

Loury and McWhorter discuss Obama

LOURY: Hi there, John McWhorter, how you doing.

MCWHORTER: Glenn Loury. I am fine, how are you?

LOURY: I'm just fine. I'm here at Brown University, still teaching economics, and trying to get on the web whenever I can to sound off on these profound issues of our time.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, me too. This has been quite a couple of months, and certainly it has been quite a week. I am massively unhappy with what seems to have happened after this speech. I'd say it's been one of the most depressing couple of days in the time that I've been working on race. And now I'm in my eighth year of it, but I'm very sad.

LOURY: Well, this is because your candidate, Barack Obama, has taken something of a hit by all these events, or something less partisan, and somehow more universal reasons for your sadness?

MCWHORTER: Well, it's because of what seems to have happened to the reception of Obama. And we should preface this with the fact that there's a certain irony in that I am "the controversial person" who's in cahoots with the right wing, and I'm very much an Obama man, so they say. And I'm the Obama man, and you are, if I may, the progressive who, you know, liberal person, you're identified as that.

LOURY: Yes, I am sometimes.

MCWHORTER: And you are for Clinton. And so --

LOURY: See what happens when we start thinking for ourselves?

MCWHORTER: Yes, it's always a problem, isn't it? But that's the irony that we're beginning with here, that you are a Clinton man, and I am an Obama man, despite the niches that we're put in.

LOURY: That's true.

MCWHORTER: But I am depressed because it seems to me that Barack Obama made the other day what I think is the best speech in about 20 years, the best public, really national speech in 20 years. It's really an amazing piece of work. But nevertheless, a lot of white people seem to only be able to see that Barack Obama has gone and goes to a church where the minister makes sermons of a certain kind, and that the sermons classify as hate speech, and to the extent that Obama can have anything to do with -- to the extent that Obama can even sit through speeches like that, they're not interested and they're going to step away from him. They have, I think, this simplistic notion that there cannot be racism of any kind, even if it's reverse racism. This is hateful language, it must be stepped away from. And that strikes me as massively unreflective, and it strikes me as evidence that there is no remotely nuanced

understanding among that segment of the population as to how black people can have any feelings of resentment 40 years after the Civil Rights Act. And --

LOURY: It's interesting to hear you say that John, it is. I've read your books, and I know your reputation, and I don't think that's what your sort of typical person out there, certainly their typical black person say they'd hear coming from John McWhorter. But let me ask you this. First of all, I want you to define this problem. You say they, these people. Where are they located, or who are they? Are they the working class of Iowa, Pennsylvania, Missouri voters in the swing states that we've heard so much about? Are they white people in general? Because in my impression, that is not an accurate characterization, the one you just gave, the way in which the mainstream media have responded to Obama. I picked up my New York Times this morning and saw two columns, one from Nick Kristof, and the other from Cohen, that were, I thought, in a very different spirit altogether. And as I surf my cable news channels, of course I come across Bill O'Reilly, the right winger, having a field day. But the right wing have having a field day. You know, there was a report on Fox News yesterday about the fact that some radical Black Panther, new Black Panther group had, because it's an open

website, added Obama.com or .org or whatever it is, gone on his site and listed himself as one of his supporters. And then the webmaster had to go and take these guys off the site (inaudible) But I'm saying, how does that make news? How does it become news that some crank or weirdo or extreme element posts something on a candidate's website, why is that reported to the nation as news? So the right wing are having a field day. But I was asking you a question, and the question is can you define more precisely the nature of this problem and the social location of it, this intolerance of the fact that Obama might have gone to a somewhat radical or Afrocentric black theological church.

MCWHORTER: Well, you know something, I think this ends up tapping into something that we don't always like to talk about, which is level of education. Obama made a speech worthy of his level of education, which was a speech which was in the middle of a lot of things. It was a speech that acknowledged ambiguity, and refused to turn away from it, refused to resort to sound bites. So yes, I've read the same sort of things in the New York Times, and of course Nick Kristof has that view. But I'm deeply afraid that that way of processing his speech is the hallmark of perhaps one million brie-eating, New York Times-reading, highly educated "sensitive white people." And I've seen a

great deal of other evidence, for example, among the right wing, or among the swing voters who could either go to McCain or could go to Obama, who last week were in love with Obama, where frankly, they are not as accustomed to acknowledging the gray zones. I hate to say that, but it's true. There are people who are not as trained in straddling the fence in that way as one is if one has had probably too much education, or has hung around certain people, or is not really part of blue America. And it seems that with those people, there is a notion that Reverend Wright is a racist, and that racism is wrong, and if Bo Connor, then Reverend Wright is wrong, and there you go. And more to the point, these are people who are sick and tired of being beaten up about being racist.

LOURY: Well, that's a key point, I think. Go on, but I want to remark on that.

MCWHORTER: There were racists in the past, and that was terrible, but now these people -- and these people can now be in their sixties, they were not there enforcing Jim Crow, they have always been taught that racism is wrong, and they are sick and tired of black people pointing their fingers in their faces. And as far as they were concerned, as soon as Obama even hinted at that kind of thing, he was just out of the picture. And I'm really sad that they

can't think beyond that and really listen to the speech that the man made.

LOURY: Well, let's review the bidding a little bit, if we can. And I ask you and anyone who's listening to try to discount the fact that I've been identified, correctly, in support of Hilary Clinton. But I want to say this about this sensibility among a lot of people, a lot of Americans, and I wouldn't just call them white. I would bet that there are many Americans who are not white, who are not black, who also have this sensibility, which is you know, the race card is overplayed, there's too much talk about black victimization, it's time for black people to ante up and kick in civically, which is to stop the bellyaching all the time. So I want to review the bidding a little bit, the bidding that I want to review is Bill Clinton in South Carolina making some comments in which Jesse Jackson's name and Barack Obama's name are mentioned in the same sentence or the same paragraph, and suddenly Bill Clinton is a racist because he's observed that a lot of black people in states with a lot of black voters vote for the black candidate, the black candidate will have an advantage.

