

The Lincoln and Obama Legacies: The perils of channeling

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The media initially made much of the fact that President Barack Obama made his 2008 presidential candidacy announcement in Springfield, Illinois and that he made incessant deferential references to President Abraham Lincoln and his legacy.¹ The formative years and campaign speeches of a future president are critical to the understanding of what type president an individual will make. In 1857 Illinois State Senator Abraham Lincoln asserted, “A house divided cannot stand,” “I believe this government cannot endure permanently, half slave and half free.” In 2004 U.S. Senate Barack Obama from Illinois said, “There is not a liberal America and a conservative America, there is the United States of America.” In effect, Lincoln and Obama followed a long line of presidents extolling national unity and they are linked in the national race drama. Historically, Lincoln is still regarded as the Great Emancipator and his 1962/1863 Emancipation Proclamation produced a fundamental change in

¹ For example, the November 2008 edition of Newsweek has picture of President Obama with a shadow of President Lincoln. The caption read Obama’s Lincoln: The Strength of Humility: Channeling the 16th President. This was an article written by Evan Thomas and Richard Wolff pp28-32.

race relations. Lincoln faced a nation divided over slavery and at an economic crossroad. The America Obama leads is a highly polarized over a variety of issues, including race. The 19th century divisions over slavery are not the same as the current ideological/partisans division-liberal and conservative (Red v. Blue states) among states. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental schisms in the nation that makes the first African American president's job a daunting one. Because race is so important to the nation's ethos, there are inevitable parallels between the two men. Race continues to haunt our democracy and search for a race neutral state persists. Susan Schulten asserts "Just as Lincoln looked to the Constitution to answer the problems of slavery, Obama looked to the Constitution to speak candidly about race."² Her references were to 1858 speech Lincoln made at Cooper Union and to the March 18, 2008 Senator Obama made his so-called Rev. Wright speech at Constitutional Hall in Philadelphia. In some ways it is ironic that a 21st Century Democrat President is channeling a 19th Century Republican President. The question is whether this look back is a rhetorical or substantive channeling?

Many presidents channel their predecessors for style, guidance and references. Channeling is defined as making a link between a mentor or predecessor and one's actions or proposed actions. The nature of the presidency enlists presidents to be students of presidential history. Reading about past presidents can provide guidance and direction. The

² Susan Schulten "Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln and John Dewey," Denver University Law Review Vol.86 (2009) p.814.

White House is also full of portraits and memorabilia of past presidents. Channeling begins with presidential candidates comparing themselves to former presidents and declaring their future administrations will produce equally successful outcomes. The words and decisions of former presidents are often cited or referenced in speeches. It is not unusual for presidential staff to point out to journalists the parallels between the incumbent president's actions and former ones. Parenthetically, most of these calculated references are made with regard to the highly regarded presidents. It is unlikely that a president would use Franklin Pierce or Warren G. Harding as a role model. Although the purpose of such channeling is to legitimate a proposed policy or action, it doesn't always work as rhetorical device or a political shield. Hence, channeling is not without its perils. Context matters.

This paper will examine whether the spirit of Lincoln's and his race relation policies are a good role model for Obama. Granted Obama used symbolic connections to Lincoln to confirm the continuity. These connections included their service in the Illinois State Legislature and the fact they both lost a Congressional election before being elected President. President Obama took a similar train ride to his Inauguration and used Lincoln's Bible for the Oath. In his inaugural speech Obama asserted

For we know that our patchwork heritage is strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall

someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

In trying to bring the races socio-economically together, should Obama take political cues from Lincoln? More specifically, do the policies of two men represent a fundamental change in the America's quest for a race neutral society? If one controls for context and differences between 19th and 21st centuries, the two presidencies can be compared across political time. Historians have concluded that Lincoln was one of the great presidents; indeed he has been called a "Reconstruction President."³ Reconstruction presidents repudiate extant beliefs about government and promote a new way of organizing socio-economic relations. Race policy is a product of political time. Presidents inherit this policy as they do other policies.

