

## The Age of Obama

MCWHORTER: So, good morning, Glen.

LOURY: Good morning, John, an order of congratulations.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, I suppose. How are you feeling about --

LOURY: We're living in a post-election, and in the age of Obama.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, we're in it. This is actually it. It's no longer hypothetical. We don't have to sit around musing about whether racist whites sitting in diners and cafes in small towns are going to keep Obama from getting elected. They did not.

LOURY: OK, so does your wine taste better, is the sun brighter, the air fresher? I mean --

MCWHORTER: You know --

LOURY: What, something happened?

MCWHORTER: You know what's really happened is the fact that I am now a Democrat who works for a conservative think tank is weird to me. I must admit that that's the main change. You know, it used to be that Bush was in office and we all had to make the best with that, and now here I am, and I'm having to forge a kind of a new identity. But in addition, yes, it is a great day, because we're going to have a presidency that we can be happy about, and possibly do

something constructive with. I'd forgotten how that felt, and it's never been that way while I was a political or media or cultural commentator, or whatever you want to call it.

LOURY: Why should the President be so important to our lives, John? I mean, I'm not saying the President is an irrelevancy. Of course we want a competent President, we want an inspiring President, but can't we do these things without having to have someone standing up in front from the White House telling us this or that?

MCWHORTER: We should, but unfortunately, or fortunately, symbolism matters. For example, think of this, just this one simple thing: from now on, whenever a black teen who likes the books is told that he's acting white for liking books, all he has to say is, is Barack Obama white? Simple as that. It's going to be the perfect smack-down, and that's not something someone could have said before a very short time ago. He's there.

LOURY: Wait, wait, wait, wait. You believe that peer culture in inner city Brooklyn, in a housing project in Chicago, amongst blacks in rural communities of Alabama or Mississippi, that the way they deal with each other, how they decide whether or not to have sex, whether or not they decide to go out and get drunk or use drugs, and how they

treat each other in their relationships, joining gangs, being belligerent on the bus if somebody looks at you the wrong way, that's all going to change because Barack Obama, who by the way, is half-white, has been elected President of the United States?

MCWHORTER: You know that's a straw man. I'm talking about acting white, and it's not just in some small town in Alabama, because that acting white problem happens in leafy, middle-class suburbs as well. And watch, I really think in ten years we're going to look back and we're going to realize that that acting white thing has lost a lot of its sting, and it's going to be because we have that particular President in office. Symbols can matter. That is one thing that I think is going to happen.

LOURY: OK, I guess what I'm saying is that I don't know if that's right or not. I don't know how you could possibly know that --

MCWHORTER: Just watch.

LOURY: -- that's your hope and that's fine. I'm not against these progressive things happening. I'm looking at the President of the United States decides or helps to decide what the government does when the government does when the auto industry is failing, decides or helps to decide whether or not to carry a conflict into Pakistan, over and

against the government's wishes to the contrary there, because our national security interests are at heart, decides or helps to decide -- and I can go on -- how health care will be delivered to hundreds of millions of people. What the message of the Democratic Party, and a progressive thing -- so these are major, major things that the President does decide. Culture amongst African-Americans is not something that anybody decides, and to look to a President to solve a problem which really is a problem for churches, families, writers and critics about culture, media, and the rest to collectively resolve, seems to me to be freighting an awful lot onto an election.

MCWHORTER: Well, none of the things that you mentioned, with this particular problem I mentioned, could be nearly as effective as the particular presence of this person, and the power of a savory put-down in human interaction. But if you want to pull the lens out further in terms of policy, I'm very excited by the fact that we're actually going to see interesting things getting done, because obviously there's been a certain amount of gridlock, and to the extent that things were getting done, during especially the first half of the Bush years, it was often things that I think a lot of us would have certain questions about. So talk about health care. It looks like we'll be in a

position, especially with the composition of the Congress, to actually see something happen, and there are all sorts of things we might want to happen, but with Obama, and what you might call his mandate, and with the Democratic majorities, we will see things happen. Not exactly what he wants, he's in office as President, it's all about compromise, but this is a time when we're going to be able to watch change of some sort happen in a way that it no longer could, especially in the second half of the Bush administration. Doesn't that excite you in some way?

