

**First Presidential Debate Edition**

Loury: John McWhorter.

McWhorter: Hi Glenn, on this Sunday afternoon. How are you doing?

Loury: Yeah, I'm good. Presidential debate #1.

McWhorter: So, finally one has happened. What do you think?

Loury: Well, I'm glad we're going to be having these conversations. You and I are going to be talking after each of the presidential debates.

McWhorter: That's right.

Loury: The vice-presidential debate and I think it's a good tradition that we're inaugurating here.

McWhorter: This is going to be fun.

Loury: So, high stakes, indeed, and the drama of the atmosphere was so charged, you could have cut it with a knife, it seemed to me, and I don't know what the viewership was officially, but scores of millions, and there they were in the same space. I was taken by, I don't know, the physicality of it all, I mean, the fact that they were these emblems of, you know, these kinds of -- they're not just symbols, of course, they're real things, but I'm just saying they're standing in for so much that's in conflict in our society.

This campaign has been going on for so long, and the intensity of the things that are being flung back and forth, both by the campaigns and by everybody else...

McWhorter: And the drama that happened last week with the bail out and McCain almost pulling out.

Loury: The financial thing, you know, we can talk about that if we were talking about that. But, you know, yeah, so I was on the edge of my chair.

McWhorter: You know, I don't know why this was, given all that I've written and said. Your own blogging has included about Obama and the color of his skin and what that meant, but that was the first time that I truly felt, in my gut, a combination of being stunned and being happy, and happy in a way that's kind of primitive, it still does there, that the man debating McCain, the man who is applying to be president is black. It hit me. Seeing the contrast, I think, between him and McCain, who in so many ways is so very, very white.

Loury: John, I am very troubled. I think I might be in the company of Shelby Steels here. I am very troubled with your emphasis on this blackness and whiteness. I mean, can we plumb the depths of that a little bit.

McWhorter: Can you really honestly say that as an American, and especially one who isn't white, yourself, living in

2008, that just watching the visuals of that when it started, it didn't strike you a little bit that the man who was walking out was not white. It's the first time. It was stunning.

I don't think about it in the way that I think a lot of black Obama fans think about it. I came out of the starting gate saying, "Let's look at him as a person." But still, something did get me when they both walked out like that.

Loury: I'm not going to say I didn't notice it. I have confessed here before to feeling some excitement about the coalitionist aspect of it and at a political aesthetics or some level, there is something cutting against the grain about it. I think it wants to be examined. I don't want to go with that feeling too easily.

McWhorter: And I actually agree with you.

Loury: I want to say, "What do we think is really behind that," because if you allow that, you know, for example, if you allow some kind of deep twinge, tingly, excitement sense of profundity to that, then that is a cousin to a lot of other racially-charged feelings by black and whites, and others as well, feelings of I don't know what, someone's being executed for a capital crime or when we're grappling with the sort of grimy underside of our industrial society,

the failures and the pathology. I mean, in other words, I don't want to allow a racial thing to ungoverned and just to run wild in me. I mean, just because it happens to be on the positive side in this case, something like that. I mean, I just want to know what you think about it because really, I'm not against what you're doing or saying, I'm just kind of uncomfortable with it.

McWhorter: And I don't want to agree with you too much because we're supposed to be going head to head...

Loury: Like Obama did with McCain...

McWhorter: The exact thing, one of the things he did wrong, too much of it, to his detriment. But, let me refine. I get a little bit itchy when I read the column that gets written now, about every 48 hours, by some very well-intentioned black writer, where it's clear that they're cheering Obama on as a black man, primarily, and that his views would have to be Clarence Thomas's before they'd consider not supporting him, and what they're thinking, I think, and this is consistent with the sorts of views that I'm known for, they're thinking that could be me, like racism isn't so bad for me, the white man can't get me down so much because look, they let one of me up there. For me, it's not that. It's more national. I do look at race in this country as a problem. I think it's a problem

for many reasons that I think a lot of the black commentary would disagree with me about, but still, I do think of it as a problem, and so when I saw a black man striding out, I thought wow, it's evidence that we have come a long way, not me bouncing on the couch with my popcorn and pumping my fist and just thinking, way to go brother. For me, that's too tribalist, and I think it exaggerates the extent to which white people don't like black people. Does that make sense?

