

Obama pessimism

LOURY: Hey John.

MCWHORTER: Hey Glenn. How are you doing?

LOURY: Oh, I'm excellent. I'm awash in excitement about the presidential campaign.

MCWHORTER: I'm not.

LOURY: Why not? You tired of it already?

MCWHORTER: Well, I don't want to admit that I'm tired of it.

But I am worried now because I've been coasting on this idea that my guy was, you know, pretty much a shoo-in.

And, you know, Obama isn't a shoo-in at this point.

LOURY: Oh no. Don't tell me. Didn't some people back during the campaign season try to point out that he might not be?

But no. I'm sorry there. I'm sorry.

MCWHORTER: It's depressing me because if he doesn't win, the sorts of things that are going to be written and said are just the sorts of things that I have dedicated a second career to working against. There's going to be --

LOURY: What are the sort of things that are going -- oh, you mean that it was because of his race?

MCWHORTER: Yeah, I think that there is going to be a vast effort to argue that racism and bigotry that was just below the surface were the reasons he didn't get it. And it very

well may not be that it was those things. It's as if his whole humanity is what color he is, and the fact that bigotry has something to do with it. And I get the feeling that if it's close, it's going to be hard to make a definite case one way or another. And I don't like that they're going to be black people reinforced in what I think of is an exaggerated view of the role that racism plays in American life. And equally, I don't like the fact that there will be a certain strain of white person who will almost -- it seems to me that there's a certain kind of white person who would almost feel validated by Obama losing because it would give them a chance to sit around talking about how yes, racism, you know is a terrible thing. And that makes them feel good because it means that they show that they are aware and compassionate people. And I don't think that's a deliberate feeling on their part.

LOURY: Let me say something to you John because I hear everything and it has a certain logic to it. But I must remark on how your concern about Obama losing -- if he were to lose, that he might lose -- the thing that you're first voicing is your grave concern is how other people will interpret the loss. As opposed to, the foregone opportunity for certain definitive, sort of, political

leadership and, sort of, public policy program to be put in place. I mean --

MCWHORTER: Well, I would have gotten to that. But, yeah.

LOURY: But doesn't this, perhaps, suggest what some of the problem might be? Which is that the candidacy is so freighted, even by those like yourself, who are -- I would say, if I may -- nuanced, and complex in your views about race. It's nevertheless so freighted with this symbolic, you know, whereas the one who's always talking about racism. The racism moniker will interpret this as proof, yet again, that a black man or woman can't get to the top in America. There's a glass ceiling keeping us out of the White House, blah, blah blah. Which certainly would not be your line. Nevertheless, your line is still, in a way, symbolic and in a way, with due respect, not substantive.

MCWHORTER: I don't want to admit that you're right. But you are right to a large extent. I think that what I'm saying is substantive, though, because I think that if Obama didn't get it, and there were people sitting around almost relieved. Almost comfortable that their way of looking at things had been proven. Then, I think that it would be really bad for this progressive experiment that you're talking about because part of that progressive experiment would not only be a matter of Obama bringing in programs to

the extent that he could. That actually moved us out of, what you could argue was a good, practically 15 year political stalemate. But also, part of that would be a realization in this country that certain obsessions, certain ideas that that progressive agenda can't happen because of how white people feel about black people is no longer what it used to be. I think that would be a crucial part of it. Talk about hope. How much hope can you really have when a lot of people would really rather think about racism than about what you do to get beyond it? So, I see what you mean. And yeah, there is symbolism here. When I think about Obama, I definitely think about the things that he could do and the new kinds of politics that we could see. I would be excited to be an adult, and thinking about these things, and watching something like that happen once in my lifetime. But yeah, there's a symbolism because I think that the symbolism could be really magic. And quickly, I'm not trying to plug myself, but I'm really into what it would mean in terms of children growing up with him as President. I had a piece in *New York Magazine* that I don't think was any big deal last week, but it was there. And I really -- as soon as he got in -- I would be thinking about the kids. And I am afraid to be sitting there in a

few months watching TV and finding out that that's not going to happen. So, but I do take your point.

LOURY: Well, let me sort of restate my concern because I'm not sure that you just addressed it. My concern is that there's a difference between bread and butter politics, where you have well defined interest. Where you have a pretty clear ideological program. Where you embed yourself within an ongoing tradition of collective struggle or striving, if you will. And so forth. I don't mean to say Obama's outside of this. But I want to draw a distinction between that and this thing that the Republicans have made so much pay of late lampooning, which is this called, "celebrity". This star status. This being the center of fervor, excitement, you know, hopeful imaginings of something that's transformative. That's transcendent. Those are not the same thing. I mean, charisma, you know, moving people, bringing tears to the eyes, touching them in their gut, getting them up on the edge of their chairs, making them shout out. That's not politics. It's a part of politics, but it's just one part of politics. And there's something else there. And that has to be there if you're going to make it all come together. I'm speculating. I'm just sort of thinking out loud. And so, what I'm saying is, what I've begun to think of late -- and

we can go over some of the particulars -- you know, the forum at the Saddleback Church, the Paris Hilton and Britney Spears on Obama's definition, many other things. What I'm beginning to think is that there's something -- like, I was saying this the last time we talked, right? The trip to Europe was going to give gravitas. It was going to make him into a world leader in the eyes of people purely by the manipulation of images. And I don't mean manipulation in a nefarious way. I just mean, the artful presentation of image.

MCWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: That was supposed to transform something in the imaginations of American voters of doubt into certitude. Image is going to be a substitute for, you know, an actual record of accomplishment.

MCWHORTER: Of course.

LOURY: For a concrete program. So, there's something it seems to me, sort of, a built in potential for disaster. I mean, you saw the story in the *New York Times*, I assume, yesterday or the day before. I think it was in yesterday's newspaper, Sunday, that the Democratic governors, like Governor Strickland. Another one was interviewed and quoted. Strickland of Ohio. But apparently grousing concern. Concern amongst senior Democrats about the

direction of the campaign. And, you know, I could go on in a litany. I don't want a filibuster, I just want to say, I'm feeling the need -- the real need for some basic gut bucket politics. You know.

MCWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: Some, let's get the war machines together. Let's get the trouts that are public snout. Snouts that are feeding at the public trough. Let's get, you know, something like that. And let's define ourselves in some way that can hook up with something deeper. Otherwise, I've got a very bad feeling about this.

MCWHORTER: You know, Glenn, it's interesting. I certainly take your point. And I understand your discomfort with the shallower aspects of all this. The manipulation of images, the punch lines, etc. But I don't know. Sometimes I wonder whether you think that everybody is -- with all due respect and affection -- everybody is as much of a grind as you, thankfully, are. Sometimes it seems as if you're waiting for the grand polity of this country to come together on a kind of a sober and detailed engagement with policy. Which I don't think has ever been the case. And I think that what we're seeing is partly a matter of technology. It's at the point where you can see people's faces, and replay what they're saying so very much. We're

in a situation where we have all of this media that's so very up close, and so very personal. And it is a media which is being used by -- which is being aimed at -- a populous who have always been uniquely susceptible to the image, or the linguistic version of the image, which is the sound bite. And to an extent, I think that we might want to work with it because if we're going to have the politics -- and I think you do understand this, as I think you pretty much said it -- if we're going to have the politics, if we're going to have the gut-bucket politics and the coalitions working together to achieve things based on some sort of compromise, which, nevertheless, actually gets something interesting done, then certainly we have to have some sort of inspiration behind it, or that's probably not going to happen. Especially in a situation where our politics has become as sclerotic as they've been lately. There's going to have to be something that blows things up. And, of course, that's going to be some sort of cult of personality. I don't have that much problem with that because I'm not sure -- and you may know of something that I don't -- and maybe you're thinking about roughly what happened between 1963 and 1966, but there would have to be a cult of personality that would create a kind of lurching change in our politics. I'm thinking, in particular, of

this new book The Liberal Hour, which really does underscore how what happened in the 60s was really a matter of something that happened during a few years a certain consensus came together. And it wasn't just because everybody suddenly had common sense and compassion, it was partly because television was new, and showed the injustices of racism in a new way. And it was partly because we had a president who was killed, and once again, in a way that you didn't see with wood cuts, but that you say film of it. And then, you had the charisma of black leaders making a special argument at a special time. That's what happened. And even that only lasted for about 1,000 days.

LOURY: Let me see if I'm understanding you. So, you're saying sometimes things just come together in a moment, not for any particular reason. Not --

MCWHORTER: But they come together because there's something charismatic that happens. Things get blown up. And it's not that people sit and think about it. Something strange happens that gets people in their guts. And that's what Obama's doing, just like what happened in the mid-60s. How else would it happen, is my question?

LOURY: OK. So, maybe it's not feasible. Maybe that kind of change really is a pipedream. Maybe it doesn't work that way.

MCWHORTER: It doesn't last long.

LOURY: Maybe what you do is you have incremental change and -
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MCWHORTER: Unless there's a depression, for example. Then there was the New Deal. And if you look at that, the good part only lasted a few years.

LOURY: But what I'm saying here, and it's going to sound like rehashing some stuff in the primary campaign -- I don't want to do that, you know, I really don't want to do that. But what I'm saying is, the Obama candidacy was constructed on this idea of being above politics. And there was this, almost contempt, I would say for -- let me give you just one example. Do you remember the suspend the gas holiday. The gas tax holiday. So that was a "gimmick". OK? And now, I'm an economist. I just want to confess, you know, to my colleagues out there, I know that it had all these kind of problems, in terms of the rational, logical workings of it. But it also had a sort of political ring of truth to it. I don't, you know, it's the kind of Democratic Party interest group pandering politics. But, of course, the Republicans do it to. That everybody takes

pleasure, all of us, you know, Cambridge, Massachusetts dwelling, you know, snobs, take pleasure in denouncing. But that is also a way that politicians show voters that they're fighting for these. That they're (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) in a very concrete way.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, Democrat for the masses. Right.

LOURY: You know, and that was pooh-poohed, and it worked during the primary campaign. But you can see with the oil drilling fiasco for the Democrats that there was, nevertheless, a certain kind of political power in that kind of appeal. And these intellectual arguments, it's a gimmick, it won't solve the problem, you know. So, you know, here we are, too clever by half. You know, here we are, so smart that we're not going to play -- so smug that we're going to disdain that old game. Whether it be about a flag pin being put in, or whatever it may be. I mean, it all is of a piece. The bitter comments -- this is not a tirade against the candidate -- these are just simple observations. They're all of a piece about a failure to, sort of, get down to retail, street level, press-fleshing politics that can work. And, you know, let me stop because I've been talking for a long time, give you a chance to say something.

MCWHORTER: Well, I would just say that to the extent that you don't like that, I would say that that is changing. And so, it seems that Obama is realizing that he might want to make some more compromises in that sort of vein. And I think that that's a good thing. I would certainly like to see -- I mean, given the fact that he really may not win. Given the fact that there may be a kind of -- there is a kind of white person who -- I don't think that white person is necessarily a racist -- but that white person does not find his color, and his biography as sexy and interesting as a college town white person might. That kind of person will be interested in Obama if he gets down to the nitty gritty. And the idea that he is going to be above politics and bring the nation together, that might not appeal to that person who's having severe economic problems, etc. Whether they're bitter or not. And I would like him to get down to some policy proposals. And, in light of the kind of culture that we have at this point, I would like him to do it with some good, articulate, sloganeering. I would like him to keep it short. People process sentences seven words at a time. We produce sentences seven words at a time. I think that he ought to get out there and start making some music so that there can stop being this idea that people don't know who he is. For a certain kind of

person, who Obama is is this symbol. I suppose I'm one of those people. For another kind of person, all they see is this increasingly shifty figure who had this association with this race-baiting fire brand. And made a speech where he didn't seem to quite step out of it. And then, made another speech where he stepped away from him only when he dissed him, which didn't seem like it was enough. And I think that Obama could really put himself over the edge, given what a weak candidate John McCain is. But I agree with you, in a way, that he might want to do that by actually dealing with more concrete issues that he has always been. And, you know, getting down in the mud, so to speak. Is that what you mean?