MCWHORTER: Right, I thought that was a ridiculous thing.

LOURY: Bob Kerrey, president of New School University, former senator from Nebraska and presidential candidate, liberal

Democratic supporter of Hilary Clinton, makes some comments in which, and I can't quote exactly, so please don't take these as verbatim, but basically the effect is it's an advantage to Obama or a great thing or something like that that he had this multicultural background, and he might have grown up with part of his childhood in Indonesia and something. I don't know if the madrassa thing was mentioned or not. But in any case, Bob Kerrey makes a comment, and then there are stories I'm reading for two or three days in the newspaper, national newspapers, about Bob Kerrey's inappropriate comment, and how that signals some kind of nefarious race strategy on the Clinton campaign. Hilary Rodham Clinton observes that it took a president as well as a social activist to bring structural change to American society in terms of civil rights laws and all the rest, that being Lyndon Baines Johnson, and there's a huge brouhaha over the fact that she allows for the possibility that Lyndon Baines Johnson's skills were absolutely essential, working on the inside, along with Martin Luther King's skills coming in from the outside, to bring about these changes. And again, there's a firestorm of protest about the inappropriate racial comments. I can go on in this vein. I'm not defending any of these peoples' comments. Geraldine Ferraro, well we know that story,

that's very recent. She says what she says, Obama wouldn't be where he is if he were a white man or a white woman or a black woman for that matter, but he happens to be very lucky, says Geraldine Ferraro, to be who he is. And the country's caught up in the concept. That much I know is a quote. And I wouldn't have said it, I wouldn't have advised anybody to say it, but it looks to me that it's not anywhere close to being racism to have said that.

MCWHORTER:       Nope.

LOURY:       Now let me just finish this. I'm sorry to be taking so long, but I want to just lay these points on the table. A candidate, as a post-racial candidate, who is getting beyond race, and yet he is resting on 85 and 90% support from black electorates around the country who are voting for him, you have to conclude, at least in substantial part, because of his race. And it becomes an unspeakable thing. Reports about the election can't dwell upon the remarkable fact that this candidacy is being buttressed by racial loyalty voting in many of these critical electorates. We just count the states, add them up and say he won. Oh, he's likely to win in California -- I mean, in North Carolina, people will say, without mentioning the reason why. Oh, Georgia, of course. Mississippi, well what do you think. Maryland, what inference can we draw,

etc. So now suppose you're -- forgive the caricature or the stereotype, you're the beer drinking high school graduate but not much more, union member, \$20 an hour guy. You know, all of this has not gone past you. You're not stupid, you've seen it all. And then, and then, and then the revelation about Reverend Jeremiah Wright's fiery sermons, and then the lectures from people about how come you all are so benighted, how come you're not more enlightened. Why don't you realize that everybody goes to a church, and every community has its foibles and its scars and its warts and all? Why can't you get over it and move past it, and see the grandeur of the man himself? Well, we've been sunk, mired I would say, in indirectly, tacitly, manipulatively racial environment for this entire campaign, much of it redounding to the benefit of the candidate. And now, as he seems to be being hoisted on his own petard, there are all these schools about why can't people see beyond race? I mean, forgive me, but did I miss something? OK, that was my spiel, and I'm happy to wait patiently and listen to your reply. I mean, you don't have to refute it or whatever, but that's what I wanted to get on the table.

MCWHORTER: And all of it is extremely important. And it's interesting. I wrote, a year and a half ago, before we knew Barack Obama very well, that the reason that he was

getting so much attention was because he is black. And that was true, back then. And like I said, if Barret O'Leary, I was creating this white version of him, all the same qualifications but not black, had done all the exact same things, then it would've taken longer for him to get attention, if he ever got it. And I just said let's evaluate him on the basis of himself, rather than the fact that he's a pretty color and that he symbolizes something. And that elicited -- I've had like three or four things that I've written in eight years that have elicited the most vitriol. And that was one of them.

LOURY: From where, from which quarter?

MCWHORTER: From white people, you know, never mind black people. White people hated that one. You know, I got all sorts of hate mail, and blogging groups yelling and screaming. And still that piece gets bounced around.

LOURY: And you're saying why can't you see past race?

MCWHORTER: Yeah, why can't you see past race. And then it becomes, John McWhorter, you get all of the attention you get because of your color too, really nasty stuff. And that's still being passed around. There are people who don't know that I have examined Obama, and come to like him. There are many people who seem to think that that's the only thing I've ever said about him. And so people

were really -- white people were really in love with this guy, and telling themselves that they were past this race thing. But it's interesting, they are not interested in Obama to the extent that he is racial at all. And so it wasn't that they were interested in voting for a black person. And many of these Joe Barstools had been falling in love with him, and Josephina Barstools. It wasn't that they were interested in voting for a black person, they were interested in voting for a black person who wasn't black. And so as soon as Obama shows that --

LOURY: That's a good point, John.

MCWHORTER: -- that he has some kind of connection with aspects of blackness that white people are less comfortable with, well then no, no, no. And the fact of the matter is that I, a few weeks ago, I put something on this new -- theroot.com, where I listed a few traits that I considered culturally black. I was trying to say that there is a such thing as cultural blackness, these are good things and that some black people exhibit these things more than others. And I talked about black English, I talked about Christianity, and I mentioned soul food and relationships.

LOURY: OK, when you say Christianity, I assume you mean the kind of black church version of Christianity, as it's

preached and taught and prayed in the thousands of churches, OK.

MCWHORTER: That's right, and has been so important in the civil rights movement.

LOURY: Indeed it has, profoundly so.

