. global power a little differently from Bush, partly because of Bush's successes.

The key Bush success on which Obama has piggybacked is in Iraq. Obama built his early campaign on opposition to the war. By the time he was nominated there were qualifiers in the fine print—Obama would “work with his military commanders to responsibly end the war,” according to his campaign website (“It’s Your Choice—How the Candidates Stand on the Issues That Matter to You,” [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com)). Since Bush’s “surge” in 2007-8 did succeed in quieting opposition in Iraq for the moment, Obama was able to agree with the commanders (and Bush) on a “withdrawal” date of January 2011. At the moment there are still 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, about the same number as in 2006. Supposedly they have “withdrawn from the cities” and are no longer in “combat roles,” but, according to a briefing by U.S. commanding general Ray Odierno in May, something like 30-45,000 combat troops will stay in urban areas through such creative thinking as redefining these areas as lying “outside” their cities and “re-missioning” the troops as trainers or advisers, “although

least through that year. It should be clear that this isn’t a plan for pulling out of Iraq but for reducing the overt U.S. occupation as long as the pro-U.S. government is stable. If the anti-U.S. forces regain strength, everything indicates that Obama will stop or reverse the withdrawal.

The other side of Obama’s war-peace profile is Afghanistan, where he is escalating an ongoing U.S. counterinsurgency into an open-ended war. The extent and duration will depend on how successful he is. During the campaign, Obama presented his policy as a plan to “refocus our resources on al Qaeda”—but, again, the fine print contained qualifiers: “The Taliban has reemerged in southern Afghanistan while Al Qaeda has used the space provided by the Iraq war to regroup...” (“It’s Your Choice,” as above). As Obama’s policy is now unfolding, al Qaeda is merely the excuse for the major target, the Taliban in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, which threatens the survival of the U.S.-created Afghan government and the stability of the



many will still go on combat patrols” (*New York Times*, May 9). Most troops are supposed to be out by early 2011 but a “residual force” of unspecified size is supposed to remain at

U.S. ally, Pakistan. The major focus is Afghanistan and Obama’s aim is to eradicate the Taliban, which, after all, is a conservative religious Afghan movement that never attacked

the U.S. when it was in power. It is true, of course, that the Taliban is in a tactical alliance with al Qaeda, but Obama's goal is clearly to defeat the Taliban altogether and stabilize the U.S. client regime led by Hamid Karzai, who has very little support in his own country. (A recent article about him was entitled "Karzai in His Labyrinth," a reference to Gabriel García Márquez's novel *The General in His Labyrinth*, about a dying and isolated Simón Bolívar.)

The stepped up U.S. war in Afghanistan is imperialist in at least two senses: it is hated by many Afghan people and it is imposed by the U.S. on the U.S.'s so-called allies. On the first point, a news account headed "Marines Land in Caldron of Afghan Resentment" (*Times*, July 3), one of many similar dispatches, included the following comments from villagers in Marja, Helmand province, which the U.S. bombed in May:

- o "We Muslims don't like them [foreign forces]—they are the source of danger" (Hajji Taj Muhammad)
- o "They come here just to fight, not to bring peace" (Allah Nazad, a farmer)
- o "The people are very scared of the night raids. When they have night raids, the people join the Taliban" (Spin Gul, farmer)
- o "Who are the Taliban? They are local people" (a villager who wouldn't give his name)
- o "I will not allow them [to raid my house]. I will fight them to the last drop of blood" (Hamza, a village resident)

The U.S. is also pushing, pulling, and strongarming so-called allies into reluctantly cooperating. In July, Pakistani intelligence officials, as an intended counterweight to this pressure, told the *New York Times* that Pakistan objects to the expanding military campaign in Afghanistan. The reasons are plain: the war is pushing Taliban forces across the border into Pakistan, which does not have enough troops to fight them while defending its border with India. Therefore, the story paraphrased, "dialogue with the Taliban, not more fighting, is in Pakistan's national interest" (*Times*, July 22). The article summarized Obama officials' position as "frustration" that Pakistan has "chosen to fight Pakistani Taliban who threaten their government, while ignoring Taliban and other militants fighting Americans in Afghanistan or threatening India" (same). In other words, Pakistan has the insolence to *have* a

national interest and not act as an automatic pawn of the United States. Obama's administration does not need to take lessons from Bush's imperialist arrogance.