LOURY: No, it does. I mean, there was an election. I grant you that the political landscape has changed, that the ground has been shaken and reconfigured, and I don't know going forward what all of that means. I mean, the Internet community, organized by and excited by the Obama candidacy, can now become a template or a framework around which could be built a permanent and ongoing, you know, political effort for raising funds, for activating the interests of people and communicating with them and mobilizing them, and who knows how that might change American politics, and so much more besides. You know, I grant you that this is a moment of possibility, but I think whereas you are talking a lot about culture, and in particular about culture amongst blacks as the venue where this possibility might be

realized, I want to think about what it means to have a -- you call him a black President, OK, let's call him a black President, although I want to stress that's already trimming down a little bit of the reality to fit a convenient narrative. He's not just a black President, he's also a white President. OK, his mother, his grandmother, his grandfather, you know, et cetera. But in any case, I want to think about what a black President might mean for American foreign policy. I want to think about what it means or might mean that there's a black man in the oval office when it comes to nuclear war, when it comes to maintaining an arsenal capable of incinerating all of humanity. You know, I can go on in that vein. If we talk about mobilizing people, maybe there's a possibility for a real war on poverty. OK, how about taking on the idea that hedge fund managers and Wall Street bankers make 100, 500, 1,000, 10,000 times what the ordinary person on the street is making, and really bringing that into the center of our politics? Now I don't much expect that to happen, but that's the kind of thing that I would get excited about.

MCWHORTER: Well, how about this. There is a natural tendency for people to develop a sense of anger against another, and that being a spur for their political feeling

or their sense of group membership, there's always that. And it has seemed that when it comes to the Middle East, there has been a feeling that we've seen documented in many sources that the problem with the United States was an antipathy towards Islam, and certainly there have been issues of skin color involved in that, and whether or not that's the case, whether or not those were the motives of our administration, that is the narrative -- a word that you often use -- that Middle Eastern leaders, and "The Arab Street" have often thought. Now the simple fact of the matter is that Barack Obama is not white colored, and then of course there is his middle name and the general --

LOURY: Barack Hussein Obama, let's say the middle name.

There's nothing wrong with the middle name.

MCWHORTER: Barack Hussein Obama, and it's a wonderful thing, and certainly that's going to have some effect. We've seen it already have some effect in terms of the dialogue on how we can interact with Middle Easterners because they're divested of that notion that the President is necessarily against them, because of the history and the skin color and the sense of being against Islam. So that matters. It's an accident; who knew that we would have somebody with any kind of Muslim association as our President? But we do, and so I think that's a wonderful thing, that's exciting.

LOURY: So yeah, well, I'm laughing, because back before the election, the idea that he had a Muslim association was a slur against him for most, you know, progressive commentators, and now you put it forward as a badge of honor. I want to just say for my own account here that I've been going around telling people the next President of the United States will be called Barack Hussein Obama, and I've been reminding them of the 1967 Heavyweight Championship bout between a hapless Ernie Terrell and an ascendant Muhammad Ali, who had only just become Muhammad Ali. Ernie Terrell would not say the man's name, or would say it, you know, with a smirk. Before the fight and all the pre-fight publicity, he was making fun of the fact that Cassius Clay had somehow become a Muslim all of a sudden, and you know, basically just saying, man, y'all, you just a nigga from Louisville. You know, that's kind of the way, you know, you think you're a Muslim now? Like that. An Muhammad Ali whupped him. You know, whupped him real good in the ring, and every time he'd land a jab, Ali would say, "What's my name?" And then he'd smack him again. "What's my name?" And then after the fight, Ali said, "I guess he knows my name now, don't he?" You know, like that. And that's kind of how I feel about Barack Hussein Obama's name. That's his name. What's his name again? Let me

remind you of what his name is, OK? So I'm with you about that, although, you know, acting on that, you know, not just symbolism, not just stagecraft. We're not in a campaign anymore, we're deploying forces, you know. We're renegotiating understandings with allies and enemies. You know, we're not putting up Greek columns and faux oval offices. We're doing the real deal here now, and there are structural forces at play. Now what do we have to say about them, you know?

