Reverend Wright and My Father: Reflections on Blacks and Patriotism

“For the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback.” Michelle Robinson Obama

“I have, and always will be, proud of my country.” Cindy McCain

On June 30, 2008, Barack Obama delivered an address in Independence, Missouri, entitled “The America We Love.” Patriotic speeches delivered by candidates for the presidency are usually unremarkable, part of the banal ritual of electoral politics. Clearly, though, Obama wanted to break out of the grip of the ordinary with this address. He wanted it to be a key statement in his campaign.

Obama offered several reasons why it was “fitting to pause for a moment and reflect on the meaning of patriotism.” One was that the nation was in the midst of a controversial war in Iraq that had, at that point, claimed forty-six hundred American lives and sixty thousand wounded. “It is natural,” Obama declared, “in light of such sacrifice by so many, to think more deeply about the commitments that bind us to our nation, and to each other.”

Obama also noted that the country was in the midst of a presidential election campaign from which had arisen a steady stream of insinuations suggesting doubts as to whether he harbored sufficient patriotism to be entrusted with the nation’s highest office. “Throughout my life,” Obama averred, “I have always taken my deep and abiding love for this country as a given.” But now he found his patriotism challenged “at times as a result of my own carelessness, more often as a result of the desire by some to score political points and raise fears about who I am and what I stand for.” Obama did not elaborate on what he meant by his own “carelessness.” Perhaps he was referring to refraining at times from wearing an American flag lapel pin, an
omission that was portrayed as an ominous signal of disloyalty by some of Obama’s more paranoid detractors. Neither did Obama name specifically those whom he accused of wrongly challenging his fidelity to the nation. He did declare, however, that he would not question the patriotism of others during the presidential campaign and that he would “not stand idly by when I hear others question mine.”

Impugning a rival’s patriotism has deep roots in American political history. Obama noted that Federalists had accused Thomas Jefferson of “selling out to the French” and that anti-Federalists had accused John Adams of being “in cahoots with the British.” What he did not say but what is more pertinent is that since at least the 1950s, a major line of Republican attack against Democrats has been that they cannot be trusted to govern because their ranks have been riddled with cowards and weaklings or infiltrated by agents with mixed loyalties or even by out-and-out traitors. Democrats, too, have used patriotism as a cudgel. But on this front – who can be more unequivocal, sentimental, and militant in populist displays of patriotism – Republicans have long enjoyed an edge. “It’s hard to remember a time, David Greenberg rightly observes, “when Republicans didn’t own the patriotism issue.

The challenge to Obama’s patriotism in 2008 included novel elements – his Kenyan father, his birth outside the continental United States, his schooling as a youngster in Indonesia. For an appreciable number of Americans, Obama’s unfamiliar background conjured up visions of a “Manchurian Candidate” who may have been inculcated at an early age with un-American values. Nativism, however, is not limited to people on the margins who obsessively question whether Obama was, in fact, born in America. The United States Constitution regrettably conditions eligibility for the presidency on being a natural born citizen. In his address, Obama

1 “No person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the office of President. . .” United States Constitution, Article Two, Section One.
declared that an “essential American idea” is the notion that “we are not constituted by the accident of birth but can make of our lives what we will.” But skepticism about the reliability of Obama’s patriotism was nourished, in part, by a Constitution which itself wrongly discriminates on the basis of “the accident of birth.”

Another element in the campaign to question Obama’s patriotism had to do with the charge that he is a Muslim. Several features of this accusation are worth noting. First, Obama identifies himself as a devout Christian. Some detractors maintain, however, that Obama’s asserted devotion to Christianity is false; they claim that he is a secret Muslim. John F. Kennedy had to contend with a similar hostility. After he set forth his views on church-state relations, some of which diverged markedly from the doctrines of the Catholic Church, die-hard opponents maintained that the Catholic doctrine of “mental reservation” would permit him to lie, without sinning, if in so doing he was seeking to advance the cause of The Church.

Second, that Obama was “accused” of being a Muslim is itself evidence of religious bigotry inasmuch as it suggests that being a Muslim is itself dirtying, shameful, disqualifying, un-American. There is no formal bar precluding a Muslim President and there is no formal requirement that a President adhere to any religion. Obviously, though, large numbers of Americans view adherence to some form of Judeo-Christianity as a prerequisite.

Race was another ingredient in the case against Obama’s patriotism. Millions of Americans suspect that, in general, African Americans are less patriotic than whites. A substantial number also believe that they have reason to fear blacks who secretly hate America. Those are perceptions that fueled the charge that the Obamas are among those who harbor deep, unrelievable resentment against America because of past racial injustices. Those who subscribe to this contention concede that there is no record of Obama expressing such sentiments. But they
attribute this absence of evidence to his cunning: an ambitious man, he knows better than to express his outrage openly. They maintain that evidence of Obama’s concealed attitude can be gleaned from the words of his wife and his former pastor. Speaking at a rally, Michelle Obama once remarked that the positive response to her husband’s candidacy had made her proud of her country for the first time in her adult life. Detractors imposed upon that comment the worst possible interpretation and resisted her efforts to amend or clarify it. In their view Michelle Obama had revealingly confessed that, except for when her husband’s campaign for the presidency was going well, she felt no pride in her country despite all of the many benefits it has bestowed upon her family and the world.

In the anti-Obama narrative, Reverend Wright’s “God damn America!” was similarly revealing in that it emanated from someone who was a long-time, influential advisor to the candidate. Why, conservative journalist Andrew C. McCarthy asked, is Barack Obama “so comfortable around people who so despise America. . .?” Maybe, McCarthy responded, “it’s because they’re so comfortable around him” – a person whose attachment to America is so attenuated that he can easily stand the company of those who disparage it.