Putting all this in historical perspective, there is no difference except in style and tactics between Bush and Obama. The U.S. interest in Iraq was to replace Saddam Hussein's anti-U.S. government, which had been a U.S. ally as long as it did what the U.S. asked, with a pro-U.S. regime. In Afghanistan, to its annoyance, the U.S. poured in tons of aid and special operations to fight the Russians in the 1980s only to lose control when the Taliban came to power in the 1990s. After the September 11, 2001 attacks the U.S. went to war in Afghanistan supposedly to destroy al Qaeda but actually (as the focus of its operations shows) to overturn this anti-U.S. government and install the pro-U.S. Karzai regime. Obama is simply continuing this policy. Obama's weak quarrel with Bush is that Bush took his eye off Afghanistan letting the Taliban regroup. True enough. But the aim of his policy is identical to Bush's aim. The policies, in other words, come from real and lasting U.S. imperial interests in controlling the shaky parts of the empire.

## BLACK AND WHITE

For African Americans, as Nicholas Powers wrote recently in the Brooklyn-based *Independent* newspaper, "The change we can believe in has become the change you can drop in a beggar's cup" (July 29, [www.indydependent.org](http://www.indydependent.org)). There is unfortunately not much that can be said about Obama and civil rights issues. His campaign listed a basketful of good-sounding but vague goals—"Strengthen Civil Rights Enforcement," "Combat Employment Discrimination," etc. ("It's Your Choice") but Obama did not campaign on these issues and in fact was as silent as possible. Months later this remains true, with the exception of inside-the-family occasions like his address to the NAACP's 100th anniversary convention (July 16) and his response to the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, where Obama's main concern, unfortunately, was to apologize for criticizing the police. (See sidebar article.)

In its omissions and emphases, Obama's speech to the NAACP reveals a lot about his approach. (It can be read at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).) As befitted the occasion, Obama paid tribute to

## PROFESOR GATES IN HANDCUFFS

The now-famous July 16 encounter between Henry Louis Gates, Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, and a white Cambridge Massachusetts police officer, Sergeant James Crowley, plus the varying responses to the incident by President Obama, offer a snapshot of what it is like to be African American in the United States at the moment.

As most people know, Gates found the door of his Cambridge home stuck when returning from a trip to China and enlisted the help of his cab driver in forcing it open. A woman down the street phoned a woman across the street from Gates, who, not sure if anything bad was happening, called asking the police to check up. Crowley responded, found Gates inside the house, asked or ordered him to step outside (Gates refused), saw proof of Gates's identity but continued questioning him and, after Gates protested and yelled at him, arrested Gates for disorderly conduct. The next day the Cambridge police, sensing a no-win situation after arresting a senior Harvard professor inside his own house, dropped the charges.

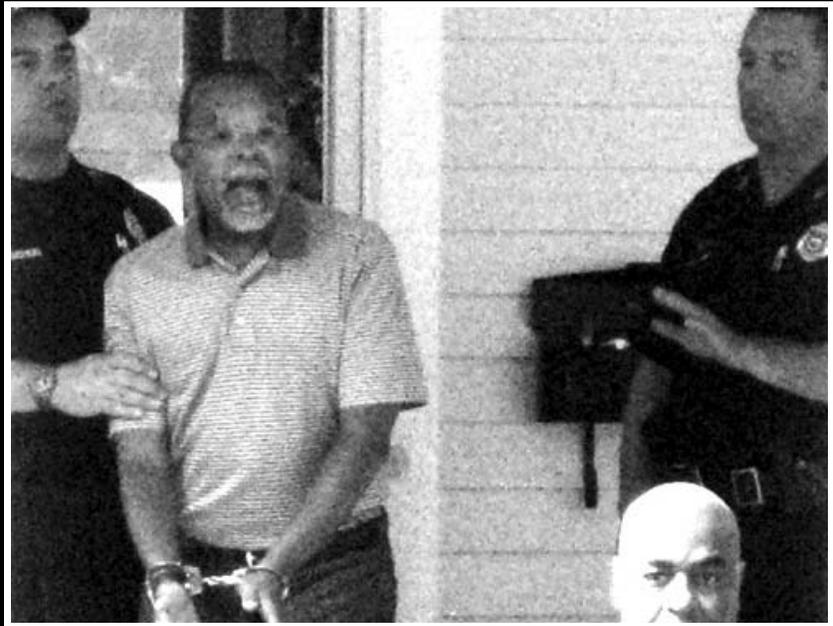
There are some uncertainties: Crowley's report stated that Gates at first refused to show ID while Gates said he did so at once. I know how to read police reports (a police report is a document that shows that the police, who know what are lawful commands, acted according to the law) and in any case, Crowley lied about several other matters, notably whether the call to the police specified the "intruder's" race (Crowley said yes, transcripts say no). So on balance