Lincoln's Political Times and Race

Political time is a "medium through which presidents encounter received commitments of ideology and interest and claim authority to intervene in their development."⁴ In defining political time further, Stephen Skowronek paraphrases Lincoln "Political time is the president's construction of "where were are" as a polity and "whither we were

³ Stephen Skowronek Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from Johan Adams to George Bush (Cambridge: Belnap Press, 1993)

⁴ Skowronek, Stephen Presidential Leadership in Political Time (University of Kansas Press, 2008) p.18

tending.” For Skowronek it is “construction designed to authorize a certain course of political action at the moment.”⁵ Comparing Lincoln and Obama across political time require outlining the relevant political context and the legacy of their predecessors. In selecting race relations as the dependent variable, I will try to answer the following questions: How did blacks as slaves fit into the American political culture of the 19th Century? How do blacks as nominally equal citizens fit into the 21st American political culture? Were the slavery policy legacies from the Buchanan Administration comparable to those of the *race equalizing policy* of the Bush Administration? Did the two presidents predecessors leave their immediate predecessors with unsolved issues regarding race? Given these legacies, Did Lincoln and Obama effectively communicate their policy changes and decisions?

Nowhere is political time more apparent than in the run up to the 1860 general election. As a former Whig Congressperson, Abraham Lincoln had proven his mettle as a true supporter of nascent industrial capitalism. His new party, the Republicans, supported tariffs to protect industry and the funding of the Transcontinental Railroad. For Lincoln the big political issue also included the expansion of slavery into the territory and enforcement of the fugitive slave laws. Lincoln’s predecessor James Buchanan thought the way to keep the nation unified was to let slavery remain.

⁵ Ibid.

Although in Pennsylvania we are all opposed to slavery in the abstract, yet we will never violate the constitutional compact we have made with our sister states. Their rights will be held sacred by us. Under the Constitution, it is their own question, and there let it remain.⁶

On the last day of his office term Buchanan signed a Constitutional Amendment (Corwin Amendment of 1861) that would have protected slavery in perpetuity.⁷ Buchanan also questioned whether Lincoln would enforce the fugitive slaves laws. The Buchanan Presidency represented the epitome of the prevailing sentiment that the integrity of the union was paramount over eliminating slavery. Buchanan was not alone in trying to fashion some type of compromise policy that would allow the south to maintain slavery and stay in the Union. It could be argued that Senator Stephen Douglas, Democrat from Illinois, support of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act was a failed attempt to fashion a compromise on the issue.

In the 1858 debates between Douglas and Lincoln, the issues of slavery, the efficacy of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and whether it repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise and notion of popular sovereignty. . Although Lincoln lost his bid to unseat Douglas, he would defeat him for the presidency two years later. Lincoln, a staunch unionist, regarded the integrity of the union more important than the end of the institution of slavery.⁸ Given the political tensions of the times, it was unlikely that a

⁶ Cited in Klein, Phillip S President James Buchanan: A Biography (American Political Biography Press 1995)

⁷ Ibid, p.362.

⁸ Phillip Shaw Paludan argues that slavery vs. union was not a choice of either or but rather both and. See The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994)

presidential candidate would have run on a platform of immediate abolition. Attacking so-called "Slave Power" i.e. slave owners' control of the government was more acceptable. Lincoln was considered a moderate as compared to his rival for the nomination. This is why the Republican Party selected Lincoln instead of William Seward or Salmon Chase as the nominee.

Lincoln had created an image of a self-made man who was self-taught and honest. The debates with Senator Douglas consolidated Lincoln's moderate centrist political persona. Because there were no brainstorming campaigns, Lincoln, the candidate, depended on surrogates and media coverage to get his message out. His photographs (daguerreotypes) were designed to generate trust. The only candidate of the four that campaigned in the way we use the term, was Stephen Douglas. He proved to be weak candidate for the Northern Democrats.