MCWHORTER: I would say that another aspect, which I had no reason to mention in that little piece, was a sense that even though the days of the fire hoses are gone, that there is a certain vigilance that we need to maintain, that there is a kind of racism which is not overt, but is covert, which is societal. I think that you could say that awareness of that, having a relationship to the statement that I just made, be it positive or negative, is another aspect of cultural blackness in America today. And Barack Obama is not so post-racial that he doesn't have a relationship to that, such that he is not what I would call a victimologist, but he can sit in a church and listen to a Reverend making speeches like those, and he can not flinch. He would not get up and walk out, he knows where that's coming from, as I've written. I think he probably sees it as a kind of performance. But I would not be surprised if somebody comes up with some video of the Obamas sitting and listening to Wright making statements like that, and I wouldn't be surprised if he's sitting there smiling and

clapping a little bit, because as somebody who has -- he's adopted black Americaness, he's adopted it thoroughly enough that not only does he speak the language, which is not an easy thing to do, acquiring that cadence which he did not grow up with, but he has that psychology, he has that relationship to our racial history. And unfortunately as soon as he showed that hand, then a lot of white people seemed to be turning away. And it just shows that it wasn't people interested in electing a black president, it was people interested in electing a president who has black skin, but who doesn't come up with any of the things that make them uncomfortable about blackness. And I hope that this has not imploded the poor man's campaign.

LOURY: Yeah, I don't disagree with what you're saying, but I want to make some observations. One of them is, and we made this point in a previous discussion on bloggingheads, you and I, about the elective character of Obama's blackness, which I always found so interesting about him as a person. I mean, there can be no doubt, this is a fascinating, as well as a brilliant and diversely talented, and eloquent and elegant and decent man. I mean, his biography, his unique sui generis, you know, journey, draws us in, and it draws us in because it's drama. I mean, it's deep and it's profound drama, played out in the life of a

somewhat still young man. So I'm taken by this idea of someone, president of Harvard Law Review, high flyer, Ivy League, you know, brilliant guy who goes to the South Side of Chicago -- which is my home turf -- that's where I was born and raised and lived nowhere else until I was in my twenties. And I picture myself in an analogous situation going into some community that is in some ways quite far from my experience.

MCWHORTER: Quite far, yeah.

LOURY: But still seeking himself, as he's explained in his autobiographical writing, still trying to find himself, still trying to get ground on this, still dealing with all of these identity questions that are plaguing and dogging him, and that he's needing to work out about who he is and where he belongs, and where is home for him, and how to go forward. And settling into my community, the South Side of Chicago, and building a life there, marrying, a family, integrating himself in the community, setting about his work as a community organizer and so forth, and then as a young politician, and yes, joining this church. And I know the South Side of Chicago. There was nothing in that sermon or those excerpts of sermons from Jeremiah Wright that I heard that surprised me --

MCWHORTER: Not at all.

LOURY: -- coming out of a black church. I knew that the ministry at the United Trinity -- United Church of Christ, out there on 95<sup>th</sup> Street, and near the Dan Ryan Expressway, on the South Side of Chicago, was known to be radical. I know that Wright was known as a brilliant, but iconoclastic and on occasion irreverent and dynamic, powerful preacher of the word of God, and advocate of the wellbeing of black people. And nothing about it surprised me. Frankly, to say this, and I don't mean to tar anybody with association, but I'll simply observe, it's entirely logical that the church there that Wright is the pastor of, and that Senator Obama is a member of, would have had a positive view of the ministry amongst Muslims of Louis Farrakhan in Chicago. They're cheek by jowl in the same community. They're drawing on the same sensibilities and the same life experience. There was nothing that Barack Obama said in his brilliant speech about the humanity and the complexity of this fierce -- fiercely intelligent black man, Jeremiah Wright, that couldn't also be said with a fair amount of truth about this despised, reputedly anti-Semitic Muslim imam by the name of Louis Farrakhan.

MCWHORTER: I might quickly add also that there are black preachers like him all over the country. It's not as

though there's some hot-house phenomenon going on in Chicago. That is one stripe of black preacher.

LOURY: Yeah, I don't dispute that in the least. I don't mean to imply that it's only in Chicago. I just mean to imply that you know, you put a half a million, three quarters of a million black people in an urban, unclean ghetto, and put the lid on that, and let it cook for a half century --

MCWHORTER: Right, and naturally there's going to be --

LOURY: -- and you're going to get something, OK.

MCWHORTER: That's right. And yet, the United States is surprised to find this out. They really thought that Obama was just a kind of black-faced Robert Kennedy. And it really shows the amount of revulsion out there for what has been called victimology, however you feel about it. And you know something Glenn, it leads me to a question that I want to ask you, and it's almost premature, because we can't see what effect this is going to have on how Obama does. But if perhaps at this point, it becomes common wisdom that Obama is just too --

LOURY: Excuse me John, there was just a little bit of interference on the line, so I didn't quite understand the last thing you said.

MCWHORTER: OK. If it ends up that Obama has lost stead because of this, then it seems to me that there can be no

more eloquent statement of the fact that the United States, the non-black United States, is really tired of the notion that societal racism is still something that the moral white person needs to attend to. Now, it would be nice if we could have this conversation that we're now being told we're about to have, where white people suddenly realize something, because that's what this conversation's supposed to be about. Once again, we're seeing all over the blogwaves that we need to have a conversation. That is a euphemism for white people need to be taught something massive in the moral sense, white people need to be taught that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were not enough, and that there's still something that the country as a whole must do, despite the fact that there is Bill Cosby, despite the fact of Condoleezza Rice, despite the fact that there is a Barack Obama. That's what the conversation is. The conversation is not about black people learning something, it's about white people learning something.

LOURY: You're saying that's the view of white people and they reject it, is that what you're saying?

MCWHORTER: No, I'm saying that this is what black people mean when they say that we need to have a conversation.

