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## Race and the 2012 Presidential Election

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### INSIDE:

**Catholic Social Thought and the Common Good** .....p. 3

**The Ryan-Romney Budget Plan and Catholic Moral Criteria**.....p. 4

**“Impossible Subjects” with Impossible Choices**.....p. 6

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We live in an odd in-between time, neither free of the racist politics of the past nor committed to achieving racial justice within our multi-racial reality. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the casualties of racism include not only the lives lost to death-dealing racism, but also truth and justice.

As in 2008, there is a new opportunity for people of faith to counter-frame the worn-out white narratives dominating the political landscape. Sadly, in 2012, leading Catholic institutions have yet to lend their witness to racial justice or contend fully with America’s racial history.

There is a critical need, both on the grounds of Catholic social teaching and fundamental democratic values, to counter-frame the dominant white narrative. Doing so is a prerequisite step toward a future that embraces our increasingly diverse citizenry. Yet to do so we also need to expose the hard and soft racial frames that keep structural inequities invisible in public policy debates while they pollute our souls.

By “racial frame” I mean the perceptions, stereotypes, ideologies, narratives, and emotive responses used to make sense of the role of race in society.<sup>1</sup> Joe Feagin, a preeminent scholar of race, explains that “hard racial framing” typically employs explicitly racist language and imagery, openly invokes white superiority, and expresses overt disgust with people of color. In contrast, he explains, “soft racial framing” eschews explicitly racist language (like the N-word) but commonly downplays or ignores structural racism through so-called colorblind language and glorifies persons of color who do not acknowledge systemic inequalities.

Widespread use of white racial frames since the election of Barack Obama belies the claim that we live in a “post-racial” society. Even during his candidacy, it was widely reported that Obama received more death threats than any presidential candidate in history and he gained Secret Service protection eighteen months prior to the election, earlier than any previous presidential candidate.<sup>2</sup>

—Continued on page 2



Upon his election and entry into office, blatantly racist language and imagery, depicting the President and his family as monkeys, as Hitler, and questioning his citizenship became widely available on the Internet and in Tea Party protests across the nation.<sup>3</sup> Such imagery hearkens back to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes from Virginia*, in which he likened Africans to orangutans, and demonstrates how we remain moored to our racist past.<sup>4</sup>

Hard racial framing was also used against President Obama and Judge Sonia Sotomayor upon her nomination to the Supreme Court. Newt Gingrich and several other prominent Republicans criticized Sotomayor as a "Latina racist."<sup>5</sup> Their criticism focused upon a speech Sotomayor gave to students at the University of California Law School at Berkeley. Her speech, entitled "Raising the Bar: Latino and Latina Presence in the Judiciary and the Struggle for Representation,"<sup>6</sup> discussed her Latina identity "and the influence I perceive that it has on the bench." She expressed the view that racial and gender diversity on the bench would provide a broader perspective because socially and economically disadvantaged groups offer a particular experiential perspective on issues of inequality that elude relatively privileged whites. She acknowledged that white male judges in *Brown v. Board of Education* were able to see past their privileged position (critics conveniently ignored this part of her speech). Sotomayor concluded, "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who has not lived that life." Far from racist, she expresses a perspective central to the wisdom of the preferential option in Catholic social teaching. John Paul II explains that it is from the vantage point of the oppressed in society that the faithful can give concrete expression to loving one's neighbor as oneself and "serve him instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage."<sup>7</sup>

Mitt Romney's July 11, 2012 speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People utilized soft racial framing by failing to acknowledge any concrete structural impediments that people of color face. Although Romney acknowledged disproportionate joblessness in African American communities, his NAACP speech and campaign proposals do not recognize any political or economic structures that hinder development of communities of color. Romney stressed free markets and reducing government spending as the path to economic

freedom for African Americans. By failing to acknowledge any specific, concrete structural impediment well known to his NAACP audience, he did not demonstrate any practical understanding of white complicity in the devastating consequences of racism today.

Both hard and soft racial frames fail to acknowledge what President Obama has accomplished for social justice and the common good. For example, as Michael Grunwald, Senior Correspondent for *Time* magazine explains through the title of his new book, *The New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era*, both conservative and liberal critics of the President have failed to acknowledge the successes of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Grunwald details how the ARRA not only provided short-term aid that provided assistance to states and victims of the Great Recession, it also provided long-term re-investment that included \$90 billion for clean energy—the first such public investment of this magnitude in alternative energy.<sup>8</sup>

The Affordable Care Act, if fully implemented, can significantly shrink the nation's racial disparities in health insurance coverage and costs.<sup>9</sup> Although the plan provides critically important preventive care and immunizations, expands local access through community health centers (badly needed in vulnerable neighborhoods), and prevents insurance companies from rescinding people's coverage when they get sick, Republicans nearly universally opposed the Act (one Republican House member voted for an early version of the bill).

Presidential candidate Obama's speech on race on March 18, 2008, counter-framed race by explaining how racial inequalities "can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow," and invited whites not only to recognize the claims of African Americans not just with words but with deeds by investing in schools and communities, enforcing Civil Rights laws, and providing new ladders of opportunity.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, as Frederick Harris explains, Obama has tended to stress race-neutral policies, which may exact a price for all those who still struggle at the bottom of economic and racial divides.<sup>11</sup> Until whites acknowledge the wisdom of Obama's speech on race and our common need to learn from people of color throughout U.S. history, we will fail to counter the white racial frames that block the possibility of racial and economic justice in the future.

—Endnotes on back cover





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## Race and the 2012 Presidential Election

Continued from page 2

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.
- 2 Kevin Johnson, "Scope of Obama's Secret Service Protection Proves Daunting," *USA Today*, (December 14, 2008) cited in Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Orbis Books, 2010), p.6.
- 3 Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe Feagin, "The Racial Dialectic: President Barack Obama and the White Racial Frame," *Qualitative Sociology* Vol 35, (2012): 143-162, here p. 148-150.
- 4 Thomas Jefferson's *Notes from Virginia* is available at the University of Virginia and also online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/dpart3/3h490t.html> accessed August 17, 2012.
- 5 ABC News, May 27, 2009 accessed online on August 20, 2012 at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/SoniaSotomayor/story?id=7685284#.UDJBSq6vd1M>.
- 6 Judge Sonia Sotomayor, "Raising the Bar: Latino and Latina Presence in the Judiciary and the Struggle for Representation," was originally given October 26, 2001, at the University of California at Berkeley Law School and was accessed August 20, 2012, at [http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2009/05/26\\_sotomayor.shtml](http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2009/05/26_sotomayor.shtml).
- 7 Blessed John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38, cited in Margaret Pfeil, "The Transformative Power of the Periphery," in Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Orbis Books, 2007), p. 129.
- 8 See Kai Ryssdal's interview with Michael Grunwald on the program Marketplace, available online at <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/economy/political-lessons-obamas-stimulus> which includes details of how stimulus has been spent (accessed August 20, 2012).
- 9 Lisa Clemans-Cope, Genevieve M. Kenney, Matthew Buettgens, Caitlin Carroll, and Frederic Blavin, "The Affordable Care Act's Coverage Expansions Will Reduce Differences in Un-insurance Rates by Race and Ethnicity," *Health Affairs* Vol. 31, No. 5, (May 2012): 920-930.
- 10 Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," accessed online on August 20, 2012, at [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250\\_162-3947908.html?pageNum=2&tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-250_162-3947908.html?pageNum=2&tag=contentMain;contentBody).
- 11 Frederick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 192.

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