what happened is that Gates showed ID, Crowley wasn't satisfied, Gates blew his stack and got arrested. Asked about the case, Obama responded that Gates was a friend, so he wanted to be careful, and that everyone should be cautious in such cases, but that it seemed evident that the police had "acted stupidly," and additionally that "there is a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That's just a fact" ("News Conference by the President," July 22, posted July 23, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). The word "stupidly" backfired amidst a campaign by police and conservative bloggers to defend Crowley as having acted professionally and as a dedicated officer who even leads training sessions on how to avoid racial profiling. (This means: how to conduct stop and frisk operations that don't meet legal definitions of racial profiling.) Conservatives seized on Obama's comments to show that he is biased against the police. Two days later Obama

walked into the White House briefing room and backed down: he said he still thought the arrest "an overreaction" but that Gates "probably overreacted as well," that he, Obama, "obviously contributed to ratcheting it up," and that "in my choice of words, I think I unfortunately gave the impression that I was maligning the Cambridge Police Department or Sergeant Crowley specifically—and I could have calibrated those words differently" ("Statement by the President," July 24, same source).

What really happened?

Some insight is provided by Al Vivian, president of Basic Diversity, Inc., a consulting service in Atlanta, who summarized what he called an "unwritten code" among African Americans: "Quiet politeness is rule No. 1 in surviving an incident of racial profiling, he said. So is frequent use of the word 'sir'" (New York Times, July 24). Any young African American man knows these rules, or has had them



explained by his parent or a counselor, and knows that he is at risk if he ignores them. So from this point of view Gates forgot the basics of being Black in the U.S. Knowing that he is a world-famed scholar, holder of more than forty honorary degrees and author of fourteen books—and perhaps tired from a long flight and on edge from the problem with his door—Gates forgot double consciousness, neglected to switch codes, reacted as “an American” rather than “a Negro,” and failed to use “quiet politeness” and frequently say “sir.”

What happened to Gates, in other words, shows that the tactics of surviving while Black have not changed at all since Jan. 20, 2009. Bob Herbert, Op-Ed columnist for the New York Times, reminds us of what anyone with reasonably sharp eyes knows: “Black people are constantly being stopped, searched, harassed, publicly humiliated, assaulted, arrested and sometimes killed by police officers in this country for no good reason.” And: of the half-million police stops of private citizens in New York City every year, “the overwhelming majority of those stopped are black or Latino, and the overwhelming majority

are innocent of any wrongdoing” (Aug. 1). It is worth thinking about how this case would have unfolded if the “intruder” had not been Henry Louis Gates, famed professor and author, but an ordinary African American homeowner, say an accountant or electrician returning from an out of town trip. Perhaps that person, more on guard, would have remembered the rules. If not, at best he would now be facing repeated court appearances; at worst, beating—or worse.

As for President Obama, he too forgot the rules. That is, in his initial remarks, while speaking crisply and calmly as always, he forgot (in effect) to use “quiet politeness” and frequently say “sir”—by affirming respect for the police and Sgt. Crowley and all the other words he forced from his mouth two days later. He spoke, for the moment, honestly as a Black man in the United States, got slapped down for it, and backed off. He too forgot double consciousness and code switching, forgot that a Black man in the United States must choose when to speak as a Black man in the United States and when to speak as a Black man is supposed to speak in the United

States. And he forgot the basic bargain that led to his presidency: that he could become president if he did not act as a president for African Americans, if he did not provide leadership on race issues, if he upheld the fiction that there is already (with a few lapses) impartial legal justice for all.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that Obama had acted differently. Let’s imagine that he had scheduled a prime-time speech. (He is the president; he can schedule such a speech if he wants, especially on an issue that already has the country’s attention). And then let’s suppose that with time to prepare his remarks with care, he had told the nation, momentarily focused on this issue, the truth about police conduct toward African Americans and had spoken of the need for change, enforceable reforms. To do this, of course, would have meant making equal rights for all a defining theme of his presidency.