Loury: Yes, I understood every word you said, I believe, but no, I don't agree, I don't think it's sensible at the end of the day.

I hesitate here because I don't want this to be understood as a partisan comment in any way, that is, to say a comment that is meant to cut against Obama. But, you know, he has had to run away from the black community. You understand that. Jeremiah Wright, south side of Chicago, I won't belabor the point.

He's had to run his campaign away from the black community. He's had to be black in a virtual, theoretical, symbolic sense, not in a substantive -- he hasn't been able to get to the NAACP. He hasn't allowed those black inflectionists to get, you know, to have too much reign in his rhetoric. I really do not mean this as any criticism of the

candidate. I am simply stating what I see to be the fact. So now, if I cooperate with you in this celebration of the political aesthetic shock value of a dark-skinned person standing opposite the conservative candidate in a national contest, he's our gladiator of the progressive forces in this society, fighting over and against the you-know-who's...

McWhorter: Right, that's what I mean...

Loury: If I allow myself to enter in there with you and to somebody's blackness, in a way, I'm, too, running away from the black community in the sense that I would be saying, it's OK, the shame of blackness in this society, the stigma, the subordination, I'm understand that we have to go along with it; therefore, I want not to see it in racial terms. Do you see where I'm coming from this at the end of the day? I want not to invest Obama with too much racial significance, because I don't want to participate in this fraud, not the democrat versus republican contest, the fraud that there's some deep and profound racial transformation happening, when in fact, the race emblem is being worn in a very cautious way, kept at distance from its authentic root. Take that John McWhorter.

McWhorter: I understand that, but in a way, that's good. In a way, that's what I am celebrating, that this human being,

this competent human being is out there doing what human beings in his position are supposed to be doing, and look at this, he happens to be a black human being, and damn it, he has gotten that far. So, take that, tribalist people. I think that's what's inside of me.

But to the extent that this is about the debate, I want to ask you, were you disturbed by the fact that he seemed so sleepy? I thought, frankly, the whole thing came out to a draw...

Lour: Did you say creepy?

McWhorter: Sleep. I found it was the worst oratorical performance I have ever seen him give. It was as if he was either sleepy or that he was suddenly extremely worried about his sound bites taken out of context...

Loury: Is this McCain or...

McWhorter: This is Obama. I mean, it was a draw, but I was really disappointed by his performance, the hesitations, occasionally the stammering, the not using his smile very much. He actually seemed more uncomfortable than I would ever have expected him to be. It wasn't a fun debate to watch for me.

Loury: McCain wasn't fun, either, was he?

McWhorter: I wouldn't expect him to be. McCain was the best McCain he could be, which was, sparkling mediocre.

That's what McCain does, oratorically. But Obama, I thought he was going to be much smoother. I thought he was going to be kind of Reaganesque, in terms of the smoothness, in terms of maybe occasionally wave with a line. He seemed very uncomfortable and I don't think he made the best case for himself. He just made a decent case for himself which, because he was up against McCain, was OK.

Loury: Everyone is saying past this bar of appearing presidential, I mean, and some have even said was the adult in the room, the one who is relatively more calm in his conduct throughout this period of crisis, some have said, has been on the whole, more even.

I see what you're saying about equivocation and about a lack of a real smooth comfort, you say, didn't use a smile. That's interesting, because that would be an indicator, wouldn't it, of a person who is genuinely at home.

McWhorter: Yeah.

Loury: You know, the stakes were enormously high for both combats, so that a person might be unable to perform in that kind of perfectly-smooth way under the circumstances. Well, you might expect it, and if he had done it, wouldn't it have been such a winning thing. It would have put him very far along the path, if he had pulled off this thing

that you imagine.

McWhorter: I would like to see it like you're doing it. I don't think you would have been nervous in whatever was going on, just talking. I actually found myself thinking, when watching them, Glenn Loury would be better at this, but you're not running, seriously.