The effort to portray the Obamas as unpatriotic or at least insufficiently patriotic to entrust with the Presidency brings to the fore a subject that has received all too little attention: the relationship between racial conflict and patriotism. In his pioneering study, *The Roots of American Loyalty*, Merle Curti asked: “What can be said of [the black American’s] attitude toward America, of his loyalty to the land that enslaved him?” Although Curti did not offer much elaboration, he warrants commendation for at least making the inquiry. What is the answer? And how does it figure into the election of 2008 and beyond?
First, a definition. I understand “patriotism” to refer to the love that a person feels for a place he considers “home” and a people he considers “his” people. Although the object of a loving attachment to a place and people can take many forms – a household, neighborhood, state, or region – the object with which I am concerned here is the nation known as the United States of America. I am concerned with the sentiment which prompts African Americans to say that they love the United States and to express that love through sacrifice. Patriotism may include admiration. But admiration is inessential inasmuch as one may feel love even while simultaneously feeling shame, revulsion, and even fear toward the object of one’s affection. The black poet, publisher, and activist Haki Madhubuti writes: “I love[] America, but loathe what America [has] done to me, my people, and other non-white citizens of this country.” Loyalty, however, is an essential element of the love that I am calling “patriotism.” As the philosopher Alastair McIntyre declares:

patriotism is one of a class of loyalty-exhibiting [traits] . . . other members of which are marital fidelity, the love of one’s own family and kin, friendship, and loyalty to such institutions as schools . . . or baseball clubs. All these attitudes exhibit a peculiar action-generating regard for particular persons, institutions or groups, a regard founded upon a particular historical relationship of association between the person exhibiting the regard and the relevant person, institution, or group.”

Whatever the basis of the relationship that calls the affection into being – whether it be contractual (as in the process of becoming a naturalized citizen) or status-based (as in native-born citizenship) – the affection transcends one’s routine assessment of the nation’s virtues or vices. The patriot loves his country even if he thinks it is gravely deficient in important respects. Patriotism is thus akin to the feeling of affection that exists within many families – the love that exists at graduation when the mother looks on with pride as her son accepts his diploma and the
love that exists at sentencing when the mother looks on with dismay as her son is condemned to prison for robbery.

Patriotism is often exhibited through sacrifice – the willingness of individuals to subordinate their personal interest to the interest of the nation. The most celebrated example of patriotic sacrifice is a willingness to risk one’s safety, even one’s life, for the perceived greater good of the state. Hence, the pageantry of Veterans Day, the respect proffered to the winners of military medals, the valorization of civic sacrifice that the society attempts to inculcate within the minds and hearts of its young people via countless rituals and perhaps, most importantly, public education. “Ask not what your country can do for you,” President John F. Kennedy famously declared. “Ask what you can do for your country.”

Although American politicians typically assume that patriotism is an appropriate, indeed admirable sentiment, it has also been reproved. To George Santayana patriotism was a delusion. “It seems a dreadful indignity,” he declared, “to have a soul controlled by geography.” Leo Tolstoy regarded patriotism with disdain, asserting that it survived mainly because governments and ruling classes “persistently excite and maintain it among the people, both by cunning and violence.” To George Bernard Shaw, “Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it.”

Apart from the problem of defining and assessing patriotism is the problem of distinguishing true patriotism from counterfeit. A major difficulty is isolating authentic love of country from displays of purported affection that are the consequence of coercion. Acts (including speech) deemed to be unpatriotic make one vulnerable to punishment. That being so, people watch what they do or say to avoid trouble. They say things – “I love my country” – or do things – put an American flag in the front yard – not because such acts are truly expressive of
patriotic feelings but because they fear the consequences of appearing to violate heavily policed norms.

Around no subject involving patriotism is more sentimental nonsense uttered than service in the military. Joining the military is conventionally ascribed to patriotism. In reality, however, the motivations behind enlistment vary greatly. Some enlist in the military out of a sense of obligation, loyalty, or love. But many enlist for more self-interested purposes: to escape poverty, avoid incarceration, seek thrills, obtain discipline. The draft or the threat of a draft should remind everyone of the government’s unwillingness to depend on patriotism alone to generate an adequate number of personnel in a military crisis. While political candidates almost always speak of military service as a matter of voluntary sacrifice, the government relies upon the coercion of the job market or, in a pinch, the coercion of a draft to insure an available pool of soldiers.²

A stock trope in discussions about black patriotism is the observation that, despite racist mistreatment, blacks have shown unwavering fidelity to their homeland. “Since the time of slavery,” Professor Michael Eric Dyson writes approvingly, “blacks have actively defended the U.S. in every war it has waged, from the Civil War down to the war on terrorism.” Left unmentioned is that, often, blacks, like others, were forced to fight on pain of being shot or imprisoned or at the very least disgraced. Fighting to avoid retribution is very different from fighting motivated by love of nation though, from the outside, the difference may be difficult to discern.