Lincoln and the Radical Abolitionists

Lincoln was never fully in the camp of the so-called radical abolitionists such as Charles Sumner. Keeping his distance allowed Lincoln to appear more reasonable to southern unionists. Besides repudiating the institution of slavery is not the same as asserting the equality of "Negroes." Like his predecessor Buchanan, Lincoln supported so-called 1861 Corwin Amendment that would have prohibited Congress from interfering with slavery in the states where it existed. The Amendment passed the Congress but the Civil War started before all the states had a chance to

vote on it. Lincoln's support of the Amendment must have sent mixed signals to abolitionists.

American historians spend their careers debating the true feelings of Lincoln toward the "Negroes."⁹ It is not clear whether Lincoln gave up on his Colonization projects. Yet a case has been made that Lincoln was philosophically opposed to slavery. There are speeches and letters that indicated Lincoln did not support slavery. A letter to Albert Hodges dated April 4, 1864 is often cited.

"I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel. And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling."

The idea that "Negroes" were equal under the Constitution made sense in the abstract (and maybe to a few so-called radicals) but the idea that they were social equals (and should be treated accordingly) was a difficult construction to accept for many 19th century Americans. Maybe the ambiguity or the "inconsistency" Douglas complained about, served Lincoln's interest. Remember before the War, the President was getting feedback from advisors and surrogates about how to proceed on this issue. Lincoln made statements and actions before he was President and after to support both sides of the slavery issue.

Moreover, few historians debate Lincoln's skills as a 19th Century politician. Although there were no so-called scientific polls, Lincoln was

⁹ John Stauffer Giants: The parallels lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln (Twelve, New York,2008)

sensitive to public opinion. This is not to say Lincoln was a stealth abolitionist but rather he understood that abolitionist fiery rhetoric would only inflame disunity and secessionist sentiment. Since Lincoln regarded himself as a pragmatist, keeping an eye on the prize –the preservation of the union was prudent. For Lincoln negotiation and compromise was preferred over imposing his views on others. Otherwise he would not have supported the Corwin Amendment.

What emerges from the Lincoln Presidency on the issue of race was centralist pragmatism. Lincoln worked hard not to offend the sensitivity of whites on this issue. Yet the Emancipation Proclamation represented a fundamental break what would be later called the “punctuated equilibrium.”¹⁰ The freeing of the slaves changed the dynamics of extant political culture, disrupted the hegemony of the southern agrarian political power and changed the nature of the presidency.

During the War the President never expressed any contempt for those who disagreed with his views. Lincoln fully intended to incorporate rebel leaders back into the political fold. The fact that Lincoln selected Andrew Johnson, a Unionist Democrat from Tennessee as his vice president, demonstrated that he wanted to reconcile the political differences between the states.

¹⁰ Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner Agenda and Instability in American Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Revisionist historians have characterized Lincoln as a closet liberal.¹¹ We are told that his three encounters between Frederick Douglass, the black abolitionist, and Lincoln made a lasting impression on the two men.¹² We don't know whether the conversations with Frederick Douglass changed his view of the "Negro." Granted it would have been difficult for a man like Lincoln to escape some of his socialization about race.¹³ With the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln had gone through the policy door on race and there was no turning back.¹⁴ The so-called radical had a quasi-supporter in Lincoln but fate of Reconstruction was left dangling with Lincoln's assassination. Lincoln had selected Andrew Johnson as vice president because he was a Democrat, Southerner and unionist. It was the quintessential reconciliation gesture. However in retrospect, it was the wrong choice. Johnson defied the so-called Radical Republican's Reconstruction projects and set out to accelerate the rehabilitation of the Confederacy leaders. Johnson's recalcitrance on the Radical Reconstruction agenda, in part, prompted his Impeachment.

¹¹ Stauffer, op.cit

¹² Stauffer, p.22, 24.