MCWHORTER: You know, talk about structural forces. I want to give you a variation on the "say my name." Not very long ago if you brought up the concepts of Obama and Muslim in the good thinking person's mind, the idea was that what you were supposed to say was, oh my goodness, all of those yoyos out there saying isn't he a Muslim, isn't that scary, isn't that scary? OK, that was reasonable. Now, you take Obama and Muslim and put that in your mental Google, and what you have to realize is that "Muslim" is President. The yoyos didn't matter. Somebody with a Muslim connection as President, that can happen in America. And in the larger sense, I understand what you're saying about policy, but I think that whatever we're going to do, I think -- I hope -- I think that we're at the point where it is obvious

that -- and I've written about this in a few places, such as Forbes and the New Republic and --

LOURY: Aren't you prolific?

MCWHORTER: -- the New York Post that yes, there is racism in this country, yes we have to be concerned about it, but the idea that shaking our head about racism and click-clicking and tsk-tsking and searching out evidence of the racism that's still "out there" is no longer our main task. It's not that racism doesn't exist, but I think that we can get away from this notion that racism is kind of like quantum mechanics and binary alternations. We know it's there, but the issue is whether it's the main issue.

LOURY: But that's always been true. That doesn't turn on Barack Obama. That didn't change with the election. That was true before the election.

MCWHORTER: But now it's more obviously true than it ever was before. So many people have been so dedicated, and now here he is, and I think that -- just let me finish -- I think that the fact that he won, and that he won so definitively, puts paid to the notion that we need to devote as much attention to the fact that the country isn't perfect as we do to teaching people how to make the best of themselves despite the fact that it isn't perfect. Nothing

could make that clearer and make people actually act on it than something so dramatic and graphic having happened.

LOURY: I don't agree with that, John.

MCWHORTER: Why not?

LOURY: Well, for two reasons. One is I actually don't think the objective facts on the ground that bear on racism, like prisons, punishment, policing, marginalization of deviancy, and all of that in this country, changed when Barack Hussein Obama was elected.

MCWHORTER: It didn't, and I have a response to that.

LOURY: Let me just finish, too. I don't think those facts changed, and I think they have to do with racism rightly understood, racism not in a form of --

MCWHORTER: This is the problem.

LOURY: -- a racist white person won't credit that black people are capable, but racism in the institutionalized and deep structural form of -- and the geography and economy and society of our cities being very sharply segregated, the schools where we educate our children and so on and so forth. So that didn't change. But the other thing that I want to say is, I don't think the domestic implications are nearly as important as the international and transnational implications of this, and that's where I want to point us. I mean, when Barack Hussein Obama said during his victory

speech -- and I remember the line so well, and it just cheered my heart, John. He addressed himself to people huddled around radios and forgotten corners of the world, and he said to them that while our stories are different, our destinies are intertwined, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand. In other words, the newly elected President of the United States of America took time out of his victory address to speak to people in Venezuela, in Kenya, in Vietnam, people who might be listening to the BBC on a short wave radio where they had to come, you know, eight or ten households to a single hut or shack, in the shantytowns of this world, in order to hear what the new President was going to say. He spoke to them and he said while our stories are different, our destinies are intertwined. The President of the United States thinks that the destiny of the American peoples intertwine with the destiny of those hovering, you know, cowering in the corners of the world, near starvation, and the rest. That is new, new, new, and to my mind, it's profoundly more important than taking an argument away from Al Sharpton.

MCWHORTER: Well, all right, a response to two things. It's not Al Sharpton, it's ordinary people driving their cars down the street.

LOURY: OK, I'm sorry, I know I was making fun of your argument.