Loury: (laughter). For many reasons that we need not dwell on here. (laughter).

McWhorter: All of a sudden, Obama was not doing the job as well as I expected.

Loury: Well, but well enough, isn't that the question? I mean, what about the other guy, you know?

McWhorter: Well, McCain is just... You know, one question that I had throughout the whole thing, and I think this is the richest aspect of it, why wouldn't those two men look at each other? What did they find so hard about that? And what most people are making a big deal out of is that McCain wouldn't even turn to look at Obama, and there are plenty of places you can go there. But, Obama clearly didn't want to do it either. What do you think was behind that?

Loury: I don't know. I agree with you that was interesting. I remember that moment when Jim Lehrer says, "Talk to him." He instructs one of the candidates to address the other.

McWhorter: And Obama kind of made a joke of it, did it in quotes, but then he couldn't help but turn back to the front.

Loury: And, you know, I don't know, it's easy for me to speculate about this, God I don't know. I've never been in anything like this, but I mean, you imagine you're fighting this person for the ultimate prize. I mean, you know, this SOB, I mean, that's got to be what you're thinking. You never say it...

McWhorter: But you think it...

Loury: To respect my opponent, my erstwhile opponent, but what you're really thinking is that this SOB stands between me and doing everything I want to do in my life, and moreover, I got the right idea for the country and this SOB wants to lead us down a rat hole. This has got to be what you're thinking. So, now you're confronted with the guy. You want to be polite. You've got to be careful; you've been coached; it's all strategized and thought out, but nevertheless, at that moment, when you're looking eyeball to eyeball, you kind of want to reach across and grab his throat, and since you can't do that (laughter), I want to use whatever available skills you've got to communicate well, I'm the better man to be president.

I mean, I don't know, McCain tried to do that in his

inartful way, right. He kept saying it over and over again, this man's not ready, this man doesn't understand, this man is not... you know, he kept repeating that, and I think there are going to be some quarters of the society, the pro-McCain quarters where that will go down all right. They'll be nodding at that. But, I don't know that he would have persuaded anybody by his constant repetition. And I thought Obama had some very good moments, too, one that I think is contrary to what you're saying. He ran down the list of, the litany of what McCain was for in 2003. You talk as if this war began in 2007.

McWhorter: Exactly. That was one of his better lines.

Loury: You know, you were wrong...

McWhorter: He said to us...

Loury: That was pretty good. So, there were moments.

McWhorter: There were definitely moments. I think the reasons that they can't look at each other are actually kind of poignant. For one thing, I think that deep down, Obama feels like if he actually looked at McCain and said, you were wrong, you were wrong, I think he feels that, and I think it's because it's true, that he would look like a bully, the smooth-talking, good-looking, and taller person, and Ivy-League educated, and he's younger, and here is this small, white-haired man with disabilities from the war who

doesn't speak as well as him, and he would look like a bully.

With McCain, I think he won't look at Obama because I think he feels that if he did, then he might be tarred as racist. I think that's what it is. I don't think that he has such scorn for him that won't look at him. I think that he feels like it wouldn't be right for him to turn and dress down a black man. I'm sure that his handlers have possibly even said that. The man would never even turn around, and I think it would look like that, if he really did dress down Obama, looking him in the eyes, it would look really, really icky to a lot of people, and it would be distorted by a lot of people.

Loury: I don't know...

McWhorter: You don't think so?

Loury: Well no, I don't know, and I don't know if that's McCain's motive. I thought you were going to say that he would be afraid of losing his temper if he started looking at him, that he'd be afraid that the contempt would show, which may be close to what you are saying.

McWhorter: Yeah, yeah, because it might create the same result.

Loury: But I think for both of them, that's a danger. The idea that the contempt would show would be damaging to

either one of them, and I think it would be damaging, even if McCain were not a 72-year-old and short in stature and doesn't have an easy facility of all of his physical functioning and all of his words. Even if that weren't so, I think he would want to avoid holding him in contempt. So too with McCain, vis-à-vis Obama, though I suspect that they do feel contempt toward one another.