² “Public service” is another term often surrounded by sentimental nonsense. Asked why he or she wants to be elected president, or senator, or governor, candidates reply that they want these posts because they are solely devoted to public service. It would be refreshing to hear a candidate say just once that he also likes being a boss, likes being the center of attention, likes the ego gratification that comes with winning a competition.
The history of the celebration of black patriotism is itself mired in prejudice, humiliation, and coercion. Consider the first account of black patriots written by a black American – William Nell’s *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* published in 1855. Wendell Phillips, Nell’s fellow abolitionist, observes in a preface that the book was written “to stem the tide of prejudice against the colored race.” Nell was seeking to use the memory of Crispus Attucks and other blacks who fought with the colonial rebels as a shield to ward off attacks by racist whites. He was not so much interested in memorializing an accurate account of what blacks did in the Revolutionary War as in creating propaganda aimed at persuading whites that they should accord some measure of decency to colored folks whose ancestors had helped the American colonies secure independence. That being his aim, it should come as little surprise that Nell ignored the tens of thousands of blacks, mostly slaves, who fled to the British.[endnote?] It was not until 1961, when Professor Benjamin Quarles published *The Negro in the American Revolution*, that academic historians began to offer a portrayal that gave substantial attention to blacks who accepted the British offer for freedom in exchange for assistance in fighting the rebellious colonists. “The Negro’s role in the Revolution,” Quarles observed, “can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor to a people, but to a principle. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made the quickest and best offer in terms of those ‘unalienable rights’ of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken.”

The pressure Nell felt in the nineteenth century continues to exist today, albeit to a lesser extent. Still very much aware of tendencies to ignore or minimize black contributions to the

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3 Throughout the age of slavery, whites, like Phillips, wrote prefaces to books by blacks to vouch for their authenticity or merit. See e.g., Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), featuring a preface by William Lloyd Garrison; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861), featuring white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child as “editor.” More recently, the trend has gone the other way with blacks writing prefaces that vouch for the handiwork of white authors. See, e.g., William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: Long Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (2000) (featuring a foreword by Glenn C. Loury).
United States, activists, commentators, politicians, and historians insistently laud the presence of black soldiers in the “winning of the West,” the “pacification” of the Philippines, or the charge up San Juan Hill without considering whether that presence should be seen as an occasion for celebration or an occasion for lament. Why, one might ask, should we celebrate blacks’ participation in cruel wars of conquest or colonial misadventures? One reason is that it serves the purpose, or is at least thought to serve the purpose, of gaining inclusion into the conventional national narrative and all of the attendant privileges that come with such involvement. Frederick Douglass voiced this view when, during the Civil War, he encouraged blacks to enlist in the Union Army. The man “who fights the battles of America,” he asserted, “may claim America as his country – and have that claim respected.”

In his contribution to the anthology What the Negro Wants, published in 1944, the poet Sterling Brown posited succinctly the dominant theme in African American thought regarding blacks’ relationship to the United States of America. “Negroes,” Brown declared, “want to be counted in. They want to belong.” Most have perceived themselves as part of the American national family, sought recognition of that status, and felt and shown loyalty to the nation notwithstanding egregious mistreatment. They have denied that the United States is a white man’s country and proclaimed that this land is their land too.⁴

⁴ Langston Hughes memorably crystallized this sentiment in verse:

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong. . . .
In the first half of the nineteenth century, the crisis that elicited the most searching discussion among blacks about their relationship to the United States arose from the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS). Created in 1816 by leading white American statesmen, the ACS sought to repatriate free blacks to Africa. The motives behind the ACS proposal varied. Some slaveowners wanted to get rid of free blacks who might give troubling hope to enslaved blacks. Other members saw blacks, whatever their status, as threats to the creation of a virtuous white republic and thus wanted to get rid of as many of them as possible. The ACS also included reformers who wanted to spare blacks a future doomed to permanent subordination; they hoped to purchase the liberty of slaves and send the newly emancipated back to Africa alongside blacks who had long been free. James Madison, the fourth President, was a member of the ACS. He supported its program because of a conviction that he shared with his friend Thomas Jefferson that blacks and whites would never be able to reside together in the same land as equals. “To be consistent with existing and probably unalterable prejudices in the United States,” Madison declared, “the freed blacks ought to be permanently removed beyond the region occupied by, or allotted to, a white population. . . . The objections to a thorough incorporation of the two people are. . . insuperable.”

Although a few blacks initially supported the ACS program of removal, the overwhelming majority quickly and vociferously rejected it. Free blacks overwhelmingly chose to stay in America, to assert their Americanness, and to commit themselves to narrowing the gap between noble American ideals and ugly American realities, including most urgently, the reality of racial slavery. “Let no man of us budge one step,” the black abolitionist David Walker declared in his Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World. “America is more our country

I, too, am America.

than it is the whites – we have enriched it with our blood and tears.” Railing against colonization, clergyman and former slave Richard Allen asserted: “This land, which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country; and we are well satisfied to stay where wisdom abounds and the Gospel is free.” In New York City in 1831 a mass meeting of Negroes resolved: “We are content to abide where we are. We do not believe that things will always continue the same. The time must come when the Declaration of Independence will be felt in the heart, as well as uttered from the mouth, and when the rights of all shall be properly acknowledged and appreciated. God hasten that time. This is our home, and this is our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers; for it, some of them fought, bled, and died. Here we were born, and here we will die.” Repudiating emigration, the abolitionist runaway slave Henry Highland Garnet declared in 1848: “We are planted here, and we cannot as a whole people, be re-colonized back to our fatherland. It is too late to make a successful attempt to separate the blacks and white people in the New World.” America, Garnet averred, “is my home, my country, and I have no other. I love whatever good there may be in her institutions. I hate her sins. I loathe her slavery, and I pray Heaven that ere long she may wash away her guilt in tears of repentance.”

In subsequent years blacks contributed mightily to the canon of American patriotic expression. Three items are particularly noteworthy. The first is “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” written by James Weldon Johnson in 1900. The final stanza of the song reads as follows:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,

5 It should be noted that Garnet later changed his mind about emigration. See Martin B. Pasternak, Rise Now and Fly to Arms: The Life of Henry Highland Garnet (1995).
6 Johnson was an an extraordinary person who deserves more attention that he typically receives. He was an attorney, a diplomat, a leading figure in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a poet and a novelist (The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man). See Eugene D. Levy, James Weldon Johnson, Black Leader, Black Voice (1973); Kenneth M. Price and Lawrence Oliver, eds., Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson (1997).
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who has by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.