¹³ This may explain why there is no memorable statement by the President on the Draft Riots of 1863 and the defensive answers reportedly gave Frederick Douglass regarding the slowness of the retaliatory against rebels who murdered black soldiers and unequal pay black soldiers received. See Stauffer, p.20. Paul D. Escott book paints Lincoln is a less celebratory light. He concluded that Lincoln was consistently conciliatory and flexible with slaveholders." He also concluded that "Lincoln chose not to take political risks to improve the future status of black people" p209 see "What Shall We do with the Negro? Lincoln, White Racism and the Civil War America (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009)

¹⁴ The meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation has been challenged in the historical literature. See Benjamin Quarles Negro in the Civil War (Boston: Little Brown, 1953) p.162 and Lincoln and the Negro (New York: Oxford University, 1962) p.187.

Lincoln's gradual approach to incorporating "Negroes" stumbled through Ulysses S. Grant's two-term presidency before ending with the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidency. The years of Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement of blacks shaped the politics of the south and race was interwoven into the fabric of the nation's political culture.

Race and Politics

Race has dominated American politics for generations. Obviously, the American political culture, with its racist underpinning did not come unraveled by the Emancipation Proclamation and post Civil War Amendments. Reconstruction failed and Jim Crow laws and black disenfranchisement lingered until the mid 20th Century. Blacks who could vote, voted for the party of Lincoln until the Great Depression. The Great Emancipator kept his place as the most admired white man in the Black community until Franklin Roosevelt. The Depression and the widespread unemployment in the black community and the Republican response to it undermined the Republican Party in the mind of most blacks. However, Roosevelt's decision to downplay the violation of black civil rights in order to keep Southern Congressional Democrats' support for the New Deal did not result in blacks returning to the party of Lincoln. Roosevelt's Faustian bargain may have uplifted the economic situation for many blacks but it also kept in place the structural barriers that precluded blacks from competing with whites for jobs, education and housing. For that

concession to Southern politicians, the Democratic Party was able to keep solid South voting Democratic in Presidential elections.

It was Rev. Martin Luther King, the black Civil Rights Movement and President Lyndon Johnson that pushed through the 1964 Civil Rights Act dismantling Jim Crow laws and 1965 Voting Rights Act providing federal enforcement of voting rights of southern Blacks. President Johnson was also the first president to advocate an Affirmative Action Policy. In effect, Johnson initiated *race-equalizing policies* followed by his successors-even Republican Presidents from Nixon to Bush. Implementing this policy has been politically costly for Democrats. Since the 1960s, whites in the New South have voted for the Republicans in Presidential elections. Party realignment was, in part, based on the opposition to the *race equalizing policies* of the Democrats. *Race equalizing policies* continue under Democrat Presidents and the question is whether this type of incrementalism will be consolidated under President Obama or whether he will move the nation forward into a race-neutral society or Post-Racial Society. Is this the real echo of the 2008 Election?

Barack Obama and the 2008 Election

The beginning of the 21st Century found a nation unenthusiastically supporting the *race equalizing policies* of Lyndon Johnson. Since the 1960s politics has changed. The Republican Party has changed and the race hierarchical sentiments of the Old South have been melded into new southern Social Conservatism. Granted the current red and blue states'

divide is not comparable to 19th Century North/South divisions but the nation is currently divided between Liberal and Conservative states.

Although the Constitutional equality of all Americans regardless of color is relatively settled, the objective disparities between blacks and whites are irrefutable. Nonetheless, a few commentators regarded the election of President Obama as the advent of the Post-Racial Society.¹⁵ Like Lincoln, President Obama promised to bring Americans together. Both Presidents faced embedded racial attitudes.

In the run up to 2008 Presidential Election Obama used his youth, race, charisma and oratorical skills to mobilize the youth, minority and progressive voters. In our telegenic times, youth and appearances sell. The modern American advertising and marketing industry is based on young models buying, selling and consuming products. The subtext of television is that old people are not so interesting, exciting and happy as young people. In most cases, a youthful appearance trumps grey-haired gravitas. Today, it is not uncommon for younger candidates to use subliminal messages such as “bridge to 21st Century (e.g. 1996 Clinton v. Dole campaign) and word like “new” and “change” (Obama v. McCain) against their opponents. The fact that Obama was still in his forties and has achieved so much visibility and esteems so early makes him appealing to young people.