I'm sure that McCain must feel that this upstart doesn't know diddly about that, I've been doing this for 35 years and here's somebody who just came along and you know, whoever they represent, he probably puts quotation marks around the name, Obama, when he thinks it. Obama represents all sets of forces in society, and not someone like John McCain who's whatever, I don't know, but I would imagine that that contempt is something he'd have to guard against showing and that might be why he would want to keep a distance. I don't know.

McWhorter: Both of them have personality perception problems in terms of Obama being seen as a little haughty by some and McCain with the temper, etc. This is a hypothetical thought experiment, and I don't know this for sure, but I think that if both of the candidates were in their 40s, or both the candidates were in their mid 50s, and just taking the color out of it, I think that they would be more

comfortable demonstrating that contempt to an extent by looking at one another, because it would be seen on various levels as a fair fight.

Loury: Let me ask you this, John. I hear you, this is a slightly different thing. What difference do you think it would make, I mean, Bill Clinton the other day say that he knew and he liked John McCain. Make of that what you will, and I'm sure much has been made. But, what I want to say is what difference do you think it would make if the candidates knew and respected each other than if they did not? I mean, you know, it's certainly possible for someone at the left side of center within the Democratic Party, Teddy Kennedy, to know and respect someone at the right side of center of the Republican Party, Orrin Hatch, and to be friends.

Now, put the friendship aside, just the knowing and respecting, just to having been engaged, even if at a distance, even if not always face to face, but having been aware of the other person and of the other person's activities, and having been engaged, you know, over some period of time, I think it would make a tremendous difference to the quality of their capacity to conduct a constructive and informative argument about some issues.

McWhorter: I do, too. Familiarity, sure, and also maybe to

have a little bit of room for slightly spiky disagreement and then have a genuine embrace at the end, as opposed to what we saw the other night, which was that Obama seems capable of that. You see the footage of him walking over and shaking hands with McCain. McCain still can barely look at him, doesn't smile very much, and clearly, does not want to be touching this man at all.

Loury: But, I don't think McCain respects him. I think McCain thinks he's an empty suit. I think McCain thinks "This guy's going to be president??" That's what I think he thinks. He probably thinks a little bit like a lot of people think about Sarah Palin, undoubtedly, without justice, I want to say, if it needs to be said. But, I'm just imagining what John McCain might think. I think it's very plausible that he thinks the guy is not his equal, not his peer.

McWhorter: I was disappointed to see that so many of the good lines and some of what was discussed, memorably, had to do with things like Iran, and the threat of nuclear war, and things like that, where McCain...

Loury: Well, it was a foreign policy debate...

McWhorter: It was, but the fact is that for reasons that were beyond anybody's control, partly because the bail out had to be discussed, and that's a domestic issue, that

there was a certain amount of talk about what sort of budget we would have and what we would spend the money on, and the most disappointing thing for me was that when Obama was trying to talk about what sorts of things he would spend the money on that McCain was making fun of him for wanting to spend money on, he didn't enumerate. I was just waiting for him to say, yes, I do want to spend this kind of money. I do have big plans, and that is so that we can do this, this, and this. He didn't give that list, almost as -- it was almost a Palinesque moment. It's as if he didn't have the list in his head when he certainly does. He didn't seem to realize that he needed to get specific.

Loury: I hear you. I think this is a recurring problem with Obama, and Peggy Noonan had a piece in the Wall Street Journal last week. Did you see it?

McWhorter: I think I did, which one was it?

Loury: All By Yourself, or, it was something like that. The theme of the piece was that Barack Obama stands atop the Democratic Party all alone, which is to say that, you know, given the nature of the campaign, given the way that he's calmed the insurgency, the political insurgency within the Democratic Party, I think that's a correct description that the Obama phenomenon represents, and also the historical happenstance that he's running against the wife of the

immediately-previously-serving Democratic president, and therefore, could not credit that administration unduly without indirectly crediting his primary opponent.

Because of these things, his connection to the kind of life force of the Democratic Party...

McWhorter: Shallow roots...