LOURY: OK, so the conversation has to basically be about reparations. Maybe not literally that thing, but it's got to be about that kind of thing.

MCWHORTER: Right, a moral realization followed by some sort of governmental intervention, that's the idea. Now what I'm saying is that based on this white reaction, and from what I've seen it's not only the right wing. There are a lot of moderate whites who are truly repulsed by Reverend Wright and the fact that Obama would have ever been in that church for longer than five minutes. I think we're seeing that the idea that white people are going to realize something again, that white people are going to ask, as you have asked, what manner of people are we, that we do not attend to, etc. I don't think it's going to happen. Now, it's not whether it should happen, but can that happen? And if this is the response to people simply finding out that the man who wrote those two books, and that the man who wrote that speech also has been sitting in that church for 20 years, even though 90% of what Wright does and says -- 95% has nothing to do with all of that race-baiting and anti-Americanism. Doesn't that mean that we have to give up the idea that there's going to be some sort of moral revolution, and just work with what we've got? That's a question I have for you.

LOURY: OK, John, I see where you're going with this. Not only might Obama go down, which would be a tragedy, if he goes down about this, if he ends up not becoming President because of this, that would be too bad. But not only that, but something will have been said, should that happen, and we both hope that it doesn't, something will have been said about the capacity for a moral deliberation at all. The sort that I have in my own writing have been advocating, calling America to higher ground, saying that look, what kind of people are we? These are our children, just as Barack Obama said towards the end of that magnificent speech. I mean, I must said again I wish I had written. I almost said I could've written, but then that would've been self-aggrandizing.

MCWHORTER: It's as if God wrote that speech.

LOURY: I wish that I had written it.

MCWHORTER: I don't know where that speech came from. It's amazing, isn't it. And it's scary, and he wrote it.

LOURY: So we have here an intellectual as well as a politician.

MCWHORTER: And it wasn't a bunch of guys in a room who wrote it for him, he wrote it, and it was quick. And really, it's dazzling.

LOURY: I don't know the backstory on that. You mean, he had no advice or input from anybody else? He didn't send around any memos for Bill Wilson --

MCWHORTER: From everything I know, he sat down and took off his sport coat and wrote it, and I'm sure he asked people how does this sound, how does this sound, but he wrote it.

LOURY: I have no doubt that he's capable of doing it. But in any case, what I want to say is what I've been saying in my own writing that well, America the higher ground, and these kids who are filling up our jails, they're really our children, we mustn't view them as alien and so forth, and Barack Obama said all of this. And I believe the argument that you're making is that if this firestorm consumes his candidacy, it means that it's really impossible to have that kind of moral discussion calling us to higher ground -  
-

MCWHORTER: Yeah, there would be no reason to suppose that that discussion could happen, right.

LOURY: Yeah. Well I don't know, I want to discuss that, and let me think about that while I'm talking here. (laughter) But I want to say a couple of things. I mean, one is that Wright said some things, and they've all been rehearsed, you know, "God damn American," "The U.S. of KKKA," "The government spreads the AIDS virus," the government puts

drugs in the community and then locks you up, and so forth and so on. And you know, I'm not trying to defend these things, I just want people to know that I'm not saying it was OK or somehow you know, if you really knew black pain, you'd know where this is coming from. I mean, if you really knew the black community, you wouldn't be surprised that this was being said, but it wouldn't have been my approach. But I want to just relate, very briefly, a little bit of an anecdote that puts this in some perspective. So I have a friend, now deceased. His name was Tony Campbell, the Reverend Anthony Campbell, who was the chaplain, the minister in the Boston University chapel during the summers for I don't know, 15 years. He was the guy who preached the sermons at the university chapel where I was on the faculty for many years during the summers. He's an African-American, he had pastored a big church in Detroit for many years. His father had been a well known Baptist minister. The family's out of South Carolina, and Tony had a somewhat academic bent. He was a Baptist, but he was also very high-churchy in his familiarity with the Anglican and Episcopalian tradition. You know, he preached at Canterbury, he preached all over the world. He was a beautiful, elegant, poetic preacher. I saw him preach a sermon with my son. We traveled to New York from Boston

for the sole purpose of seeing Tony Campbell preach in Riverside Church there, up in Manhattan, because it was such an honorific thing for him. And again, he hit it out of the park with just one of these beautiful, profound reflections on some aspect of the Christian teaching. Now, ten days, I would say, after 9/11, it wasn't the following Sunday, it was a week from the following Sunday, he preached his final sermon of that summer in the Boston University chapel, and I was there. And the theme of that sermon was "A Reversal of Fortune." And the bottom line, I won't go on long about this, was he preached from a teaching in the New Testament about the figure of Lazarus, not the one who was raised from the dead, but the wealthy man who ignored beggars who sat in front of his door throughout his blessed life, and who when he died, was sent to hell, to roast in the fires of hell, and when he asked for relief from the angel of the Lord, was denied it, being told that you had your chance on earth, and you didn't help. And when he asked that someone be sent back to warn his brothers, lest they fall into the same condition, he was told they didn't listen to the prophets, they didn't listen to Jesus, why would they listen now? Let them roast along with you. Tony starts with that scripture in that sermon. This is, I tell you, a man who doesn't have a

radical bone in his body. This is a man, as I say, who's preached at Canterbury. And he says in effect, the U.S. is in the position of the Lazarus here. We, in effect, he says, to some degree reap what we have sown. Those were not the words, but that was the message. We, in other words, live now with the consequences of our neglect, of our contempt, of our arrogance, of our haughtiness, of our self-absorption. Now, that sermon was preached in Boston University's chapel. And the point I'm trying to make here is that the African-American Christian witness, the embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the long years and generations of pain and suffering and disappointment, and bless this, of the millions of descendents of African-Americans in this country, has a prophetic message for the American people. I mean, I'm sorry to those of you who may not be Christians, if I sound like I'm preaching, because I realize that I well may be. But the point I'm trying to make here is that we are not, I talk now about America, perfect. And that the black experience does throw up from time to time a critical look at how we look at ourselves and how we conduct ourselves, and we would be well served to attend to it. And if that criticism, if the content of the criticism about our arrogance and our neglect of suffering the world, and about