The second is a speech, “What Does American Democracy Mean to Me?” delivered by Mary McLeod Bethune in 1939 in which she declared:

Democracy is for me. . . a goal towards which our nation is marching. It is a dream and an ideal in whose ultimate realization [I] have a deep and abiding faith. . . . We are rising out of the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom. . . . As we have been extended a measure of democracy, we have brought to the nation rich gifts. We have helped to build America with our labor, strengthened it with our faith, and enriched it with our song. . . . But even these are only the first fruits of a rich harvest, which will be reaped when new and wider fields are opened to us.

Turning to the question of African American loyalty, Bethune declared:

We have always been loyal when the ideals of American democracy have been attacked. We have given our blood to its defense. . . . We have fought to preserve one nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Yes, we have fought for America with all her imperfections, not so much for what she is, but for what we know she can be.

A third example is the 1963 “I Have a Dream” address of Martin Luther King, Jr. With its loving references to iconic locales (“let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia”), its prayerful allusions to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and its reverential recitation of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” King’s epochal speech exudes patriotic fervor.

Wars have produced numerous crises in which blacks have responded in word and deed with outpourings of patriotism. In the gravest crisis to beset the United States, some blacks
responded to the cause of the Union even before emancipation became one of Lincoln’s weapons and even before blacks were permitted to enter the ranks of the United States armed services. Explaining why they wished to drill, a group of blacks in Cleveland, Ohio, declared: “We, as colored citizens of Cleveland, desiring to prove our loyalty to the Government, feel that we should adopt measures to put ourselves in a position to defend the Government of which we claim protection. . . . Today, as in the times of ‘76 and the days of 1812, we are ready to go forth and do battle in the common cause of the country.” Requesting permission to participate in the defense of the Union, a group of colored men in Massachusetts declared: “Your petitioners, colored citizens. . . respectfully represent. . . that they have never been wanting in patriotism, but have always exhibited the utmost loyalty to the country and to the Commonwealth, notwithstanding the great national injustice to which they are in many ways subjected on account of their complexion.”

In subsequent years this pattern reappeared. In World War I, the great W.E.B. Du Bois insisted that blacks subordinate their protests against white supremacist outrages to the imperatives of the national war effort. He asked Negroes to forget their “special grievances” and close ranks during the war.⁷ Most blacks acted in accordance with Du Bois’ wishes, curtailing protest, submitting to the draft, and doing all sorts of voluntary acts indicative of patriotic sentiment. “The Negroes of South Carolina are standing by,” reported the white supremacist Columbia Record. “They are loyal, they are earnest, they are zealous. Sometimes they shame us

⁷ Although DuBois’ position seemed to reflect only patriotism, other motives were also at work. He feared what might happen to him if he urged a continuation of protest against a government that was clearly willing to suppress dissent. He also wanted to secure for himself a post in the government. This episode did not constitute DuBois’ finest hour. See David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race: 1868 – 1919 (1993) 555; Mark Ellis, “W.E.B. DuBois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I: A Commentary on ‘The Damnable Dilemma,’” 81 Journal of American History 1584 (1995).
in their exhibition of their understanding of the causes of the war and their determination to support the Government throughout.”

In World War II African Americans were similarly responsive to the government’s plea for patriotic support. Much has been made of blacks’ “double V” campaign for victory against fascism abroad and against racism at home. Some observers have suggested that blacks’ opposition to racism during the forties ignited the militant dissent that blazed two and three decades later. As historian Harvard Sitkoff has shown, however, blacks’ feelings and displays of national solidarity after the American entry into World War II were far more widespread than blacks’ feelings and displays of racial grievance. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, leaders of black organizations pledged loyalty and support to the nation. Black newspapers, such as the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (echoing Du Bois) called upon African Americans to “close ranks and join with fervent patriotism in this battle for America.” Many blacks volunteered for service in the armed forces, few refused to participate in the draft, and those that did were widely ostracized. When a black gardener named Winfred W. Lynn refused induction to protest segregation in the military no black newspaper or pressure group defended him. Not only did the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) refuse to aid Lynn, but Thurgood Marshall, who at the time was the NAACP’s chief counsel, used his influence to dissuade the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) from offering assistance.8

A striking episode of armed patriotism stemmed from the horrific Battle of the Bulge where Hitler’s armies made a desperate last-ditch effort to stop the Allies’ advance on the Western Front. Confronting massive losses and a surprisingly effective German

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8 Another black man imprisoned for resisting induction during World War II was Elijah Poole who became better known as Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam. A quarter century later, Muhammad Ali, one of Elijah Muhammad’s disciples, also refused induction. Although his religion constituted his principal basis for declining induction in the military, Ali also cited the hypocritical racism of the United States as another consideration that prompted his defiance.
counteroffensive, General Dwight Eisenhower embarked upon a racial experiment: he called upon blacks to volunteer to replace white soldiers in white units who had been killed or wounded. He also stipulated that some black volunteers would have to agree to demotions in order to avoid situations in which black soldiers would outrank white ones. Notwithstanding the dangers of combat and the insulting policy of racial demotion some four thousand blacks volunteered.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, during the most militant phases of opposition to various American domestic and international policies, especially the Vietnam War, there arose among blacks more of a challenge to conventional protocols of patriotism than at anytime subsequent to the Civil War. Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), Huey Newton, Edridge Cleaver, and others associated with the radical edge of the black liberation movement lauded North Vietnam, praised Communist China, and, in general, sided with the “colored” Third World against the “white” First World. Even at the acme of the Black Power initiative, however, fidelity to the nation remained the overwhelmingly dominant sentiment among the great mass of African Americans.