Loury: ... going back was abstract...

McWhorter: It's formal...

Loury: ... continuous, didn't have enough meat on the bones.

McWhorter: It's only formal.

Loury: Wasn't clear enough. And her recommendation, I mean, very late in the campaign for anything like this, was then he gave a series of speeches about why I'm a Democrat, where he sort of laid out his whatever, and I don't know if that's a good or bad idea for a campaign, but I thought the diagnosis had merit in it, and have felt so all the way back to the primary campaigning, in which the change theme, and the antiWashington and the insurgency led to things like, at one point during the campaign, John Edwards said something like he was criticizing Clinton because she had referred to LBJ and having gotten something done in the 60s, and Edwards called him a Washington politician, and so forth and so on, and I thought that was so problematic for the Democratic Party that they didn't have a 50-year-

emeritus, instead of a five-year emeritus. So, something like that -- and this is what I'm trying to come to at the end, the list would come rolling off the tongue. It would come tripping right off the tongue. The specifics would flow because they would be the natural expression of this well-articulated vision about governance, about the role of the federal government, etc....

McWhorter: The way Teddy Kennedy would have done it.

Loury: I'm not saying that Barack Obama does not have a vision, please, OK. Anyone who wants to say that, I'm not saying that. I just said he didn't articulate it.

McWhorter: Right, and also, it's interesting, another way you can look at it from that exact same perspective is that he didn't seem to realize that he needed to put that list forward. He seemed to assume that everybody already knew it, and therefore, the point didn't have to be made, when the fact is that because she has such shallow roots in that particular late 20th-century Democratic tradition, he has to score. He has to underscore exactly what he's got in mind, and then -- I don't know, it's almost like he didn't seem to realize that he was talking in terms of strategy -- strategy, listen to me, it's just like George Bush in the Saturday Night Live sketches -- in terms of strategy, he's talking to these swing voters who want to hear him put

up or shut up.

Loury: You know, Bill Clinton said it exactly right the other day -- I saw him on the Daly Show. The formulation that I thought was so exactly correct was, he said, "It's not about the people liking Obama, because there are plenty of people who like him and that's great. It's about the other people, the ones who haven't yet committed to Obama, knowing that he likes them." You've got to make them know you like them. And the way you do that is by articulating what you are going to do in very concrete terms from the very first moment, that you have the opportunity to serve on their behalf in that White House. You're going to get in there and you're going to do the following set of things. It's got to be said with passion. It needs to be said in very small pieces.

I thought you were wise the last time we talked when you said -- what it was -- he needed slogans. You know, that sounds so light and insubstantial...

McWhorter: But it's true...

Loury: ... but of course, the slogans would be standing in for something.

McWhorter: I was waiting for them the other night...

Loury: You know, you've got to be concrete; you got to be specific; you got to talk small ball as well as big ball,

and you got to get it across that man, you're going to get in there and you're going to do the following set of things, and it's going to make a difference for you, and point your finger at him. Pound the podium. (laughter).

McWhorter: That's right! The other night, we got none of that, none of it, and I'm sure that he's been reading everybody's editorials about this. Somebody must have told him.

Loury: Somebody had made reference to it, yeah.

McWhorter: And somehow, he -- and you talked about how he's got to make those people realize that he likes them, and that brings up...

Loury: That was Bill Clinton, not me.

McWhorter: This is one other thing, a final thing, that I want to toss out here on this...

Loury: OK, well keep it short this time...

McWhorter: Mr. McCain, Senator McCain struck me in that debate as somebody with very little feeling for this common man that I think we're talking about. I mean, he's somebody I've admired in many ways for a long time, but his issues are the kind of boom, boom, boom issues, and so he cares about campaign finance reform, which is the sort of thing that's certainly important, but it's -- he cares about immigration, but you get the feeling that's only