LOURY: Well, he seems to be moving in the direction a little bit now. But there's something else, I think. You know, I don't think it's the Reverend Wright, although that thing is laying there. You know, I don't necessarily the machinations of the media. I think the candidate Barack Obama is showing himself not to be as good as we thought he was. I mean, he's good at a certain set of things. He gives a good speech, there's not any doubt about it. But he's made, I think -- I'd like to know what you think -- two horrific blunders in the last month. This race card comment, where he walks into a trap, I believe, said by the

Republicans. They're sitting and waiting. The first time he raises it, we're going to smash him with this, they're saying. And he makes this comment. Again, it's somewhat smug. We're morally superior, but these dirty old Republicans, and they're going to tell you this, and they're going to tell you that. And that was OK during the primary. But it ain't going to play, in my opinion, and I think he really lost big time on that when McCain and people come back and say, you're playing the race card from the bottom of the deck, blah, blah, blah, blah. And they sustain several days of news cycles of whatever. The other way, and I don't think we're yet heard the last of it, the comment that he made about Justice Clarence Thomas in the Saddleback forum on Saturday night.

MCWHORTER: Yeah?

LOURY: Well, I think it's a blunder, John, and I'd like to know what you think. Here's the thing, don't get me wrong. I'm not fan of Justice Thomas.

MCWHORTER: I know you're not. Yeah.

LOURY: Barack Obama's the last man on the planet who should be talking about fitness for office of an African American at the top of American government. He's the last person on the planet who should be talking about that.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, people have said that.

LOURY: Well, but, I mean, do you think it's not true?

MCWHORTER: Well, you know, I don't know. I, frankly, I admired his comment about that, despite the fact that I am -- I do not hate Justice Thomas. I think that he has gotten a really bad rap. I despise the way he can write an autobiography and people are looking for the tasty passages that don't shed a good light on him.

LOURY: Sure, sure. He's had an awful time.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, Michael Fletcher and Kevin [Merriter?] write this book that, you know, in large part is a hit piece on the poor man. And that's considered ordinary reported. And then, nobody pays attention to something like First Principles by Scott Gerber, I think it was, that actually looks at the man's jurisprudence so far, and shows that he is not Scalia's pawn, and that he does think for himself. Somehow (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOURY: What you read (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). I never heard of this latter book?

MCWHORTER: Yeah, that's an interesting book on him. So, I don't have any hatred of Thomas, nevertheless, I do believe this -- and I almost hate to say it in public, but it's true -- he was under qualified at the time. And I think that to pretend that he wasn't is almost a kind of a lack of black pride. As if, somehow that was OK, that somebody

was brought in as a token, which he definitely was. Now, what's important is how he's done thus far.

LOURY: No but --

MCWHORTER: But wait. The thing is, yes, of course Barack Obama is not as qualified to be in the Oval Office as a great many people. It would be kind of a gamble. Nevertheless, as far as I'm concerned, that doesn't mean that the statement that he made was wrong. The issue is, do you feel that that should have happened, and he said, no. And I don't think that he should somehow primly not say that. Not speak about that just because he happens to be not especially qualified for a job that he does not have yet. Do you see what I mean?

LOURY: No, I don't, John. Or if I do, I don't agree. I mean, Obama in that comment did something very specific. He said that Justice Thomas wasn't well qualified to be on the court. He said, whereas, Scalia and Roberts are people with whom he might also disagree on Jurisprudential matters. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt of their brilliance. And he left the impression -- I mean, more than the impression, I think -- that here was, you know, a sitting Supreme Court justice who had somehow gotten into his office without meeting reasonable expectations about competency. And for a guy who's susceptible to being

attacked as an empty suit, who is being attacked in that way. For a guy about whom it is said, well, Abraham Lincoln only had such and such years and such and such of legislative before he became president, therefore -- in other words, the reach of the arguments is so abstract and, you know, wishful in their -- I mean, and really, what's lying behind it is, I dare you to say he's not competent. Political correctness is lying behind it because implicit in that is, oh, oh, oh, I see. John F. Kennedy could be ready to be president, but because this fellow is black he's not. See, so, the Obama campaign has lived for so long on that implicit threat, which is collapsing, even as we speak, that he ought to have tip toed around it. I mean, he had to know that he was going to be asked about the Supreme Court. They ought to have decided, I'm not going there. Instead he raises this issue of competency in a way that makes him look like I'm the only black man on earth marginally qualified by conventional life experience for a high office to which I aspire. To whom everybody is supposed to bow aside. And guess what, I can criticize other African Americans who have similarly been admitted into the inner counsels of American government as being not as smart as me. Couldn't have made the law professor

faculty at the University of Chicago. I think it's a disaster.

MCWHORTER: You know, it -- wow.

LOURY: Yes, I think -- it's not going to go away. I could be proved wrong about this. I think it's a grave error.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, you know, I -- not to minimize what you're saying -- but it's funny you have that interpretation. I sense you don't like that guy. I sense that he really gets in your craw because what I saw in the comment was just a massive kind of confidence, for one thing. And also, the qualitative differential here, for me, is larger than you're supposing. I mean, here again, I end up --

LOURY: You mean, the difference between Thomas and Obama?

MCWHORTER: Yeah, I mean, Obama, yes, OK, he hasn't ever really run anything. Yes, OK, in his community activism it's not like he was in there long enough to actually accomplish a whole lot, although I'm not sure what accomplishing a whole lot would have been, doing the kind of thing that he was doing. But nevertheless, yes, but he did, you know, have a certain Ivy League pedigree. He did make Harvard Law Review, and you don't make Harvard Law Review as a token. He actually, he got -- because he was a human being who was that good. And he did.

LOURY: But we're talking about the leader of the free world here, John. I mean, I understand that he's smart. I don't doubt that for a minute.