What should one make of African American patriotism? First, one should recognize the excruciating circumstances in which it has arisen and been displayed, circumstances often marked by indifference or hostility. Consider that most holy day of American patriotic ritual – the Fourth of July commemoration of the Continental Congress’s adoption of the Declaration of Independence. This holiday has long stuck in the throats of African Americans because the framers of the Declaration tolerated Negro slavery. Hence, Frederick Douglass asked:

What, to the American Slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings,
with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. . . . There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

But beyond the ideological affront afforded by the celebration lay another difficulty. Historian Leonard Sweet observes that for much of the nineteenth century, July Fourth was “one of the most menacing days of the year for blacks.” That was because of the whites who took offense at the sight of blacks celebrating as if they were members of the American political family. On July 4, 1805 whites in Philadelphia drove blacks out of the square facing Independence Hall. For years thereafter blacks attended July Fourth festivities in that city at their peril. On July 4, 1834 a white mob in New York City burned down the Broadway Tabernacle because of the antislavery and antiracist views of the church’s leaders. Firefighters in sympathy with the arsonists refused to douse the conflagration. On July 4, 1835 a white mob in Canaan, New Hampshire destroyed a school open to blacks that was run by an abolitionist. The antebellum years were liberally dotted with such episodes.

Until relatively recently, blacks faced open hostility from those with whom they sought to fight in wars on behalf of the United States. In the Revolutionary War they were excluded from the Continental Army until perilous circumstances impelled an informal easing of the color line. Even with defeat staring them in the face, the rebel militias in Georgia and South Carolina refused to permit the arming of blacks, saying that they would rather suffer defeat by the British than imperil slavery. During the Civil War Blacks were not permitted to enlist in the United States armed forces until two years after the start of the conflict when conditions had become more dire than anyone had initially envisioned.
In World War I, blacks were drafted alongside other Americans, but were then subjected to all manner of invidious racial discriminations. They were largely excluded from the officer corps and mainly consigned to menial duties. The French called black American soldiers “Enfants Perdus” – Lost Children – because their mother country had abandoned them. The commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), General John J. Pershing, wrote a directive to French military officials entitled “Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops.” It stated that while Negroes were citizens of the United States, the black man was regarded by the white American as an inferior being, a judgment with which the General had no quarrel. “The vices of the Negro” he maintained, “are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly.” Regarding Negro officers, Pershing averred: “we must not eat with them, must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside of the requirements of military service. We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of Americans.” Out of naked racism, New York’s all-black National Guard Regiment, the most decorated American unit in the war, was denied permission to march in the Paris victory parade.

During World War II, black soldiers and sailors were constantly bombarded by racial insults. In many places in the American South, German and Italian prisoners of war received treatment that was superior to blacks’. In one revealing, instance a white officer sought to persuade a local sheriff to allow his men, black soldiers, to get off a train to purchase food: “This is a troop train of the United States Marines on [the] way to a port of disembarkment.” The reply? “I don’t give a good goddam if the niggers is going to Tokyo. They ain’t goin’ to eat in Atlanta, Georgia with white folks.”
Previously I mentioned the black volunteers at the Battle of the Bulge. Although many whites praised them, some objected to their presence. One wrote a remarkable letter to the notorious race-baiter Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi:

I am a typical American, a southerner and 27 years of age. . . . I am loyal to my country and know but reverence to her flag, BUT I shall never submit to fight beneath that banner with a negro by my side. Rather I should die a thousand times, and see Old Glory tramped in the dirt never to rise again, than to see this beloved land of ours become degraded by race mongrels, a throw back to the blackest specimen from the wilds.

This revealing missive was written by a man who did not even serve in the military in World War II, a man who afterwards became the longest sitting United States Senator in American history – Robert Byrd of West Virginia.

A second thing to realize about the tradition of African-American patriotism is that right beside it, albeit widely overlooked, is an alternative tradition constituted by the words and acts of blacks who have either refrained from ever loving the United States or who have fallen out of love with it. Progenitors of this alternative tradition include runaways who fled the estates of Founding Fathers American are taught to revere – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry. Their ranks also include blacks who, accepting the terms for emancipation offered by the British, took up arms against the American rebels. One of these black Tories was an enslaved New Jerseyan named Titus. When Titus heard in 1775 of the proclamation by the royalist governor of Virginia promising freedom in exchange for assistance in putting down the American rebellion, he headed south to seek liberation. Three years later Titus returned to New Jersey, now bearing the name Colonel Tye. The leader of a multiracial guerilla band, he had become “one of the war’s most feared Loyalists.” We know next to nothing about Colonel Tye’s thoughts and sentiments. It may be, however, that in addition to serving his own personal interests, he fought the Americans on ideological grounds, outraged by the perfidiousness of a
Thomas Jefferson who championed “freedom” with one hand while endorsing with another legislation that paid rebel soldiers with Negro slaves. Colonel Tye was not alone. Though one would never know it from the ascendant mythology that often passes for popular history in America, it is likely that more blacks fought with the British or with the American rebels.