because he's from Arizona. If he were a senator from Vermont, I don't think that he cares about immigration because of a natural sense of identification with (inaudible), and then, he's very concerned with pork-barrel spending and all these issues, and all that is very nice, but in terms of Mr. and Mrs. America and how they're feeling, and I detect that that just isn't much of an interest of McCain, whereas it is of Obama, and I think it's genuine in that he talks about Wall Street and Main Street -- that's the closest he came to punchy. How important do you think it is, maybe now or maybe in general, that a presidential candidate or a president have compassion -- and I'm almost done -- but this is because last time we talked about whether a president needs to be an intellectual, and the idea seemed to be that most certainly not. Well, how about compassion? I don't sense that John McCain cares terribly much about people who are having problems with their mortgages, because I don't think that he doesn't care at all, but it's not his thing. He wants to be in a suit talking about rather abstract, although important, issues in Washington, DC. That's what he does.

Obama is different. It's another reason that I prefer Obama. What do you think about compassion?

Loury: Well, I don't know if Obama has some powerful compassion thing, but I would grant you -- I don't disagree with you anything that you said about McCain, I mean, the charge of Obama being aloof, and so forth, and whether or not he really can -- so I don't want to rehearse those, I just want to say, those are out there. But let me bracket the question of just how much compassion Obama communicates and try to respond to you.

First of all, acknowledgement about what you said about the deficit, with respect to candidate McCain, and also the credit of -- your thought that this is important, and in a way, this is what we were just saying, at least what I was trying to quote Bill Clinton as having said a moment ago. You got to make the people know that you love them, it's not just about them loving you, you now, and as it were, feel their pain, I mean, it's a cliché but there you are, that you can empathize that you are in touch. So yeah, it's a stereotype about McCain that he's out of touch; he just doesn't get it. It's the kind of thing you would say about a Republican who owned seven houses and nine cars, and whatever it is, and is married to a wealthy woman and so forth.

But, just at the level of when you see him on TV and when you're talking and what not, what comes across and what do

you get? I think I will have to agree with you 100% that McCain comes across as a professional Washington politician who's been a wheeler and dealer for a long time and who's interested in cutting some more deals to "take the country forward" and Obama, after all, was a community organizer not that long ago, did just finish paying off his student loans as a matter of fact, and probably sees the world in a very different way, more from the bottom up, is what I'm saying, and as I say this I smile, because I know my wife would be pleased to hear me saying it. (laughter). She's been working on my insufficient Obama enthusiasm. Central.

McWhorter: I can imagine. My wife and I had a much quieter Hillary/Obama problem months ago but we got that set.

Loury: But the man survived it. (laughter).

McWhorter: Still going strong, but yeah, but actually though, who do you think came out best in the debate, or do you think it was a draw? I think it was a draw.

Loury: They were saying it was a draw. I thought Obama certainly did what he had to do, which was not be made to look somehow weak or ineffectual in the context of the discussion on foreign policy, and since, I don't know, a quarter of the debate was on domestic policy, it may be even more, that's got to be a plus for Obama. I thought, as we've said, we've rehearsed, Obama didn't really do all

that we think he's capable of doing in terms of his oratorical virtuosity and his being at comfort in making his arguments. On the other hand, I thought he had strong arguments to make, and I think McCain has basically got one card here, which is that you're going to trust this guy running the country when not that long ago, he wasn't doing that much? I've been here, I'm steady, I've got a track record, and I thought McCain was effective at doing that. So, I'm going to come to the draw at the end of the day here, but that's what I thought. I didn't think there was any clear victor in the debate, although I think Obama probably can breathe a sigh of relief with this one behind him.

Sarah Palin and Joe Biden coming up (laughter).

McWhorter: Oh, that's going to be a whole different kettle of fish, but you hope for the next debate that somebody slips Obama either a Xanax or a glass of wine, just one, before the debate, so he will just loosen up. I really -- that is literally what I would counsel.

Loury: A glass of wine, that's a very idea.

McWhorter: But of course, he keeps his own counsel.

Loury: Forget about it; that ain't going to happen.

(laughter).

McWhorter: Why don't we do this again, as if we hadn't

planned it to do it. Why don't we do this again after the next debate.

Loury: Look forward to it, John.

McWhorter: Me, too. And so have a good rest of the Sunday night, and I'll talk to you soon.

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