MCWHORTER: And I think that he's demonstrated more smartness than the other person that we were talking about in 1991. They're the books that he's written, that we have discussed a little bit, which is, again, more of the smartness, more of the largeness of soul. And so, in terms of what we know of him now, and what we knew of Justice Thomas almost 20 years ago, I see there being a big difference. And I'm sure that's the way Obama processes it too. It's not that --

LOURY: OK. Let me concede to you that it's arguable about who would have been ahead in this, sort of, sweepstakes of comparison of resumes. But I think there's an emperor has no clothes quality to the Obama assertion that I'm ready to read the free world, to be the commander in chief, to be the person who bring peace to the Middle East, to be the one who reconciles the conflicting factions in the U.S. Congress and actually gets us moving forward in our problems. I, a few years ago, was in the Illinois State Legislature. I have no major accomplishments, legislative, or otherwise, although, I've written a couple of books that have done well. There was an emperor has no clothes --

when Bill Clinton said it's a fairy tale, about this argument that I had the judgment to be against the war when I didn't have to cast a vote in the U.S. Senate for or against the war. The claim that my lack of experience is offset by the fact that I'm not from Washington, and I had the judgment to be against the war, and Bill Clinton said it was a fairy tale. And that was dealt with by talking about -- by *ad hominem* argument, basically -- Clinton's the kind of person who would make a comment like that, and not by addressing the substance of the argument, which is that when you represent a liberal district from Hyde Park, Chicago, and you stand up and give an anti-war speech, that's not the same thing as being in the United States Senate and having to vote against the war, and all of that. So, there's an emperor has no clothes. And then, the emperor with -- partly naked -- stands up and starts pointing at a naked emperor and saying, hey, hey, that guy over there doesn't have any clothes. I'm telling you, it's a disaster.

MCWHORTER: I have an awesome command of both domestic and foreign policy, which I've acquired within a relatively short time. I used to be a constitutional law professor, and according to all people who took my classes, was very good at seeing things from both sides, and drawing

synthesis down the middle. I am a person with considerable intelligence, not to mention charm and common sense, who also shows that when the chips are down, I can play politics in a way that is as often as not, is effective. Won't you take a chance on me, given that, in addition, if this country has a severe problem with the issue of race, then what I am, and what I will be, and what I will do, will help us to get beyond that in a way that nothing else would, except roughly, another 60 years of rampant and happy miscegenation. That means something to me. And, you know, Glenn, if the person who was in the position he's in now was not kind of arrogant, it would really be a surprise. And if we didn't think he was arrogant, then it would be rather clear that it was just a pose. You know, people who do this sort of thing think a lot of themselves.

LOURY: Yeah, but if he were a better politician, he wouldn't let the arrogance show through. I agree with you that it can't be -- there can be no doubt. But that anyone who (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

MCWHORTER: It's going to show at some point.

LOURY: -- you know, level, has to think well of themselves.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, very well.

LOURY: But if you're shrewd, you know, and you're playing the thing right, you don't leave yourself open to this thing.

Well, anyway, I hear you. Maybe we should talk about something else because we've stated our positions rather clearly.

MCWHORTER: Well, actually, if we want to, a little bit more about Obama -- talking about disappointment. For me, the sinking moment during that interview was not the Justice Thomas comment. I knew that was going to make the news. I was thinking, what are we going to be talking about next week -- but, not only you and me, but what are people like you and me going to be asked about -- but what I really -- I didn't like that bit about the evil. Now, I didn't like how, when he was asked about evil, he talked about how there's evil all over the world, etc, etc. That struck me as rather pious and PC when he didn't really get in that there's a particular kind of evil that might be of particular danger to us. And without going to the extremes. And I think there have been some really unethical extremes that the current administration has gone to to protect us from this. It could be done in different ways. And I worry that he doesn't see that there are people who hate us for reasons which, whether or not they are justifiable in a socio-historical way, could really promote a kind of a danger that we need to think about. I sometimes worry about him on his Middle Eastern foreign

policy, and how he would grapple with Iran, etc. For me, that worried me.

LOURY: Well, I hear you. And I know a lot -- I agree with you that that was not a good moment for him at all. I mean, his answer was abstract.

MCWHORTER: And I found that a little arrogant.

LOURY: He had four different kinds of evil, right? There was genocide, I don't know about racism, sexism, homophobia --

MCWHORTER: And that's a kind of arrogant thing. That's, you know, I understand that there is evil among all people. My culture is not better than any other culture in any other way. That's a kind of a Hyde Park, I'm better than you, which rubbed me the wrong way more than the Thomas comment.

LOURY: OK. Well, you know, I agree with you that it was not a good moment for him. I think, and I've thought for some time, that either you're going to embrace in a fore-throated way this global war on terrorism, Islamo-fascism, radical Islam, a threat to American civilization. This Manichean view, this new cold war, hundred years war of the 21st century. The problem is, extirpating radical Islam, a war on -- either you're going to embrace it whole heartedly or you're going to critique it at its root, I thought. Easy for me to say, I'm not running for president. I don't have the bevy of advisors telling me I can't say something.

What I think Obama really believes is that the whole thing is off the tracks. That Bush is an idiot. That these people, who decided that they were going to define a technique, which is terrorism as an enemy, and then, engage in a -- or welling in kind a crusade against it are off on the wrong track. But, of course, he dare not say that. Too many political calculations say, one can't say that.

MCWHORTER: Precisely.

LOURY: There are very articulate, very knowledgeable people out there. I think of Andrew [Basovich?], the defense intellectual at Boston University, who's been writing a series of books critiquing the rise of what he calls the new American militarism, and worrying about the prospects of a kind of, you know, moral fervor driven American military global engagement that could both bankrupt us and lead to much mischief in the world.

MCWHORTER: Of course.