¹⁵ For my discussion of a Post-Racial Society see “America as a Post-Racial Society: Building a New Discourse Architecture”, Unpublished Manuscript, 2009)

Charisma and oratorical skills are also prized in American politics. Lincoln and Obama share a rare elegance for a presidential candidate.¹⁶ Obama's use of analogies, humor and dramatic pauses works in his speeches. Obama's speaking cadence shows traces of the sermonic styles of some black clergy and the learned emphasis of a professor. This gift helps him as a candidate and has served him well in speeches. His speaking skills led journalist James Fallows to conclude, "Based on his rhetoric, Barack Obama would arrive not because of support for a list of programs, although he has offered them, but because of the support for cast of mind."¹⁷ For Fallows, an Obama victory was an endorsement of the person, not a plan. A thinking president is preferred among the intellectual class but a rhetorical presidency is a critical part of governing.¹⁸ Now that he is the president, the nation has a right to expect a plan. This is particularly true for race and politics. There was an exuberant response to the Obama election, particularly among African Americans who may expect the president to free them from the race cage. It is obvious now that other Americans may have expected more from him than they expected from his predecessors.¹⁹

¹⁶ Kathleen Kendall's research suggests that by the electronic press neutralized candidate speeches in the 1992 (Clinton and Bush. Will Obama be an exception? See Kathleen E. Kendall "Public Speaking in the Presidential Primaries Through Media Eyes" American Behavioral Scientist Vo. 37, No.2 (November, 1993) pp240-251.

¹⁷ Fallows, James, "Rhetorical Questions" The Atlantic Monthly (September, 2008) p.52

¹⁸ Tulis, Jeffrey, The Rhetorical Presidency (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)

¹⁹ Interestingly, Obama is aware of this possibility. He has been called a "human Rorschach test." In an interview Obama confesses, "I serve as a blank screen on which

Did Americans seek a “Reconstruction President” in Obama? Obama is arguably attempting to repudiate the blind sentinel free market economics of his Republican predecessors. This is a difficult project on its own terms and could become the measuring stick for the Obama Presidency. However this may or may not change race relations in America.

What does Obama have to do to change race relations to qualify as a Reconstruction President, race-wise? The guiding principle of nation’s current race relation strategy can be called a “*race equalizing policy*.” Basically this policy used legal means-the federal courts and law enforcement- to protect the rights to equal opportunities to jobs, education, and housing of all American regardless of color. The goal is to remove institutional barriers that support racial inequality and promote attitudinal change among all Americans. This policy has a long history but it was consolidated with the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration’s reaction to the black civil rights movement. President Johnson’s successors have not attempted to repudiate this policy. President George W. Bush, with his advocacy of school reform, saw himself as foursquare in his support of the policy. The question is, is this fifty-year policy sufficient or effective to achieve a post-racial society? Is this policy a form of institutionalized gradualism?

people project their own views. As such I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them.”¹⁹ Cited in “Explaining the Riddle” Economist (August 23, 2008) p.20.

Obama and the Progressives²⁰

Progressive Americans are the most dedicated adherents to the mythos of the Democratic wish. They believe that if the nation gets the right leader, the people will override the interest groups and do a lot of creative things leading to the emergence of a true democracy. This type of citizen agency is the essence of the Democratic Wish.²¹ Some adherents of this view may suggest some type of *new social contract* between government and the citizen. There is also an undertone of soft paternalism in the policies they advocate for the poor. We know what is best for them attitude. Simply put, creating a race neutral society is just one of the objective of this politics.

Are progressives projecting their yearnings upon Obama? This may explain why they are still angry with him for not supporting the single payer option in the Health Care bill? Do they believe that because he has a community organizing background, that once in office, he will speak truth to economic power? Presidential candidate rhetoric aside, massive increases of civic engagement is unlikely. The current financial crisis has channeled the energy of Main Street into economic survival rather than toward more citizen involvement with governmental decisions.

Progressive narratives have been so cogent because they have made an excellent case against negligence of the Bush Administration. It is

²⁰ I use the term progressive to include white liberal intellectuals, professional community organizers and their academic cohorts. Sometimes called the “left” they adhere to a more direct citizen participation vision of American Democracy.