Subsequently, substantial numbers of blacks continued to create an alternative to the African American patriotic tradition. Consider the case of Martin R. Delany. Convinced that blacks would forever be stymied by racism in America, Delany became a leading voice of emigration in the 1850s and he sought to establish himself abroad on several occasions. “We are Americans, having a birth right citizenship,” Delany declared in 1852. “We love our country, dearly love her, but she doesn’t love us – she despises us, and bids us begone, driving us from her embraces.” Delany wrote that he was “not in favor of caste, nor a separation of the brotherhood of mankind, and would just as willingly live among white men as black, if [he] had an equal possession and enjoyment of privileges.” But, he insisted, “I shall never be reconciled to live among them subservient to their will – existing by mere sufferance, as we, the colored people, do in this country.” He continued despairingly: “If there were any probability [of attaining equality in America] I should be willing to remain in this country, fighting and struggling on, the good fight of faith. But I must admit, that I have no hopes in this country – no confidence in the American people – with a few excellent exceptions.”

Early in his career as an abolitionist, before he became a patriot, fugitive slave Frederick Douglass plaintively declared: “I have no love for America. . . . I have no patriotism. . . . I desire to see [the government of the United States] overthrown as speedily as possible and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments.” Over a century later, near the highpoint of the

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9 The American Civil War prompted Delany to change his mind. He recruited blacks to join the Union Army, became an officer himself, and then participated in the struggle over Reconstruction in South Carolina. See Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Policy of Representative Identity (1997).
Civil Rights Revolution, Malcolm X declined to join with Martin Luther King, Jr. in assuring blacks that white America would, over time, be persuaded to bring its conduct into line with its promises and professions. “Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American,” Malcolm X asserted. “I’m not an American. I’m one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of... nothing but disguised hypocrisy.” Expressly contrasting himself with King, Malcolm X noted: “I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.”

Two decades later, the pan-African activist Randall Robinson quit America, spiritually and physically (he moved to Saint Kitts).

America. America. Land of my birth and erstwhile distress... My heart left long ago. At long last, I have followed it. Trying my very best, how could I, in good conscience, remain for a country that has never, ever, at home or abroad, been for me or for mine?

Echoing Delany, Robinson remarked, “I tried to love America, its credos, its ideals, its promises. . . . I have tried to love America but America would not love the ancient, full African whole of me. . . . For all of my life, I had wished only to live in an America that would but reciprocate my loyalty.”

I grew up in a household in which sentiments of this sort were frequently voiced. My father, Henry Harold Kennedy, Sr., never forgave American society for its racist mistreatment of him and those whom he most loved. Born black in 1917 in Covington, Louisiana, my Father attended segregated schools, came to learn painfully that because of his race certain options were foreclosed to him despite his intelligence, industry, and ambition, and witnessed countless incidents in which blacks were terrorized and humiliated by whites without any hint of disapproval from public authorities. He bore a special grudge against police – municipal police, state police, military police, all police, because, in his experience, a central function of police
was to keep blacks in their “place.” I saw with my own eyes why he developed such a loathing. On several occasions in the 1960s when he drove his family from Washington, D.C., to my Mother’s ancestral home, Columbia, South Carolina, my father he was pulled over by police officers not because he had committed any legal infraction but simply because he was a black man driving a nice car. I am not making an inference here. This is what the police openly said. And then, noting his Washington, D.C., driver’s license, they would go on to say that things were different in the South than Up North and that my Father should take care to behave himself. “OK Boy?” Then there would be a pause. It seemed as though the policeman was waiting to see how my Father would respond. My Dad reacted in a way calculated to provide the maximum safety to himself and his family: “Yassuh,” he would say with an extra dollop of deference.

Incidents of this sort profoundly alienated my Father. In his view, they justified his refusal to view the United States as “his country.” He felt neither that he belonged to it nor that it belonged to him. He attempted to make the best of his situation and, in the view of many, succeeded admirably. A post office clerk married to a school teacher, he was often happy, had many friends, was widely respected in his neighborhood and church and owned a home. He sent each of his three children to Princeton University, and lived to see them all become lawyers (one is a federal judge). It could be argued that my father’s life is a vivid embodiment of The American Dream. But my Father did not see it that way. Like Malcolm X, he believed himself to be the victim of a terrible and ongoing injustice that white America refused to acknowledge satisfactorily.

My father eschewed any sentimental bond with American government or the American nation. He rejected patriotism. I once asked him why he enlisted in the Army during the

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10 Even with racialists, race is seldom the sole explanation for an important decision, policy, or orientation. For my father, racial feelings played a large, probably decisive, role in his refusal to be patriotic. But another ingredient
nineteen-forties. His response? “I joined in order to eat.” He offered no talk about wanting to serve his country. Rather, he candidly declared that the only attraction he saw in military service was refuge from want. Years later, during the Vietnam War, he maintained that any black man drafted by the United States government should go to Canada rather than risk his life for a nation that, out of racial prejudice, continued to subordinate black folk. He relished Muhammed Ali’s quip that the Vietcong had never called him “nigger.”

My Father’s alienation was such that in virtually any conflict between the United States and some other country, especially any Third World country, he sided presumptively with America’s foe. In the 1980s, when American officials railed against the Ugandan head of state Idi Amin, my Father defended the dictator, reasoning that any black man who got white folks that mad had to be doing something right. In the 1990s, during the first Gulf War, my Father hoped for America’s defeat:

You don’t see Bush pulling out all the stops for black folks catching hell right here, do you? You don’t see him going the extra mile to get straight with black folks after having vetoed the civil rights bill or having helped that racist Jesse Helms, do you? . . . These white people here had to be positively shamed into doing anything, even the least little thing, against the South African government. And when those damn South Africans whipped up on poor Angola and Mozambique, all that white officials over here could do was try to figure out how to join in. . . . And just watch what happens after the war in Kuwait. Bush will talk about helping the Kuwaitis rebuild their country, while black communities here starve for attention. . . . And watch what happens to the black soldiers coming home. Do you think they will get any special hand for “serving their country.” Hell, no! They will probably get kicked in the butt like I was. . . . They’ll be told that they don’t qualify for this and don’t qualify for that. They’ll be told in so many words that all they’re good for is cannon fodder, and that if they don’t like it they can get in line for prison where there are already enough black veterans of Vietnam to outfit a good-sized army. . . . Boy, you just don’t know how evil and nasty these white folks can be.

that nourished this attitude was a deep-seated localism. He believed in being loyal to people he knew who had been loyal to him. This included whites who were racists. He had a number of friends whom he knew to be bigots. But they were good to him and his family. For my father that was sufficient. In the same way that his racist white friends exempted my father and our family from their generally damning views of blacks, my father exempted his racist white friends from his generally damning view of whites.