LOURY: You know, so, there's a view that's out there. You could articulate that view. You know, I mean, you could actually critique the thing at its foundation. But no, we're not going to do that. We're going to try to coast into the presidency on the national anger about a failed war in Iraq, rather than articulating a genuinely progressive vision about what American power in the world

ought to be if it were informed by the idealistic vision of a young Democrat from Hyde Park, Chicago. I mean, here's what I'm saying, John, Barack Obama has to earn the presidency. He's not going to coast in. This is not a popularity contest. He's going to actually have to show us something, OK? Now, if he had taken a stand on something controversial and unpopular and stick with it, and argue the merits through, and change the consensus on the ground, by the time we got to November, he would have shown the kind of courage, character, vision, and leadership that he attributes to himself, without having had the actual accomplishments to vouch-safe it. I don't think the Republicans are going to let him coast into the presidency. I think he's actually going to have to show himself to be a world leader, and not just get photographed with world leaders before he can be elected.

MCWHORTER: When was this? I'm sitting here, I'm thinking about elections over this century. I'm really trying to think of one where discussion was carried on, other than between about 150 people on that high a level. Could this country listen to Barack Obama if he tried to make that utterly sensible message, most of which I agree with, without being savaged by a know-nothing media, which is not going to go away. Take this, for example, the whole idea

of him saying they're going to mention what a funny color I am. Or that his name sounds funny, etc. Now, technically, I didn't love that moment because I knew how it would be misinterpreted. He didn't say that McCain was going to do it. He didn't say that McCain's people -- the people right around him -- were going to do it. He was referring, I think, in his head -- if I can put myself in his head. He meant the larger Republican entity, many of whom are not formally connected to McCain. And I think, neither of us think that McCain would be giving orders from on high to do these things and saying, just don't let my fingerprint show. It's a matter of a whole bunch of ideologues, who are not connected to McCain, but think that they would be doing his good work. For Obama to mention that some of these "they's" would do that sort of thing, I think, makes perfect sense. To suppose that it means he's accusing the McCain people of that's what his name must mean, I think, was an almost willful misinterpretation based on these posits. That's how people hear things. So, if Obama gave the kind of address you mean, imagine what people would say about it, and then, he might not get elected. Wouldn't it be better if he would act on those (inaudible) and maybe put them forth after he becomes President of the United States. When was the election where that sort of

disputation could be had in the public forum without being misunderstood by people who don't know how to pay attention?

LOURY: Well --

MCWHORTER: Really, that's a genuine question. I can't think of one.

LOURY: I don't know. I don't know about that. I just know that it was a mistake. I think it, like I said, was walking into a trap. I mean, what he should have said was, there are going to be some people out there, maybe, who would never vote for me because of my race. I hate to think that, and I'm going to do everything in my power to persuade every American to cast their vote for me. Next case. Leave it simply at that. The sins of the primary campaign have lingered on into the general election. Whereas political correctness was the order of the day in a certain self-righteous, sort of, victim stance. I mean, both, I'm above race. But, oh, by the way, I'm also black. Encouraged by the press. By this cheerleading commentariate that's out there. That you hear Bob Herbert comment about phallic images in the Britney Spears, Paris Hilton ad?

MCWHORTER: Yes, Bob Herbert has really annoyed me over the past six months. But, yes.

LOURY: You're talking about over the top. During the primary campaign, the otherwise sober Orlando Patterson opines in the *New York Times* that he sees D.W. Griffith type Ku Klux Klan imagery in Hillary Clinton's three o'clock red telephone ad.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, yeah, I remember that.

LOURY: See, this creates a sense of righteousness. The slimy -- in other words, politics has been politics for a long time. Everybody has had negative ads run against them. Everybody has had everything under the sun used against them. John McCain was said to be the father of an illegitimate child because he adopted a Bangladeshi baby, or whatever. Everybody has had this stuff thrown at them, you know. But, I'm black. We're from Hyde Park. We're the enlightened, you know, post-racial generation of achievers. And we deserve to be evaluated on the merits. Nobody better not say anything dirty about us. That's, to me, that's the flaw because it's tone deaf to the American way. I mean, it works in the Democratic fundraising precincts. But it's not going to work, in my opinion, in a hard-fought campaign going into November.

MCWHORTER: Oh, I agree with you completely on all that. There's a taxonomic distinction here. I did not see his "race" card comment as being in that class. I mean, you

can make an argument -- it is plausible to make an argument that, yes, you can throw anything at me that you want to. But to throw that I'm not qualified because of the color of my skin is off-limits, or I dispute that, or I think that you're disgusting for doing that. Now, I think that if he's surprised that race is ever going to come up at all, then it's kind of Polly-Anna-ish. But, I don't think it's wrong for him to say something like that because really, the people who seem to think of it as racist whenever anybody criticizes Obama -- and especially if it happens to be in a rather tart or colorful way -- those are the others. And so, for example, Bob Herbert. I try to put myself in people's heads. And I probably try to do it too much. I try to understand why somebody who, you know, hates me, would feel that way. And I can usually understand it, why a Republican would feel the way he does, why a Democrat. Herbert, I think, I try to put myself in the mind of intelligent man of hearty middle age looking at things that are going on. And seeing racism lurking behind every tree, every time somebody says something about Barack Obama other than -- that was a book falling, sorry -- hallelujah, he sees it as racism. It is appallingly sloppy logic. And he is not an ideologue who is doing that just to attract people to his column. It seems to be the way he

really thinks. And he's representative of a way of thinking. And I shudder to think how people like that would be enabled by an Obama loss. Can you imagine what Herbert's column would be like for the next six months after Obama lost.

LOURY: Well, I'm not going to read it, so that doesn't matter to me what it would be like. I mean, I'm not saying I don't read Bob Herbert. Obviously I do, but if he starts writing columns like that, I'm going to read the first paragraph and then, move on to the next thing. But, with friends like that, Barack Obama doesn't need any enemies if you ask me.

MCWHORTER: I agree.

LOURY: You know, back during the primary campaign, Bob Herbert wrote a column that I thought was just terrible. I mean, it was attacking Hillary Clinton for what he thought was gutter politics. Clinton fighting for her life and trying to win this primary. And frankly, when you look back on it, the arguments that she was making about the candidate, you know --

MCWHORTER: All made perfect sense.