²¹ Morene, James A. The Democratic Wish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998),

obvious that the nation's financial and economic problems go beyond the Bush's tax and anti-regulatory policies. In order for the average citizen to think intelligently about the future, there need to be more information about the uncertainty of the new economy. Part of President Obama's task is to teach a new economic lesson. The same is true for race policy.

The Post-Racial Society and its Critics

Where are we "tending" in race policy? Will Obama take the nation to another level of race relations? The history of America makes it difficult for the nation to forget about race. Charles Mills' The Racial Contract suggests that whites have bought into a social contract that imposes racial obligations on them.²² Whites are enlisted to continue discriminatory practices in order to protect their entitlements, also known as white privilege. Sometimes knowingly but often by remaining silent in the face of injustice, whites are implicated in the maintenance of the race hierarchy. The discriminatory social system is so effective that many whites are unconscious that they are acting in behalf of a set of practices that reinforced and supported inequities. Whites often defend the status quo even when it is not in their best interest to do so. For many, it is a simple "us and them" mentality.

These racial attitudes persist despite the fact that the 2010 Census indicates the nation is becoming multi-racial. Lincoln was facing a binary situation of blacks and whites. Our nation now includes growing numbers

²² Mills, Charles The Racial Contract (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997)

of Latinos and Asians. As this process continues, the color line will become more difficult to enforce. The great question is what is the next step? The continuation of the *race-equalizing policy* has its own glass ceiling. First, it does not provide for any reparations for past racial injustices. It also assumes that Americans can achieve equality after starting at many disparate places. Under those circumstances, the socio-economic gap between the races will continue indefinitely. Secondly, it does not adequately address the racial injustice implicit in the disproportional incarceration rates for black men.

The Search for a Betterment Policy

Fashioning a socio-economic betterment policy for African Americans is an extremely complex enterprise. Not only are there questions as to whether a major compensatory strategy would work, there is no national will to do so. Reparation, although intriguing, never attracted the support of most African Americans. Obviously slaves were not compensated but what is due to their descendants? Following the lead of W.E.B Dubois, political theorist Lawrie claims that

Conceived as a massive investment in black communities, rather than a per capita payment, and targeted primarily at the poorest African Americans, reparation could create a basis for attacking the deep economic inequality Du Bois understands to be incompatible with democracy and thereby broadening the base of African Americans who can be said to enjoy the fruits of citizenship in a meaningful sense.

. . . Reparation speaks to the second strand of Du Bois's economic claims by providing some recompense for the years of slave labor and for the exclusion from access to resources that succeeded abolition. By

attending to the value of African Americans' labor under slavery and to the continuities between slavery and the neoslavery of the Jim Crow period.²³

Balfour is not saying that Du Bois would have endorsed the idea of reparation. He may have thought that the idea was a "pipedream."²⁴ One could read Du Bois as an argument for reparation. Some type of reparation would also represent an acknowledgement of the contribution of African Americans made to the nation. An apology and the expression of gratitude would accompany reparations. The idea has been around a long time before James Forman, the former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), interrupted a sermon at New York's Riverside Church to present a "Black Manifesto" that demanded reparations. This protest occurred in 1969 and in 2000 Randall Robinson wrote The Debt: What America Owes Blacks.²⁵ However the idea of reparation had a short intellectual lifetime. Besides even if it resurfaces as an idea it may be too complex to implement.

The other policy initiative that would promote a race neutral incarceration is also problematical. Policy wise attacking the incarceration rate for blacks seems more amenable to education and statutory laws. Although black are 12% of the population, 44% of prisoners are black. There are many of explanations for this shocking statistics. Changing sentencing and punishment policies in states is an

²³ Balfour, Lawrie Unreconstructed Democracy: W. E. B. DuBois and the Case for Reparations," American Political Science Review, Vol. 97, N0.1 (February 2003) p.41.