MCWHORTER: No, I would have used the same line. But the point is, internationally, yeah. I mean, I have noticed, I'm not sure why, but people especially from Western Europe call me up a lot. I've kind of become the go-to person for being controversial about race and Obama, et cetera. I'm not sure why me in particular, but Europeans, even educated Europeans, tend to think roughly -- because they don't live here -- that this is an intensely bigoted country where the vast majority of black people live in festering ghettos, and that they know about the Cosby show, which plays all over Europe and all over the world, and they imagine that there's maybe you, me, and I guess about 600 other people, but that really, this is a nation that hasn't really come that far past Jim Crow. And Obama is something that has completely surprised them. I've gotten messages in all sorts of languages from my friends overseas, and they have been shown a new America, and that's not just Europeans, but people from other continents. You can see it in Chinese newspapers and on Chinese blogs, and so yes, that is a wonderful thing. But in terms of the domestic, this is the thing. Your statements about what structural racism is are literally the -- now I'm not just saying this --

they are the wisest I know. You take the case and you lay it out like Aristotle, and you dot every I and you cross every T. And I understand what you mean, and anybody who reads you understands what you mean, but the fact is that out in the roustabout world of screaming discourse, where nobody can pay but so much attention to any but a few things, and they probably don't happen to be reading what you wrote, the idea of structural racism and societal racism is processed in shorthand as white people are more bigoted than we think. And so the idea is that all of this structural racism is due to an aggregation of the Archie Bunker that is underneath every white person. So for example, all of the black men in prison, the immediate thought is that, well, there's the white warden in the small town in upstate Pennsylvania who doesn't care about black people enough to understand that his job depends on people being penned up in his state, and that he's supporting the system that is herding all these black men into these prisons, and people want to build the prisons, that sort of thing. I think that what happened with Obama shows that even if white people aren't perfect, that they're not so racist that they wouldn't elect a Barack Obama, and that means that the structural racism that you talk about, if you want to call it that, and one day, if I

get out of a current lazy phase that I'm in, I might even do an article or a monograph on this. I don't know if it needs to be called structural racism. I'm getting uncomfortable with that term. But if you want to call it that --

LOURY: Well that wouldn't be my choice of term, but just for the sake of argument.

MCWHORTER: Right, it's not something as simple as white people don't like black people as much as they like to think, and that you put it all together and you've got a bunch of black men in jail. I think Obama allows us to think more constructively about the very real problems that we have. It's not that they aren't there, but they aren't about us not having gotten past 1970. Do you see what I mean?

LOURY: I do see what you mean, and I mean, Barack Hussein Obama said that, said as much, when he was rebuking Reverend Wright way back when he had to deal with that thing in that speech on race in Philadelphia, and he repeated it during his victory address when he said something like, for those who thought that America wasn't capable of whatever, this is their answer. Tonight is their answer.

MCWHORTER: Indeed.

LOURY: And I thought, yes, indeed it is the case. And I agree with you, John, about the things that you're saying about the kind of commonplace, day-to-day, kitchen table discourse about how race is deployed as an all-purpose -- race and racism -- an all-purpose excuse and explanatory variable to account for all the woes in the world and so forth. And I agree with you about the stick figured stereotypic view of American society as being closed and bounded along the lines of race in ways that are not, you know, permeable or can't be surmounted.

MCWHORTER: And Glenn, just to interrupt very briefly, and you agree that that is not just Al Sharpton and a few thousand professional --

LOURY: No, I agree that it's deeply kind of got itself insinuated into the fabric of thought amongst a lot of people, not only black people, in this country, and I think it's been dealt a blow by these events. There can be no doubt about it. Of course, this event, the event of the election of Barack Hussein Obama --

MCWHORTER: You're going to keep saying that.