LOURY: They should have been made, obviously, because they're going to be made now. Obviously those arguments were necessary to be made. Somebody had to make them.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, of course.

LOURY: Whatever. And he's gone on about how the Clintons never had any class, and he descends into this with, do you know when they left the White House, they took stuff from the White House that they weren't supposed to take. And he trots out all these allegations about Hillary Rodham Clinton's brothers, who were lobbying for clemency for some people in the last days of the Clinton administration. Again, had no brief for the pardons that he issued. I don't know enough about it to have an opinion. I'm just saying, Bob Herbert tracks out all of this kind of stuff that, you know, vast right wing conspiracy would bring up against the Clintons in the midst of a primary campaign because he didn't like the fact that she wouldn't withdraw from the race and she was actually challenging his candidate.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, you know what it is?

LOURY: Where does he get off? Who does he think he is?

MCWHORTER: You know who he thinks he is? And I'm saying he, as representative of a group of people who think the way he does, often of the years of his -- you know who he thinks he is? Not as good as white people. And I honestly believe that. People like that come from a time when it was easy to fall into the misimpression that to be black is

to be less. It would have been hard not to feel that way under Jim Crow. And I think, when I read something like that by Bob Herbert, that what he really thinks deep down, is that for a black person to have made it to a certain point, to have rung the bell a certain number of times, that's really the best that we can be expected to do. That when we do that, we are super heroes. And therefore, of course, under that paradigm, to criticize that person at all, you must be a racist because how could you have any problem with the person doing this? It's as if he thinks that there's a permanent handicap. That's the most terrible way that I can put it. I think it's a lowered self image. And it really does worry me because if he really believed that Barack Obama was as wonderful as he claims to, then he wouldn't wince every time some one says something like, we have to questions this person's competence when, as you say, he has not done that many things. I don't dispute that point.

LOURY: I'm not going to psycho-analyze the brother as they would say, but I can't rule out what you say.

MCWHORTER: It's worth thinking about, I think. It's how I make sense of somebody like that.

LOURY: Yeah, but I want to tell you this, because I saw it. I happened to be watching the program 'Morning Joe' at

MSNBC, there you are, blogging (inaudible) world. I confess, I sometimes watch MSNBC in the morning while I'm getting my exercise on my exercise bike, OK? So, I saw him come on, and the thing -- it was beautiful. Because there is Joe Scarborough, who -- I don't know if you know, you know -- but he's this TV personality, used to be a congressman from Florida. And he's a Republican. He's a pretty conservative guy. He's also a likable guy and he's the guy with a regular Joe persona. And there he is agape. I mean, his reaction was understated. He actually didn't challenge Herbert on the phallic symbol assertions that were made on his show. He simply left them there. Left them lying there for however many millions were watching his show that morning to scratch their heads and ponder what the significance of a *New York Times* columnist running around finding Leaning Tower of Pisa phallic symbols and imagining that the John McCain ads men are so clever that they planted those implicit sexual symbols in the same video with Britney, so as to suggest that Barack Obama wanted to get your daughter, or your wife. I mean, you know. I don't know.

MCWHORTER: It was so labored. It was very labored and it was paranoid. And the funny thing about Herbert, not to dog pile on him, is that when you see him -- when you do

occasionally see him -- there's a sort of peaceful quality about him. He smiles easily, you know, he doesn't seem like a tortured person. And yet, he writes these sorts of things. And I think it's because -- I do think it's because of some inner pain. But, no, I'm not a trained psychologist. There's definitely something wrong there. I think that as we look at what's going on, I suppose that what I am most worried about is that because of the sorts of things that influential people like Herbert write, or even, sometimes some of the things that Obama falls into saying, I suspect when he's tired, that there are going to be things like -- I was at a party once in 1998 and -- I think it was that year. And one of the new Star Wars movies had come out. The one with Jar Jar Binks in it. And I was at a party. This is a party that was very much a kind of stuff white people like party. It was a people parodied in that blog to a T. And there was a clump of such white people, who were, like, ten feet from me. And some guy came in, and he was one of those people, and he said he had seen this movie, and they said, so, how was it? And I just overheard this, and he was saying, well, the Jar Jar Binks character has a Jamaican accent, and that just struck me as so racist. And all the people standing around said, oh, yeah, yeah. And I remember just thinking in my

mind then, even though I wasn't in that conversation, was that really his primary response to that movie? Is that really the first thing that's supposed to come out of his mouth about that large movie full of interesting special effects.

LOURY: I'm sorry, what was the movie again?

MCWHORTER: It was the Star War movie that had Jar Jar Binks in it.

LOURY: Oh, OK, OK.

MCWHORTER: And, frankly, Star Wars bores me, so I didn't actually see it. But I remember there was a little controversy over that. And it struck me that person, those people, get such a sense of validation out of acknowledging racism, and not being racists. And I really -- those people like Obama. And I really don't want him to fail, in order that people like that can stand around at parties cluck-clucking about the ignorant people with pitchforks who wouldn't let him in. But the fact is, he is going to slip sometimes, Glenn. You know, I mean, I think that there are times when he's going to mess up, and I don't know if we want to read each of those times as evidence of him being unfit. And it seems to me that what he really does is he slips occasionally. He doesn't flub again,

again, and again. The way, for example, McCain does. He hasn't lost my confidence, yet, in that sense.

LOURY: I want to challenge that. I mean, not that he's going to slip. Of course he's going to slip. And no, I'm not writing him off. I mean, he's a man of enormous talents, and it's a long way before now and the election day. But, you mentioned the evil comments from McCain, who was very, you know, clear, concise, and concrete in his reaction to that question. And from Obama, who then, you know, proceeded on a kind of ethical disquisition on the various forms of evil in the world, and so forth. It was too abstract, and too intellectual by far. But I thought, not just in that comment, but in many moments of the Saddleback Church forum, McCain was just coming off very good. I mean, of course, he had the audience with him. It was not a level playing field, exactly, for Barack Obama, in that that audience, I think, was predisposed to -- affirmed many of the cultural positions that McCain would take. But McCain handled himself very well. He was extraordinarily well prepared. Then, the Obama campaign, it was reported, was telling reporters that they think the cone of silence might have been broken and McCain might have cheated. I heard that said by one of these talking heads on the

television that the Obama campaign was putting that word out, you know, sort of privately that they thought --

MCWHORTER: They didn't think Obama did a good job.