That he should be loyal to a huge nation-state (i.e., the United State of America) was a proposition that my father did not take seriously. He believed in face-to-face dealings; bureaucratic “loyalty” struck him as false, a sham that the authorities tricked the gullible masses into worshipping.
During the presidential contest of 2008, the black American who became infamous because of his castigations of the United States was Obama’s former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Jr. There is much that was objectionable in Reverend Wright’s various highly-publicized statements. His suggestion that a government plot is behind the AIDS catastrophe is a baseless and destructive canard that is part of a community of rumors that has alienated blacks from much-needed participation in blood banking, organ donation, and medical testing. His unequivocal praise of Lewis Farrakhan offered support to a figure whose record includes forays into antiwhite racism, anti-Jewish bigotry and intra-racial intimidation. Reverend Wright’s critique of American racism, moreover, is all too one-sided and static – as if the struggles of the Civil Rights Revolution have failed to bring about dramatic and positive changes in race relations even amidst stubborn and frustrating continuities of racial injustice.

But there is also much that is deserving of criticism in the negative reaction to Reverend Wright. First, the air of outraged wonderment that suffused many responses reflected a notable ignorance about the spectrum of belief one encounters in black communities. As Gary Kamiya noted, “the great shock so many people claim to be feeling over Wright’s sermons is preposterous. Anyone who is surprised and horrified that some black people feel anger at white people, and America is living in a racial never-never land.”11 The fact is that much of what Reverend Wright voiced strikes a chord with many black people: his contempt for American hypocrisy; his anger at American unwillingness to face squarely the two great social crimes that haunt United States history – the removal of the Indians and the enslavement of the Africans; his

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11 It is noteworthy that Candidate Obama, too, expressed shock in some of his varied responses to the Reverend Wright imbroglio. It is hard to believe, though , that he was truly unaware of the sentiment and rhetoric that generated the uproar. The claim of surprise is best understood as a strategy aimed at distancing himself from his former pastor.
suspicion that white America fears the emergence of strong, autonomous racial minority communities. This is not to say that blacks uniformly or even predominantly embraced the particulars of his message. Many of Reverend Wright’s black congregants understood him to be engaged in a performance that makes liberal use of exaggeration and parody. Moreover, some of those who clapped and shouted appreciatively were expressing approval of what they saw as his courageous articulation of figurative, as opposed to literal, truths. The great mass of politically involved blacks regretted that Reverend Wright’s sermons redounded to the detriment of Obama’s candidacy. And most turned against Reverend Wright when he insisted upon defending himself in a fashion that seemed, at best, indifferent to the Obama campaign. But there was no groundswell in black America to repudiate the basic message of the remarks that so infuriated white America.

Second, many observers abjured Wright simply for daring to denounce the United States at all – as if that is in and of itself, illicit – as if the governing authorities of the United States have never done anything that could possibly justify someone calling for divine retribution. Reverend Wright’s signature declaration, “God Damn America!” – was part of a sermon in which he criticized various social problems, including what he views as an egregiously misdirected criminal justice system that is excessively punitive and especially destructive in black communities.

Here, as in other instances, Wright badly smudges his message with a distracting folktale – the myth that the United States itself is engaged in a conspiracy to use the illegal drug trade to  

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12 Important figures in American history have contemplated with fear and awe the prospect of divine retribution for racial slavery. “I tremble for my country,” Thomas Jefferson remarked, “when I reflect that God is just.” Quoted in John Chester Miller, The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery (1991), 43. And then, of course, there was Abraham Lincoln’s haunting second inaugural address in which he raised the possibility that the Civil War might represent God’s punishment for America’s iniquitous trafficking in human bondage. If God wills that the might scourge of war continue “until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword. . . so it still must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous.’”
incapacitate large swaths of its black population through addiction, disease, and imprisonment. His central claim, however, is that authorities are needlessly compounding misery through policies that have led to massive increases in rates of incarceration. This is, in his view, a baleful development that is so shameful in its production of avoidable pain that it constitutes a moral atrocity warranting God’s damnation. Numerous studies offer substantial support for Wright’s indictment.¹³

The other statement by Reverend Wright that became the basis for imposing an ideological quarantine upon him came in a sermon he delivered soon after the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001. In “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” Wright offered a variety of criticisms of American political culture. Presciently anticipating the military interventions to come, especially the war in Iraq, Wright complained that “far too many people of faith in 2001 A.D. . . . have moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocents. We want revenge. We want paybacks, and we don’t care who gets hurt in the process.” He went on to chastise Americans for assuming what he saw as a false posture of innocence. After all, he declared, American have unleashed violence to accomplish their ends all over the world. “the stuff we have done overseas,” he said, “has now been brought back into our own front yard! America’s chickens are coming home to roost! Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred and terrorism begets terrorism.”