LOURY: -- a man whose father was born in Africa, to the highest office in this land, is just the greatest of a sequence of events. You mentioned Cosby and so forth, and we can go on and on with African-American secretaries of

state and governors of states if we're going to talk about politics, with figures who advanced in business to a high level, with the extent to which the very vitality of American culture, as reflected in our popular media, is largely driven by the rhythms and, you know, cadences of African-American life and so on. Of course these things are changing, and hallelujah, great. Wonderful that they are changing. But now I want to keep my eye on what I take to be the ultimate bottom line, and it's about resources, it's about power, it's about law --

MCWHORTER: Whose power?

LOURY: It's about legitimacy --

MCWHORTER: Power?

LOURY: -- OK, questions of this kind.

MCWHORTER: Whose power?

LOURY: And if we cannot convert the symbolic capital of an African-American President into institutional transformation for all Americans in a progressive direction, it will have been, in my view, a terrible, terrible lost opportunity, and that's why I resist, you know, characterizing what has happened entirely in those more or less cultural terms, and not keeping my eye on the bottom line. What is the Democratic caucus going to do about taxes and about health care and about all these other

things that we talked about? And can they get it done? And what will happen in that first meeting with the joint chiefs of staff? What is Barack Hussein Obama's reaction to the intelligence briefings that he's now getting about the radical Islamic terrorists who are plotting? What will be Barack Hussein Obama's posture when he sits down with the government of Israel and Syria, when his representatives talk with the envoys of Iran? What is he going to do, I repeat, with our nuclear arsenal, OK, and other things of this kind? If we can't see real change on those dimensions, John, then I think, you know, I think I'm not going to be nearly as happy as I want to be about the fact that this thing has happened.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, this is interesting because you know very well that there is a massive elation about the election of Barack Hussein Obama, and I think you know very well that that elation has very little to do with Tzipi Livni, with bombs decaying in Kazakhstan, et cetera. That's not what everybody's excited about. And so here you are, challenging Obama in terms of what his foreign policy intentions are going to be --

LOURY: Sorry to interrupt, John --

MCWHORTER: No, wait, wait, knowing full well that he hasn't had the opportunity to think any of that stuff out -- I

shouldn't say stuff, because it is important -- think any of those things out completely. And so in a way, may I gently ask you, are you not perhaps playing the Cassandra? Because I can tell you are as excited about the black part as anybody else, but you don't want to join into it.

LOURY: No, I'm not doing that. I mean, read the thing that -  
- I gave a commentary to the BBC. They called me, John, they somehow found me here in obscure Providence, Rhode Island, and asked me what I thought about the election so -  
-

MCWHORTER: They must watch Bloggingheads over there.

LOURY: -- I don't know where it was broadcast, somewhere for the BBC around the world, and it's on my Web page and you can open it up on the site. But, so yeah. I was excited. You know, I'm shouting hallelujah. I'm saying I've got a newborn faith, I'm saying where --

MCWHORTER: Well you're not now.

LOURY: -- in the book of Hebrews, where it says faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, I'm saying, man, those words have an entirely different meaning to me. So yes, I am excited, and you're right. I know that the excitement that is coming here is not a policy-particular excitement. It's a general

excitement about culture and the change of our political possibility. This is opening up a door.

MCWHORTER: It's not international in particular.

LOURY: And I'm not criticizing Obama for not having done what he hasn't had a chance to do yet, OK. I'm mainly challenging you to raise your sights above the relatively mundane, not unimportant, but relatively mundane domestic issue of how black people think about ourselves now that one of us is President. To see the full stakes that are at play, and the real possibility for subversion, and I don't mean that in a politically revolutionary way so much as I mean disquiet, shaking up the categories, making us think freshly and differently about really fundamental questions. Not only questions of identity, but really fundamental questions about the character and possibility of the American nation.

MCWHORTER: Wow. Glenn, as always, you are more profound than me, and I mean it, because --

LOURY: It's not a contest, John.