LOURY: Yeah, but I mean, come on. He cheated? I mean, whether he did or he didn't, unless you can prove it you should shut up and not say anything about it whatsoever. It makes you look small to say that. He had a terrific night, John McCain did. He was relaxed, he got to tell all of his stories, you know. His lapsing into anecdotes was exactly the opposite of Obama's sort of stiff, professorial manner. And his remove. I mean, it wasn't quite Michael Dukakis failing to get excited at the hypothetical that his wife would have been raped, but it was of the same kind. It was in the same ball park. A kind of lack of real -- I mean, why do you want to be leader of the free world? What are you going to do with all of that power? You know?

MCWHORTER: Yes.

LOURY: I mean, you've got to have a concrete, simple, straightforward answer to that question. And like I say, if it's not wage war on all the evil Islamists in the world, then it's undo this march down to a hundred years of conflict with an imaginary enemy. It's got to be one or the other. You can't coast. I'm repeating myself, I'm sorry. I know I sound like I'm lecturing.

MCWHORTER: No, you don't.

LOURY: But I believe this very strongly. Obama cannot coast into the presidency. He can't ride the polls into the presidency. He's going to have to do something.

MCWHORTER: Well, I think that he is going to have to do something, to an extent. But I think you're also -- you might be missing issues of what linguists would call channel. Obama is more comfortable doing a big rally, and coasting, so to speak, on applause, than he is on being interviewed by a person. And so, as we've seen, he wasn't as good during the debates, just in terms of charisma, as he is when he gives a speech. So, there you have it. Suddenly he's Adlai Stevenson when somebody's asking him questions, he seems to almost not like being asked these questions. And that's the way he is. And he could get a little better at that, just like Hillary Clinton got a little better at making a speech. But that's just his nature. But you can't say that when he is giving one of his rally addresses that he doesn't seem to have a certain inspiration. The distance that people see in his eyes, I do not see when he's giving a large speech. And this is why this is important because you mention that it's important to inspire people. And part of that inspiration definitely comes when he's giving big speeches. And the

big speeches are part of what being president would be. So, imagine, despite the flaws that we're talking about, can you imagine what that man's State of the Union Addresses could be like? Where he is talking to a whole hall of people, to the whole United States, and excerpts of it could be played again, and again on YouTube. You'll see inspiration there, and he'll have had more time to think about broader strokes of policy than the smaller strokes that he has on his website. He'll excited people. People will turn on his State of the Union Addresses. It will be a kind of entertainment. Can you imagine State of the Union Addresses being played in the barbershop? You know, I can assure you that as good as Bill Clinton was at it, nobody was looking at those in a black barbershop. Now, it will be in a black barbershop. There is inspiration. Imagine the first time he does a State of the Union Address and he tosses off one of those lines with that colorful, preacher-ly cadence. And the whole audience goes wild, and people are clapping at home. That's special. That is inspiration. And McCain could never do that. Hillary Clinton, for all of her competence, could never have done that. It could be interesting. And you know something, Glenn, I think it would last 100 days. I mean, there would be the cynicism that would set it. There's no way that he

could pull this off for four years, or for eight years. But it might be a wonderful beginning. And if that's symbolic thinking, then I openly admit that I'm dealing in symbol.

LOURY: John, I've got to tell you, I'm just sitting here smiling at the thought. I grant you, it's a wonderful thought, you know. And you invite me to imagine that first State of the Union of an Obama administration, and as I do, I can't stop smiling. I mean, of course it would be beautiful. It would be -- I mean, you know he would hit it out of the park. The historical resonance of it would be so profound.

MCWHORTER: People would be looking at it on their --

LOURY: The potentiality for all types of things. You know, I mean, Camelot. It would really be Camelot, you know.

MCWHORTER: Another hundred days. And that excites me.

LOURY: This is the thing about the Obama candidacy that has dogged me from day one. I mean, I heard that address that he gave in Springfield when the Reverend Jeremiah Wright had been tucked away, announcing his candidacy. I had it on TV, and I tried to get my children to watch, my teenage boys, and they wouldn't.

MCWHORTER: Really?

LOURY: But I was right there on every word, and I was all excited about it, and everything. But then, you know, in my more sober moments, I came out being a Hillary Clinton supporters. OK, we had a campaign, she lost, that's over with. He's a nominee, he's a Democratic Party nominee, I'm behind that, OK? But I had all of these, you know, conflicts. All these battles between hope on the one hand. I don't have any other way of putting it, you know. One of my students said, come on Professor Loury, you got to have hope. Come on, you can't -- don't be a cynic. That's the worst possible impulse. But those were the conflicts. The conflict was between believing in this impossible dream that you just got through so beautifully depicting in the form of that State of the Union on the one hand, and this, I guess you're going to call it cynicism. This sense that too good to be true. I don't believe in magic. I don't believe you can make something out of nothing. I don't believe you can just transcend the political differences. I think they actually have to be litigated and fought out. You know, I mean, there was this other side of me. And, of course, this realist side won out. I supported Clinton, and she lost. So, here we are. And now you -- in a way, you're holding out the same vision. And I must say that, in this, you and my 19 year old son, Glenn the second, are

not so different in that -- I mean, there's 20 years or more difference between your ages, but what I'm saying is, this is the argument he's been making with me all through this summer. He and I have been reading these speeches, reading all these books, you know. We write letters back and forth, and e-letters, and I send him, you know, links to things online. You know, we have comments over dinner, we take walks and we talk about it. And, you know, come on Dad. Can't you believe in something that you can't see, is kind of what he's saying to me. Can't you imagine a picture in your mind, and then, try to work to make it become a reality, is what he keeps saying to me. And the thing is, John, I've just got the sneaking suspicion that reality is going to break in on us in a big time -- I mean, that thing in Georgia, you know, that's the kind of thing. So, McCain comes out, and he's got his very arch, very tough line. Obama's statement, I don't know if you say it. I thought, I mean, the words -- if you just read the words off the page it would be fine. But he was reading, he kept looking down at his notes, he seemed tentative, there wasn't anything expansive. He didn't go off on a, you know, a sort of unscripted articulation about what he, you know. He looked tentative and, you know, he didn't look presidential in that moment, in my opinion. So, you know,

there's the reality, and there's this idealized vision.