The Gates affair teaches us much about the state of race relations in the U.S. at present, and about the country’s president as well.

the NAACP itself, referred to the heroes and martyrs of the civil rights movement, and described himself, I think sincerely, as standing “on the shoulders of giants.” In substance, he mentioned two key points about current social problems: (1) “The pain of discrimination is still felt in America” and (2) that “the most difficult barriers include structural inequalities that our nation’s legacy of discrimination has left behind.” Too careful a politician to omit specific programs, Obama mentioned several, such as expanding tax credits, “making housing more affordable,” school and after-school programs, his health proposals, and protections against mortgage fraud. Obama covered all this rather quickly—in 457 words, if one counts, just over 10 percent of his speech. For about twice as long, he

spoke about education and about one of his favorite themes, the need for African Americans to develop “a new mind set” to combat “the way we’ve internalized a sense of limitation; how so many in our communities have come to expect so little from the world and from themselves.” There’s no doubt that both are important. Among my students I myself have seen the self-crippling effect of internalized low expectations. But neither education, raised self-expectations, nor the desirable programs Obama listed briefly deal in an overall way with the “structural inequalities” he referred to.

For example, what about the unemployment figures I mentioned earlier? The gap in unemployment is a “structural

inequality” that has remained intact for decades, except that in recent years it has gotten worse. Obama does not raise this issue by himself. Asked about it in the context of the current economic mess, he answered that his job is to “get the economy as a whole moving.... If I don’t do that, I’m not going to be able to help anybody” (*NYTimes.com*, June 23). That’s true but doesn’t answer the question about the unemployment gap. Setting aside the difficulty of tackling this issue during the recession, Obama’s stated programs (“It’s Your Choice,” as above) don’t contain any long-term measures to deal with the problem and in fact don’t mention it.

To deal with these inequalities will take massive programs of investments, public works, and job creation. What better occasion than the NAACP’s 100th anniversary convention to go on national television and announce the need for such a program—if not for today, then to follow the economic recovery? For that matter, what better occasion to use national television to tell the nation as a whole, not just the NAACP, that “the pain of discrimination is still felt in America”—especially to tell it to the many people who naïvely think discrimination ended sometime in the past?

The prophetic version of Christianity I’ve been studying argues that God will hold individuals and nations up to judgment for failing to provide justice. The God may be mythical but the judgments are real. Already one can see the future on the other side of economic recovery, after one or two terms of Obama’s presidency. It’s one in which, certainly, the African American and Hispanic middle and upper classes will have

continued to expand, as they have for half a century, and as a result, government, industry, and public life will be somewhat more integrated. For this we can be thankful. Equally predictably the “structural inequalities” Obama spoke of will continue and probably expand, and with them the false arrests, police murders, lack of jobs, and yes, internalized helplessness, low expectations, and self-destroying despair. If Obama’s presidency unfolds to its end with the majority of African Americans and Hispanic Americans still in approximately the same position as at its beginning, as I think likely, the judgments will follow.

## Double Consciousness as a Way to Understand Obama and His Supporters

I’ve been arguing that Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness is first of all a way of understanding a majority African American view of the United States as, simultaneously, a land of oppression and the embodiment of a democratic ideal; and secondly, that double consciousness is also a way of understanding simultaneously the major change in the U.S. landscape represented by Obama’s election and the fact that this event and Obama’s presidency are likely to make little or no change in how most Americans live and how the U.S. acts in the world. Double consciousness represents, thirdly, a way of understanding Obama himself and his supporters, or many of them.



The double consciousness I have in mind now is not the same as Du Bois's internalized negative self-judgment by white standards. While perhaps no member of a racial or other oppressed group can entirely escape such self-doubts, I think Obama's biography shows that, much more, as he reached his maturity he embraced his African American self as a positive identification alongside his overall American identity. The double consciousness I am talking about in Obama's case is one of identifying fully with the African American community and its historical struggles and at the same time identifying fully, not necessarily with U.S. society in its current form, but with its political system and the economic system it rests on; seeing these—and not struggle inspired by principles of freedom—as the source of progress; and identifying with the United States' world role. Because of these identifications Obama is capable of seeing clearly the need to overcome “structural inequalities” that enforce racism while being unable to name any programs to overcome them. He is capable of identifying with poor and working people most hurt by the economic collapse while working to restore the profits of the financial system that caused the collapse. And he is capable of opposing Bush's war in Iraq while fully accepting the politics of imperial domination that led to that war and to the Afghan war he is escalating.