MCWHORTER: -- I'm just not capable of that right now, because I was born, Glenn, in 1965, and a lot of things had already happened, and by the time I had any kind of consciousness, it was well into the '70s, and my sense of things was that -- and I was taught about the Civil Rights

movement, about the murder of Dr. King -- and my spontaneous sense was those were terrible things. A lot of people not so long ago worked very hard to make this life of mine possible, and isn't it great to belong to a race where we are moving past those obstacles and making the best of them. That's what I thought when I was around 15, and then I started finding that with one race event after another, I had a very different take on it than other people, and by the time I was in my 20s, I found that the good thinking view among black people like me -- educated Black people like me -- was that we were still in the toilet, was that racism was still a very serious problem that was of immediate effect upon our lives, and that me, thinking that we were so far beyond 1965, was naive, that I must look down on other black people, that I must somehow think that I'm not subject to this constant racism that they're suffering, and it was a problem. And I never thought I was going to start writing books about it or start being asked to be on something like Bloggingheads about it, but it's been a problem, and if anybody wants to say that the reason I wrote my book Losing The Race was out of frustration about that, they are absolutely right. That is why I wrote it.

LOURY: But no one who read your book could have failed to notice your frustrations, John.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and so here we are, and now there's a black President. I know it doesn't solve all problems, and I certainly didn't mean to say that there aren't going to be what are called ghetto pathologies, et cetera. How much magic is there going to be? But I think that there has been resounding proof that, very simply, things are not as bad as we have often been told, and I'm glad, not just because it proves my little point, but because I want to see people looking more towards progress, and stop thinking of pessimism as advanced thought. And you want to think about Israel and Pakistan? I do too. I think about those things in a separate box. I mean, I'll be interested to see what President Obama has to say.

LOURY: Global inequality, and how do we solve the planet warming problem without cooperation, where's the future of the United Nations --

MCWHORTER: Global warming -- but we are only five minutes past this election.

LOURY: Yeah, well hold on, let me say something. Because you know, I love you, John McWhorter, you're a wonderful human being.

MCWHORTER: I love you too, Glenn.

LOURY: And you're telling that story, and I was thinking, man, when this guy was in his late teens and his early 20s -- I'm talking about in the '80s, you know, I was bashing my head against a brick wall trying to fight against this stuff that had me so frustrated, and I know you know that, you know. Essay after essay, and books and speeches and all the rest, I was --

MCWHORTER: One-by-one, from the inside out.

LOURY: -- and I ought to pause for a minute, just to savor the thing that you're enjoying so much, a sense of vindication, you know, about the rightness of our instincts. I mean, you know, you found yourself odd person out on a college campus or whatever it might have been because your sensibility about the race problem was so different from others, and you know, I too, you know, labored long and hard to try to tell these college students -- they would tell me, you know, some kid would get shot down by the police in New York City, or chased to his death on a highway by a racist mob over there in --

MCWHORTER: Howard Beach, right.

LOURY: In Howard Beach. And they would say (inaudible). They'd be at Vassar College talking about racist America, you know what I'm saying? I would say, you were at Vassar

College! The world is your oyster. There's nothing you can't do. Learn Chinese, you idiot.

MCWHORTER: For me this was Rodney King, yeah.

LOURY: Yeah, and things like that. So I'm with you about that, and all of my hope about, you know, reform and progressive, subversive undermining of American political sensibility ought not to allow me to miss this key fact that you're pointing out. Something tremendous has happened and we -- I mean, I want to associate myself with you in this -- have been proven right in our basic instincts about this thing, and so, good. You know, good. So, you know, maybe that could be our last words, since both our times are short right now, but let's pick this up the next time we talk.

MCWHORTER: We should, because I'm still kind of stunned. All of my words have not come out about this yet.

LOURY: I know that. You were going to talk about service, you know, and I really wanted to hear you on how you think Obama inspires us all to come out in a Kennedy-like way to, you know, do for our country what we can do --

MCWHORTER: It's going to be like, what did you do in the war, Daddy? What are you going to do under Obama, folks, that's what I think.

LOURY: Yeah. So let's talk again soon, John, and follow up.

MCWHORTER: We shall. Have a great rest of the day, Glenn.

LOURY: Thank you, you too.

MCWHORTER: Talk to you soon.

LOURY: Bye.

**END OF FILE**