our use of our power in ways that cannot be morally justified, and about our self-absorption, if the content of that criticism is dismissed along with the form of it, when it comes in an ugly package, then we're so much the poorer for that, it would seem to me.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, it's going to sound condescending for me to say this, and it isn't condescending, because I mean it sincerely. You're a brilliant man. What you just said comes from a very high IQ and deep insight. But my question is whether or not the rest of America, especially white and non-black America, can see it that way. Think of it this way. Let's say that we talk about a single black mother who has four children, and they don't all have the same father, and she's having trouble finding work that can be more than menial, because she's got all these kids to take care of. She's a fine person, but she's having trouble. We cannot expect a white person who's going about their business to look at her and say that it's the legacy of racism that she has so many kids. We can talk about the kids and why, but a woman walking by named Kay Callahan, I'm making up some white woman of about 50, she's not going to see it that way. If one of those kids, because they didn't have enough supervision, when they're about 17, ends up joining a gang and shooting some white co-ed, and then

using her ATM card, because that's the only culture he ever knew, I don't think Kay Callahan is ever going to look at that guy and think that's my fault, I'm going to write my Congressman. Whether she should or not is irrelevant. I don't think it's going to happen, and this is where I want to bring with. How about the fact that in the last fourth of Obama's speech, he talked about problems that all of us are having? It's interesting, whenever I give a talk somewhere, and there's a significant amount of black people in the audience, I know that one person's going to stand up and ask a question about hip-hop, nowadays one person is going to stand up and ask what color my wife is, and then another person, I can guarantee that one person is going to stand up and say in that talking about all of these black problems, I am stereotyping. They say it gently, I don't get yelled at, but their idea is that I'm talking about these poor black single mothers, I'm talking about these black gang bangers, and what about the white ones? And usually I give an answer along the lines of I'm talking about the higher concentration of these things in communities, I'm talking about proportions. But let's try a thought exercise of what might actually work. I was watching a movie last night with my wife, who is white, for the record --

LOURY: I didn't ask.

MCWHORTER: That's OK, but I'm putting it out there, because people seem to think it's some sort of secret.

LOURY: Fine by me, John.

MCWHORTER: (laughter) The point is my white wife chose a movie called Gone Baby Gone.

LOURY: At least it's not your grandmother you're throwing under the bus.

MCWHORTER: That's right, and I don't think that my wife crosses the street when she sees any black people coming. But she chose a movie called Gone Baby Gone, a really wonderful movie.

LOURY: It's a great film, I agree.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and it has these working class white Bostonians. And I have walked through communities like those, and thought to myself this is the stereotypical black ghetto in white face. And there are plenty of communities like that across the country.

LOURY: Oh, you're so right about this John. Excuse me for interrupting, but as you were talking, and I thought I saw where you were going, I was thinking about the heroin epidemic in South Boston, which has been a real problem here in the Boston area over the last five -- lots of overdoses and whatnot --

MCWHORTER: Or this meth thing across the country. The people who are abusing meth are not, stereotypically, that's not black people, that's a white thing. Or for example, on the root, Larry Bobo at Harvard accused me of stereotyping when I opened one of my pieces by talking about black guys who were making a ruckus at a McDonald's and had to be asked to leave, young black tweens. And his idea was that there are white kids like that too. OK, let's go with that. My gut says that there is a black problem that needs to be attended to, but maybe these people are right that what we're really talking about now is just poverty. Can we be open to that, because I think that Kay Callahan might be more moved to take care of that. Kay Callahan will look at those people in South Boston, sitting on their steps and doing the same stuff that we hear about in black ghettos. Kay Callahan could be moved to reinstate a war on poverty, whereas she's not going to be moved to reinstate a war against racism. So what about that, Glenn? Is this a black problem, or is it an American problem that cuts across the races?

LOURY: Well, I don't know that those are the only alternatives, but I want to say if I have to choose between those two, I'm going to choose an American problem that cuts across the races, because there are a whole lot of

white mothers who don't know how they're going to feed their children, a whole lot of white families who don't know if they're going to be able to find a job soon enough to keep that mortgage at bay. There's a whole lot of you know, schools that are failing, white as well as black. As you say, the rates or the proportions may be quite different. So if I had to choose between those two -- but I just want to say that if we take race completely out of the equation, we may fail fully to appreciate what some of the causal dynamics are that are driving our problems. So let me take a concrete example. The fear of crime and the overreaction to that fear that leads to us being too punitive and creating institutions that are vast and powerful, that are basically about confining, corralling, and warehousing bad people in our society who offend against our laws. There's too many people under lock and key, ought to get a day, etc. And the politics that generated that transformation of our prison and punishment institutions from a situation where we weren't such international outliers 30 years ago in terms of how many people we lock up, to a situation where we're now the most imprisoning country, by far, on the planet. And you know, I don't want to cast aspersions. I don't want to say it

was just Richard Nixon, the racist Southern Strategy,  
Ronald Reagan, the racist war on drugs or whatever --

MCWHORTER: There was also the Congressional Black Caucus who  
were behind these things.