²⁴ Ibid, p40

²⁵ Randall Robinson The Debt: What America Owes Blacks (New York: Dutton, 1969).

equally difficult mountain to climb. The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 is a minor step in addressing the blatantly unfair incarceration policy. Vesla Weaver argues that this aggressive incarceration policy was a tactic of the conservatives who after losing the civil rights struggle began stigmatizing blacks as criminals. This led the federal government to enact Safe Street laws and greater funding of local law enforcement agencies. The result was that states enacted harsh incarceration laws and penalties. This led to what she called a “carcerated state.”²⁶ Overcoming these racial disparities is difficult because black and white attitudes are far apart.²⁷ There is also an academic debate as to whether class and economic conditions contribute more than race to the incarceration of African Americans.²⁸

Unlike the public pressure on Lincoln to do something about slavery, Obama does not have a strong public demand to do something about reparation or the increasing incarceration of Americans. In many ways changing social policy is a captive of the distribution of information. Has Obama escape the information cage of Lincoln?

Presidents and the Distribution of Information

²⁶ Weaver, Vesla, “Frontlash: Race and the Development of Primitive Crime Policies” Studies in American Political Development, Vol. 21, No.2. (Fall, 2007) pp.230-265

²⁷ JamesUnnever” Two Worlds Far Apart: Black-White Differences in beliefs about why African-American men are disproportionately imprisoned” Criminology Vol 48, No.1 (2008)

²⁸ Jeff Yates “Racial Incarceration disparity among states” Social Science Quarterly Vo. 778, No.4 (Dec 1997) pp1001-1010; James Unnever “The Social Sources of American ‘Punitiveness: A test of three Competing Models”, Criminology Vol. 48, No.1 (February,2010) 99-129.

By the Mid 19th Century, Abraham Lincoln's America had outgrown its existing communication networks. The nation was fragmented socio-economically and politically into many constituencies and interest groups. A coherence and understandable message about race would have been unheard and unheeded. In addition, there was a related problem of authority and communication within its range of action. Since there were no 24/7-cable news or cell phones, Lincoln's views on slavery and rights of freemen under the Constitution could not reach all the regions of the nation instantly. The interpretation of Lincoln's views was left to opinion leaders in the Washington Establishment (Congresspersons and newspaper journalists) and those political leaders on the periphery of the nation. Opinion leaders away from Washington made interpretations on their own while members of the Lincoln Administration were busy trying to impose their frame on ongoing events. Lincoln, the vanguard of a new party, did not have a vast political machine with its requisite payoffs to impose loyalty. Indeed, there was no centralizing incentive or loyalty among messengers. Accordingly, the Civil War served a centralizing force to pull the union together, albeit briefly. After the War and Lincoln's Assassination, there was a resurgence of regionalism/decentralization and more importantly blatant mistreatment of former slaves.

Still Lincoln had an advantage over Obama in that most 19th Century Americans were illiterate and without instant access to broadcast images. They did not have countless pundits bombarding them with

analyses and second-guessing. Images of President Lincoln were made in newspaper cartoons and by word of mouth. In the 19th Century Presidential action took days if not weeks to reach the attention of the masses. Indeed if Lincoln had what we regard as essential and instant polls and communication, history may have been entirely different ²⁹ Nevertheless; Fouad Ajami has already decided, “Mr. Obama isn't Lincoln with a BlackBerry.”

Today the 24/7 news cycle offers instant evaluations of every presidential action or non-action. Any person with a telephone can be surveyed in a random telephone poll as to whether he/she approves of the President Obama's performance. Although much was made of candidate Obama's knowledge of the Internet and other electronic devices, he has a different problem. The corporate world has lost some of its control over political communication. The *New York Times* now competes with bloggers over the interpretation of presidential action. We also live in a notion of niche communication communities with fewer overlapping social networks. Moreover wayward pundits can reach the nation with equal speed. They have their own network of readers and viewers. Like Lincoln, the Obama Administration is fanatically trying to frame events but within the context of crowded communication networks. More importantly, there is no centralizing mechanism with which to forge a new race message.