And I'm having a hard time getting a hold of the vision and keeping it there. I can glimpse it now and then, but the reality always pushes itself back in on me.

MCWHORTER: Well, you know something -- I guess, though, now that we're past the primaries. The way I see it, and I think some people would disagree. I would rather see, in terms of where this country needs to go, Barack Obama get in and do just OK. And that would mean all the sniping and all the disappointment. If that's what it had to be, just OK, then to have McCain get in and do whatever he was going to do. So, we're no longer talking about whether it's Hillary Clinton.

LOURY: Yeah, I know that. I know that.

MCWHORTER: Imagine if it's McCain, you know, his first State of the Union Address. And it really would be -- and I don't hate McCain -- it would just be more of the usual. And, of course, the idealist that Barack Obama gets in and creates some sort of shift, or maybe he'd get in, and he'd just be OK. You know, he'd be another Clinton. And that, for me, would be enough too. But yes, I am excited that something special might happen because of these unique parameters that have come together. And you know, I'm not a dreamy person either. And I think that's part of -- and

to the extent that I'm considered conservative, which I'm really not. It's because I do not have the sunniest vision of the way things could ever be. And we could get close to something sunny, I think, with this guy and get a whole lot else done in the bargain. I hear everything you're saying, and I'm open to the face that it may be getting to the point where I'm letting Obama slide too much. I have become a bit of a fan, I must admit. But it's the best thing that, it seems, we have available at this point. And so, I guess we'll just see. Especially next week. There'll be things to talk about after next week, and the convention too. If only theatrical, we know that they will be there.

LOURY: Now, these are exciting times, I tell you. I can't wait for that convention. What do you think about the role that the Clinton's have carved off for themselves Tuesday night, Wednesday night, etcetera, etcetera? Much remarked upon?

MCWHORTER: I think it's fine. I am really tired of people's dog piling on those two people as if they're the spawn of the devil. The idea being that if they're there, they're going to try to take over. I'm unaware of the evidence that that is what those two human beings have in mind. They're big players in the Party. They both have a lot of

interesting things to say. And it was a very close fight. And so, I'm missing something there. There's some sort of reindeer game I've been left out of. But I'm looking forward to seeing what they have to say.

LOURY: I agree with you 100%. I think it's a tempest in a teapot, all this complaint about the Clintons stealing his thunder. That's not it at all. He's the nominee; everybody knows that. Bill Clinton is a former President of the United States.

MCWHORTER: Of the United States, right.

LOURY: You know what I'm saying? I mean, he's still a young man, relatively speaking. And his blemished, imperfect record was, nevertheless, a very strong record. And, you know, he brought the Democrats in from the wilderness. Of course you honor him and his wife had -- how he missed 17 million votes, etc., etc. She, you know, she's a fine little pillar of the Democratic Party, you know. The baton is being passed on to a new generation. Why wouldn't he honor his "elders"?

MCWHORTER: Yeah.

LOURY: He needs to embed his narrative in a larger narrative about what the Democratic Party is about. He needs to soften the edges on his running against the Clinton administration, which he basically did when he ran for the

nomination. And he had to since the former president's wife was his major opponent.

MCWHORTER: And he didn't mean that, and now he needs to make that clear.

LOURY: So, you know, and he's going to be speaking to 75,000 in a packed arena. Although, some of the funding, it seems to me, has been stolen from that by this extremely clever Republican attack because they can now say, of course he speaks to 75,000. He's a rock star.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, yeah.

LOURY: But that ain't about, you know, speaking to 75,000 is one thing. Dealing with the Russians in South Ossetia is another.

MCWHORTER: Of course it is. And we'll see what he has to say as time goes on. Yeah, the recreational hatred of the Clintons really -- it's begun to make me a little bit ill. I think it's the childish part of our natures. And, you know, based on all the criticism that he's been getting as a hollow suit lately, Barack Obama, I would imagine that his address would be one where he would at least be keeping that in mind. And maybe the man will actually say something amidst all of the rabble rousing. We'll see.

LOURY: You say, if he loses it will be bad because some people will go around saying he lost because he's black.

And I'm saying, OK. But if he loses, it's really going to be a shakeup inside the Democratic Party.

MCWHORTER: Oh.

LOURY: You know, think of all the recrimination. Think of all of the people who have placed a bet. You know what I'm saying?

MCWHORTER: Mmm-hmm.

LOURY: They put their money down, you know, to -- on the nose, you know. And if the horse doesn't come in, there's going to be hell to pay.

MCWHORTER: You know what though? I think he's -- he's going to win. And, you know, what authority do I have? But from trying to read up on this everyday, plus a certain gut feeling. And I'm -- this is on record because these things, blogging heads things, are online forever so I'm willing to have this quoted --

LOURY: OK. You made a prediction. I'm not making any prediction. I'm going to hold my fire for now.

MCWHORTER: I refuse to imagine too concretely that this is not going to happen.

LOURY: Think positive, John.

MCWHORTER: For a change, I'm trying to. So, yeah. Glenn, should we wrap it up for today?

LOURY: Yeah, let's wrap it up. We talked.

MCWHORTER: Let's do one after the convention because I'm
sure they'll be plenty to talk about.

LOURY: I'm all for it.

MCWHORTER: Good.

LOURY: All right. You take care of yourself for now, then.

MCWHORTER: Have a good day, Glenn.

LOURY: Bye.

MCWHORTER: Bye.

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