LOURY: Exactly, it's a very complicated problem, and it  
involves a lot of Democrats, as well as the Republicans,  
and yes, there were urban black representatives who voted,  
seeing the decimation of their communities for tough laws  
and so forth. But what I'm saying is that the phenomenon,  
if you will, of the Willie Horton ad, or if you will, when  
Deval Patrick was running for governor in the Commonwealth  
of Massachusetts recently, his Republican, white female  
opponent, tries to cast him as soft on crime because  
sometime during his long and illustrious legal career, he  
had done pro bono representation for people who were  
convicted of crimes, and who were filing their cases of  
appeal. He acted like a lawyer and represented a client,  
and that made him somehow -- and I'm just giving those as  
examples of the fact that the politics of lock them up and  
throw away the key, three strikes and your out, criminals  
are going to come and get us, and who cares how long they  
stay and whether or not they're rehabilitated, let's strip  
them of all their rights, let's keep them from voting,  
let's prevent them from getting Pell Grants so they can get

educated if they come out of college and want to get their noses clean, let's just punish them. You can't persuade me, on my reading of the history, that the race issue isn't part of that, isn't part of the reason that we're in the fix in the first place. So let me give just one little example and I'll shut up. The South Side of Chicago is an urban ghetto. It's a racial ghetto. It's almost uniformly, except for certain enclaves, black. There are two thirds to three quarters of a million people there. It's the most massive urban formation of that kind in the history of the modern world, as far as I can tell. And it's a creation of racially tainted politics and public decisions by federal, local and state government, and all the rest, and by individual persons who decided that they couldn't tolerate 15-20% of their neighbors being African-American. Once the tipping point of 10% was exceeded, everybody had to get out as soon as they could and so forth. Those are all racial things. So while we're acknowledging that the problems affect everybody, and the solutions are undoubtedly non-racial -- I'm a supporter of reasonable affirmative action -- you may not be, I don't know, but it's a minor key, not a very important issue relative to the magnitude of the problems that we're talking about. And the solutions to those problems are not

going to come from race, they're going to come from an America, as Barack Obama tries to tell us, an America that's able to overcome its differences and get its head together about what it wants to do for its own future for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So I think the solutions are non-racial, but I think some of the causes certainly are racial, and I think we probably ought not to throw those things away while we're moving towards a kind of non-racial sensibility for solving the problems.

MCWHORTER: We do not want to throw those things away, but if there's something I've seen while I've been trying to look at these sorts of issues, it's that most people, including thoroughly intelligent people, are not historians, and they're only so historically minded. It's one thing to tell Kay Callahan that I used to not be able to eat lunch at Woolworth's, and that was only ten years ago, and I used to have to go to this terrible school, and so I need special treatment. That was hard enough, but I think it makes sense. Any of us can see that if Kay Callahan didn't understand that, that there was a certain moral lapse. But 45 years later, to still be telling people that there are things that happened before you were born or when you were a child, there's this cumulative series of events, and it went like this, and all of us don't even agree whether it

went like this or went like that, but because of all these things, there's something you need to think about and there's something you need to feel. Glenn, it ain't going to happen, that's not the way most people think. Black people, because black people are human beings just like everybody else, are not really historians. Note how the younger black people are, the less they know about the civil rights movement, the cliché now about how black kids from bad schools wonder if Martin Luther King freed the slaves. And then, taking it even further, I did a radio show a couple of years ago with a rapper, and I'm not going to name him, but he considers himself relatively conscious, and he actually thought that the heyday of Motown was the 1980s. He really couldn't place it. I didn't say anything, but that's his sense of history.

LOURY: Wow, you're kidding me.

MCWHORTER: But that's his sense of history. And he's not stupid, it's just that most people are not historians. People live in the present tense.

LOURY: He may not be stupid, but he's definitely ignorant.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, he does not know some things.

LOURY: Of the history of the very music that partly gave birth to his own genre.

MCWHORTER: To the music that he's making, he literally thought it was then, and I just let him move on, because I thought most people don't have decades sitting in their head. That's something that historians and intellectuals do. And people say we have to learn our history, we black people. Frankly, that's never going to happen. I don't know who knows their history to that extent. How well do most Chinese-American kids -- how many of them can list the order of the dynasties? How much can they tell you about the Cultural Revolution? People live in the present tense. And I don't think I can assail white Americans for that. All of which is to say that yes, we can attend to these things. These things can be in books etc. But I'm beginning to think that John Edwards was on point. If we're actually going to get anything done, it has to be about a war on poverty. And I think that we can really work on these things. But you know, a black friend of mine married a white woman many, many years ago, who was of working class, white origin, southern Ohio, and I knew her and her family very well. I am godfather to this couple's kids, as a matter of fact. And this woman has a family, and it's all the same stuff. I mean, it's the same children by multiple fathers, it's the same lack of basic recoil from crime, and all the sorts of things that we

associate with "ghetto" culture is with these white people, and it's the whole life they've led. They come from somewhere where everybody's white, but it's all that same stuff. And those people have complained. You know, we always hear about black this and black that, what about us? I can't tell them that they're wrong. I could not look those people in the eye and say, "I'm sorry, but the black issue is more important because our ancestors were brought here as slaves 10,000 years ago," or even, "Our ancestors were being beaten up in the street before you were born, or when you were a child." It just won't wash. Most people are not intellectuals. And I'm really seeing that this week. I am just so depressed watching white people unable to get beyond he's a racist too, therefore he will not get my vote. Glenn, they can't get beyond it. That's the best they can do. I hate to say it, but --

LOURY: OK, John. John, I hear you, I hear you loud and clear. Let me put -- I want to put three things on the table for us to talk about, because our time is limited, right?

MCWHORTER: That's right.

LOURY: I mean, if you want to put other things, you can, but one of them is Hispanics. OK, so we've been talking black and white.

MCWHORTER: For example.

LOURY: OK, so we know the role that the Hispanic vote played in California and Texas in terms of its very heavy support for Hilary Clinton. I'm not criticizing it, I'm just observing it. And I'm wondering if as we talk about what blacks will do, what whites will do, and so forth and so on, that we couldn't also inject that. That's one thing. Another thing is can Obama really lead us on this question? Everybody takes that as a given. I read all these columnists and these commentators I hear, and they all say that Obama's the man to lead us, and I'm wondering could Obama really be a Nixon to China on the racial issue? Maybe you need Lyndon Johnson out of Texas, almost a segregationist at one point in his career. I don't mean to defame, I'm just saying you know, his constituency was not exactly an enlightened Upper East Side Manhattan constituency, you know.