²⁹ See Seymour J. Mandelbaum, Boss Tweed's New York (New York: J. Wiley, 1965),

Even more importantly, there is no individual or group agitating for a policy beyond race equalization.

Summary

Many books are written about great presidents. Abraham Lincoln qualifies as one of the most written about presidents. This paper is, at best, a preliminary review of Obama's nascent presidency. Although the Obama presidency is still in the making, there are enough signs to make some preliminary evaluations. In this review of Obama's channeling of Lincoln we suggested that context mattered. A case can be made that Obama should utilize Lincoln's cautious and conciliatory tactics in these polarizing times. With respect to African American betterment policy this is a minimalist one.

President Obama came to office with a certain course of action defined partly by political time. So far Obama is continuing the *race equalizing policies* of President Lyndon B. Johnson.³⁰ The Johnson regime of *race equalizing policy* has lasted for almost fifty years. Perhaps it is too soon for the inherent contradictions to become obvious. Accordingly, it is impossible for Obama to assert leadership in this area. A case can be made

³⁰ George Edward would argue that presidents are facilitators, not directors of political change. Political culture and constitutional limits forces Presidents to be a facilitator rather than a director. Facilitators are highly dependent on the opportunities handed to them. He characterizes Lincoln as a facilitator. Following this line of thinking, Obama has to wait for an opportunity to change race policy and seized it. See George Edward, The Strategic Presidency (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009)

that much needs to be done with this policy before embarking on a new and different one.³¹ Institutionalized gradualism has its supporters since they put their faith in the new generation.

The Lincoln presidency came at the developmental stage of industrial capitalism. To facilitate this Lincoln supported the Tariff and the Transcontinental Railroad. The Obama presidency is either in the midst of an adjustment period for financial capitalism or at the end of its ascendancy. As I said elsewhere this type of capitalism is not labor intensive and prone to radical shifts in investments and production centers.³² This makes it extremely difficult to fashion a socio-economic solution that is nation specific.

Granted the nation is in a different maze of uncertainty but the presidency has changed since Lincoln. Presidents today are expected to conduct personal campaigns and make exaggerated promises. Hence the presidency has become ever more personalized in an increasingly secular nation. Simply put, more is expected of presidents than in the 19th Century.

³¹ King and Smith considered this policy in more institutional form. They defined “*Racial* institutional orders are ones in which political actors have adopted (and often adapted) racial concepts, commitments, and aims in order to help bind together their coalition and structure governing institutions that express and serve the interests of their architects” see King, Desmond and Roger Smith (2005), “Racial Orders in American Political Development,” American Political Science Review Vol. 99, No.1 (February, 2005) p. 75

³² Fast Capitalism, “Sandboxes and the Future of Cities: The Folly of Liberal Solution Sets” Unpublished Manuscript, 2009.

We also suggested that the quality of the oppositional narrative also matter. Lincoln had the so-called radical Republican as a foil. Modern day progressives have yet to develop a meaningful oppositional narrative or leader. This is particularly clear with respect to moving beyond a *race equalizing policy*.

It is also clear that in order for a President to become a Reconstruction President in race relations he must do something that could be classified as a Situational Improvement Policy (SIP).³³ Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation qualifies as such a policy. President Johnson's support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act qualifies as such a policy. Arguably, it may be too soon in the Obama Administration to identify such a policy. We have proffered two possibilities-reparation and race-neutral incarceration. However, there does not seem to be much public interest in either of these policies.

President Obama's election was an historical event but by itself does not qualify as a situation improvement policy. Granted there is a lot of items on the President's agenda that are important, distracting and time consuming. Unlike Lincoln, Obama has an economy altering Recession that could change America, as we know it.

I repeat *race equalizing policy* has its limits and may not get the nation to a post-racial society. Creating a post-racial society is a difficult

³³ Rich, Wilbur "Presidential Leadership and the Politics of Race: Stereotypes, Symbols and Scholarship" in Wilbur Rich ed. African American Perspectives on Political Science (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007)

transition to make and it may take several cycles of presidents to get the nation there.