There's a large measure of political calculation in all this, of course—my article on Obama in *Utopian 7* referred to some of the radical early positions he dropped when convenient. And there is also, as I stressed in that article, the “vetting” process by which the political system tested Obama along with other candidates to be sure that his positions and affiliations were “mainstream” enough for the presidency. If he hadn't made those adjustments he would have been sidelined. But underlying these processes is the double consciousness through which Obama, fully aware of the U.S.'s historical inequalities and class and racial discrimination, and subjectively eager to change them, is led by his *ideas* to embrace methods and goals that make it impossible to change them.

Something of the same kind may apply to Obama's supporters, or some of them. Their identification with Obama, with the hope of change that he represents, with the idea that change is possible in and through the political system

and through the Democratic Party in particular, has led them—so far—to be blind to his flaws. Obama's approval ratings have fallen, but it is conservatives and ordinary voters who have fallen away, not those who were most mobilized by hope in him. As an example, a month or so ago, at a family gathering, I sat listening as talk turned to Obama. One of the young people, a college student, a bit of a social rebel, had done a little legwork for Obama, and exulted in his victory because of hatred for the Iraq war, hatred of racism, hatred of Bush specifically, and a general longing for change. Now, he told with delight the story of the Navy Seals who, you'll remember, back in April took out the Somali pirates holding a U.S. merchant captain hostage. Aside from buying into an inherently unbelievable official story (the three Seals stood on the pitching deck of a boat, aimed at another pitching boat thirty yards away, and shot two men on deck and one in the cabin just as that one threatened the captain), my young friend had just expressed complete approval of how the armed forces of the world's mightiest country executed pirates belonging to one of its poorest countries who had tried to scrape off some of the untold millions the U.S. extracts from those countries every day. What happened in my friend's mind I think (discounting a love of action films and games) was an effect of double consciousness. That is, on one side there was the desire for change in the United States, on the other an embrace through Obama of the U.S. political system, which Obama's victory seemed to have sanitized—resulting in hot approval of an act of piracy (by the U.S.).

If I haven't alienated all six of my readers—sorry, I was on the side of the Somalis and no, I don't believe the official account—I want now to make a serious point. On the part of far too many, not only did Obama's apparent ability to offer change through the U.S. political system lead to voting for him, but now confusion between identification with change and identification with Obama and the political system is leading to a surrender of critical intelligence, to making excuses for Obama's failures, and to blunting the desire for change. If there is to be real “change we can believe in,” or change of any kind, it must begin by breaking free of Obama and launching struggles for everything he is not delivering and more. And so we must *maintain* double consciousness. That is, we must be aware that Obama's victory changed something

fundamental in the racial history of the U.S., and simultaneously, that he and the political system are an obstacle to the changes people wanted when they voted for him.

With regard to the larger issues raised above, I don't know, for sure, whether the African American "double consciousness" view of the U.S. that I've tried to describe is true or false. This is an issue of whether the U.S. system can be transformed over time, not totally, but made better, through belief in and use of U.S. political ideas. On the one hand, this attitude of critical constitutionalism—the main African American strategy for change for a century and a half—has led to some profound, if incomplete, democratic changes. (Visiting a friend in her beach rental house a few weeks ago, I saw a group of about twenty, evenly mixed between African American, Hispanic, white, and some Asian American men and women, walk together down to the sea. Granted it was probably an office party, but no such office could have existed forty years ago.) This is more than the competing social philosophies, Marxism, Black Nationalism, and anarchism, have done—though they have been part of the ferment. So in the sense that by repeatedly struggling for justice one can get some of it—the African American strategy—the reform idea is not wrong, or at least not ridiculous.

On the other hand the repeated reform upheavals in the U.S. (and elsewhere) over the same century and a half—the Civil War, populism, the socialist and trade union movements, civil rights—have changed to some degree the fairness and inclusiveness of the social structure but never the structure itself. I believe we need to change the structure. Although I'll admit I don't know how, I think we start by recognizing, stating, and teaching (so far as we can) the need to do so, and therefore I didn't and don't back Obama. But I also think the revolutionaries (broadly speaking) need to listen more, and more respectfully, to others' political and social philosophies and their (not stupid or trivial) reasons for holding them; and that is why I've spent time in this article on the underlying double consciousness assumptions about the U.S. If we do practice this respectful openness, it may help our own ability to work out, as well as communicate, our ideas.