MCWHORTER: Not at all, no.

LOURY: And yet, he leads the nation, Nixon to China-esque. I know it's an anachronism, Nixon didn't go to China until after LBJ was no longer President, but you see what I'm saying?

MCWHORTER: Point taken, yes.

LOURY: And now Obama, can he do it? I'm thinking he can't. I'm thinking, you know, it can't be Obama. Maybe it could've been John Edwards, but it can't be Obama. Even if he gets elected it can't be Obama. What he can do is he can chase and chastise Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton and those people. He can certainly tame the black outrageous or whatever you want to say, but he couldn't do it for the nation precisely because he's black. And I'm thinking also that -- this is the third point, that I just want to introduce for your consideration, which is that Barack Obama has had an authenticity problem with African-Americans, which we thought that he had solved, and perhaps now of course he has solved, because once he becomes the target of the right wingers --

MCWHORTER: That's gone, yeah.

LOURY: -- and the racism of the country, then he's authentically black.

MCWHORTER: He's black now, that's right.

LOURY: If he wasn't black before, he's damn sure black now, you know what I'm saying? (laughter)

MCWHORTER: That's right.

LOURY: But it may be one reason why he didn't walk out of that church.

MCWHORTER: Oh, of course it is.

LOURY: I've heard many theories. The theories are well, he was politically opportunistic, the church had 8,000 members. Why would you walk from a church with 8,000 members? Another theory is that well, the man led him to Christ. The man had a deep, personal affection. And I'm sure that's true, and it was a question of loyalty and overlooking foibles, and you know, you don't leave your family because you don't like everything they say. But maybe another possible answer is that precisely because his own -- and I hate this, I should shut up -- I shouldn't be speculating about this person's psyche, because what do I know, but anyway, let me just finish the sentence -- precisely because his own kind of place within this world of blackness was subject to attack and question. I don't say that there was question in his own mind, but I say that he might have considered the possibility that there would be questions in other peoples' minds, that that might have allowed him to overlook, or be willing to countenance things with which he personally disagreed, because the very act of disassociation -- I'm talking about preemptive disassociation, disassociation before we get to this point -- of course he can't disassociate now, that would be the cheesiest thing in the world for anybody to do. But the very act of disassociation at an earlier point might have

also, somehow or another, enhanced his feeling of maybe not entirely being secure as being accepted within that community. That speculation may be worth very little, and that's why I make it the third point. But the first two, Hispanics, and could Barack really be the Nixon goes to China type person on the race issue, I wonder what you think about.

MCWHORTER: Well, your third point is one that I have had in my mind, and I feel the same way. We don't know him, and it's just a guess, but I don't think that it's a worthless guess. I think that a major element of what many people think of as authentic blackness to be, since the civil rights revolution, is you've got a bit of the rebel in you, that means that to some extent, on some level, you've got a bone to pick with the establishment. Something has not happened yet. Obama, fashioning a black identity, and it's really fashioning, it's something he chose, like you might decide to become Estonian if you move there. I'm sure he noticed, as an intelligent and sensitive person, that real blackness means having some sort of fire in the belly, to a lot of people, and that if you display that, then you're in. And so yeah, I remember once when I was in Dakar with an all-black group, a travel group. And this was a long time ago, this was 20 years ago, and there were some black

people in the group who questioned my authenticity. They didn't say it to my face, but I don't talk right, I don't act right.

LOURY: Because of your skin color?

MCWHORTER: No, because of the fact that I talk proper, and that I have a snotty demeanor and all that stuff. It was all very nice, but this is what I learned. There was an unpleasant episode at a market where I had to pick my sister up bodily, yell at somebody, and take my sister away. And a couple of people told me after that that now, now we know that you're really black. That's interesting. We were worried about you at first, but we saw it.

LOURY: Oh, until you had to cuss somebody up. (laughter)

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and this was natural. They were great ladies. And so in the same way Obama picked up on that, and not consciously I'm sure -- but yeah, that's part of why he felt comfortable in that church. As for whether or not he could be a leader, I think certainly he could be, if we could just get past the fact that he listened to these sermons. I think people could see him as this café au lait, neither one nor the other, consensus building person. He's have a certain authority to talk from within the black community. Then on the other hand, he would be thoroughly conversant with the mainstream world. And I think that he

would actually be a perfect leader in that way. And as I've said before, in terms of what leading is, I really think that if there were four, or hopefully eight years, of Michelle Obama and their kids in the White House every day, that would do so much, in addition to him, to change the way we talk about race in America, and what people's chances are, and how deeply racism is embedded. So I think I could see it. As far as Hispanics, Hispanics are one of the main reasons that I don't see us having a black-white kind of dialogue that's meaningful anymore. Back in the old days, the civil rights days, as you might call them, there were only so many Hispanics, Latinos in the country. Nowadays there's as many of them as there are of us, so the whole issue is --

LOURY: There's as many or more Hispanics as there are Americans, and there's going to be more -- black Americans, I should say, and there are going to be more Hispanics.

MCWHORTER: That's right, it's brown now. And so as far as I see it, we have to change the terms of our dialogue, because saying that black people deserve special attention is going to be ever harder to defend, given the reality of these other brown people around. Glenn, let me ask you a question --

LOURY: John, let me ask you something else.

MCWHORTER: Just a quick question, do you hear people talking?

LOURY: Yeah, I do hear a little interference on the line, I'm trying to overlook it.

MCWHORTER: OK, go ahead.

LOURY: I don't know what to say about that, but let's keep going. (laughter) And that was going to be biracial -- biraciality, if I can use that term. I know that you saw Shelby Steele's book, Bound Man, who makes the argument that he makes -- I'm not going to rehearse it here, but I was struck when Shelby Steele, in opening that book, points out that Barack Obama, as he has told all of America, is the son of a mother from Kansas, white, and a father from Kenya, black. And so he is not only black, he's also white. And that's with heavy inverted commas, with a footnote that goes on for two pages about how complex that kind of designation is. But anyway, he's not only black, but he's also white, and of course that's a part of his -- a part of his appeal to us, it's a part of, as Steele argues, of why he fascinates us and whatnot. But as I listen to some of the commentary, during that speech Barack Obama says he could no more disown the Reverend Jeremiah Wright than he could the black community, no more than he could his own grandmother who loves him more than anything

in the world, and who helped to raise him -- and this is a paraphrase of the quote, but it's pretty accurate, I think, and who once confessed to him that she was afraid of black men passing her on the street, and whom he had heard utter racial comments that were abhorrent to him or concerned him in a deep way. And so he deployed, if you will, his grandmother, his white grandmother. And the campaign has done that. I remember there was one incident where one of these Clinton surrogates said something about race. Somebody said something about race that the Obama campaign didn't like, and the next thing I know, I saw a photograph of him sitting with his white grandparents it might have been, but some white relatives or ancestors, by way of making the point that our candidate is not simply black. OK, so he's not simply black, he's black and white, if you allow me to say it like that, with heavy inverted commas. And I don't mean this as an accusation in any way. I really don't, I hope you will believe me. I'm not trying to pull him down in any way, I'm just making a statement of fact. That's complex.

MCWHORTER: Yes it is.

LOURY: I mean, that's Freudian levels of psychological complexity, know what I mean? What are these white people thinking when Obama trots out his white mother or his white

grandmother, and makes them look at the photograph? I mean, the tacit message, the subliminal message there is I am you, you are me. And of course, that's true. OK, so this is a profound thing to be saying to America, but can they hear that?

MCWHORTER: That's right, and can they see that he can be them, and also be somebody who can listen to a sermon by Jeremiah Wright, and not get up and leave the room? Because that means that he really does have a double kind of identity. And that is massively complex, and can people see that he can sit through a sermon like that, but nevertheless be somebody who can lead the country in a very useful way, who would not lead the country as a closet bigot. And I would assume that people could see that. And I really hope that over the next weeks, we can see America rise to, if not being ready for some kind of black revolution, seeing that Barack Obama is the same person they were going crazy about a few weeks ago. And I worry that they can't.

LOURY: Yeah, I hope that you're right. Although I'm supporting a different candidate, you know, there are worse things than losing an election, there are worse things than your candidate not prevailing. The whole zeitgeist, the whole kind of structure of consciousness in which you're

embedded goes off the rails. That's much worse than having your consciousness lose.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, here's one last question I want to ask, because we haven't --

LOURY: OK, but before you ask your last question, can I make the next to the last observation?

MCWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: Because the fury in some people, in some of the blog comments I've seen, and also some of the talking heads that I've heard, that Obama, they say, he compares his grandmother to the Jeremiah Wright, because his grandmother may have said some things that unsettled him. And I think they completely misunderstand what he's doing. I mean, of course no, a woman who's up in years who might use an n-word, I don't know that that's what it was, or who might say some crude stereotype, they're not like us, they don't work hard enough or whatever, is not the same thing as "God damn America."

MCWHORTER: No, in a public forum.

LOURY: Barack Obama is not confused about that, it's not like he thought that they were analogous. It's that intimacy can triumph over ignorance, over racism, over racial resentment --

MCWHORTER: Imperfection, right.

LOURY: -- over anger, over fear, and over stereotype.

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: You don't break off with the people who you love and who love you, because that bond of connection, that intimacy, that human contact is the basis from which stuff can be transcended.

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: I think that was his argument. I don't break off from my grandmother who loved me because what we are about is not just agreeing or disagreeing on that question, and I don't break off from this community, not just Jeremiah Wright, because it's the community.

MCWHORTER: That's right. And I think it --

LOURY: I don't break off from this community that loves me and that I love, because it's about more than agreeing or disagreeing on a particular point.

MCWHORTER: And I think it's perfectly clear in his speech that that's what he meant, and in this era of the internet, you can see it in writing, so you can see it for yourself. And the fact that all these people are reading it as just an equation between the white grandmother and Reverend Wright is what I mean in that I am very discouraged this week at the willingness of a lot of people to think sustainably. It's really depressing to see people taking

it that way. But Glenn, I want to ask you something.

Based on the long string of losses that Hilary Clinton --

LOURY: I'm sorry John, the interference on the line is so great now that I didn't hear the question. Based on what?

MCWHORTER: These people are getting loud, aren't they?

LOURY: Yeah.

MCWHORTER: I wonder where these people are. Based on the long string of losses that Hilary Clinton has suffered, why are you still supporting her? What makes you like her better than Obama?

LOURY: Again John, I'm sorry, I really didn't hear you.

MCWHORTER: You know, if these people are this loud wherever there are --

LOURY: I hear you right now, so let's try one more time.

MCWHORTER: Let's give these people on the line the last word, and we can pick this discussion up next time.

LOURY: All right. Well, maybe that will give us a good excuse for us to talk again soon.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. Glenn, this has been a good one.

LOURY: Yeah, very good John. I appreciate it, and I'm glad we can agree about something. And I hope that the bloggingheads conversation in which the two discussants actually agree about a subject can nevertheless be worthy of being watched by the bloggingheads public.

MCWHORTER: We shall see.

LOURY: We'll have plenty to argue about next time.

MCWHORTER: Looking forward.

LOURY: Bye bye.

MCWHORTER: OK, bye.

**END OF FILE**