Many people, including Barack Obama, have fulminated against Wright’s statement. Yet it contains a useful message that was especially important to articulate after the 9/11 attack. Reverend Wright’s message was that the United States, too, is tainted by worldly sin - its imperialism (the Mexican-American War, the conquest of the Philippines, the occupation of

Haiti and Cuba); its dispossession of the Indians; its subordination of blacks; its use of atomic weapons; its misadventures in Vietnam, Chile, and Nicaragua; and still other misdeeds about which all too many Americans are ignorant or indifferent.

To some, Wright’s interpretation of American history is an attack upon secular scripture: the conventional narrative of American goodness. Reaction against such perceived affronts is often fervent. Recall what happened in 1995 when the curators of the National Air and Space Museum attempted to present a heterodox view of the decision to drop atom bombs on Japan during World War II, an interpretation that called into question the necessity and hence the morality of the decision. Although this argument has been advanced by serious scholars for decades, Congress put the managers of the National Air and Space Museum on notice that they would be severely penalized (i.e., lose their jobs) if they attempted – which they did not – to mount the “objectionable” exhibition. A similar intolerant, parochial conformism animated much of the reaction against Reverend Wright. How could anyone, especially an American, say what he said about the United States, especially in the throes of the grief immediately following 9/11? In the eyes of many he was stepping over the ultimate line of political incorrectness – the patriotism line.

I have already noted my criticisms of Reverend Wright’s remarks. They were marred by hyperbole, one-sidedness, and an irresponsible willingness to perpetuate erroneous folktales. Worse, however, is the complacent smugness from which arose the feverish anger that Wright provoked and that temporarily posed a threat to Obama’s candidacy. Neither of these alternatives is inevitable. Both should be abjured. If pushed to choose, however, between Wright’s excessive denigration of America and the excessive exaltation epitomized by his most severe detractors, I’ll take the former. Its consequences tend to be less lethal.
To be elected President of the United States, Obama (like any other candidate) had to stay far clear of the patriotism line. He had to voice certain talismatic statements (“I love America”) and bow before certain totemic emblems such as the pledge of allegiance, the national anthem, and the flag. During the battle with Clinton, Obama bridled when questioned about the absence of a flag pin on his suit coat. He suggested initially that he would decline to express his patriotism through such formulaic symbolism. The fervor of the backlash however, persuaded him rather quickly to don the flag pin.

In the speech that launched him into political celebrity, his address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, Obama spoke reverentially of America as “a magical place,” gratefully recounting how it had offered sanctuary to parents who “shared not only an improbably love,” but “an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation.” During his campaign for the presidency, in his most sustained performance of patriotic ritualism, his “The America We Love” speech, Obama invoked the thoroughly familiar image of the “simple band of colonists” who “took up arms against the tyranny of an Empire. . . not on behalf of a particular tribe or lineage, but on behalf of a larger idea. The idea of liberty.” That claim hardly squares with the presence of slavery in all of the colonies that confederated to form the United States. Nor does it square with the fact, noted previously, that among the enslaved who joined the British were bondsmen who eagerly fled the estates of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other Founding Fathers. But the Obama campaign was not about to inject such complications into his feel-good narrative of American origins. He was not wholly uncritical. He mentioned American “imperfections” and “flaws.” Yet, in his speech there was only one development that he labeled “a national shame.” Was this a reference to the ethnic cleansing through which the bulk of North America was wrested from the Indians? Was it a reference to
slavery or segregation? Was it a reference to the exclusion of the Chinese or the internment of the Japanese? No. The act Obama judged most harshly in his wide-ranging address was the failure of some Americans “to honor those veterans coming home from Vietnam, something that remains a national shame to this day.” Certainly the jeering at Vietnam veterans was misdirected, especially as it targeted low-ranking soldiers as opposed to the civilian and military elite who designed the policies soldiers were forced to implement. But even at its worst, the jeering was less destructive than other actions, policies, or episodes about which Obama was mute, forgiving, or euphemistic. He did note FDR’s internment of Japanese Americans in World War II. But he refrained from labeling that moral disaster a national shame and instead termed it a mere “questionable” policy. What Obama’s calibration of censure reflects is a pragmatic politician’s understanding of what the dominant camps in American political culture will recognize as truth and reward as wisdom. Unvarnished accounts of the American story, especially in the mouth of a politician seeking the presidency, is seen by many as neither true nor wise.

It would be unfair to neglect to acknowledge that, in his speech, Obama injected something extra into what might have been, in other hands, a wholly banal exercise of patriotic ritual. That something extra consisted of two points. One was an insistence that dissent, too, can be patriotic. Indeed, according to Obama, “when our laws, our leaders, or our government are out of alignment with our ideals, then the dissent of ordinary Americans may prove to be one of the truest expressions of patriotism.” He cited as a patriot Martin Luther King, Jr., “who led a movement to help America confront our tragic history of racial injustice and live up to the meaning of our creed.” He also lauded as a patriot “the young soldier who first spoke about the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib,” the infamous prison in Iraq. The second point was that
“patriotism involves not only defending the country against external threat, but also working constantly to make America a better place for future generations. . . . Just as patriotism involves each of us making a commitment to this nation that extends beyond our own immediate self-interest, so must that commitment extend beyond our own time here on earth.”

These are nice touches that broadened the discourse on patriotism and offered just the sort of distinguishing flavor that elicited from supporters the enthusiasm that helped to propel Obama to victory. But Obama’s gestures toward a progressive patriotism14 were situated firmly within a conventional narrative that trumpeted, in his words, “the singular greatness of our ideals.” This framework is sometimes referred to as American exceptionalism – a community of ideas, intuitions, and ambitions which posits, among other things, that the United States of America is uniquely virtuous, uniquely powerful, uniquely destined to accomplish great things, and thus uniquely authorized to act in ways to which the United States would object if done by other nations. One hears strains of American exceptionalism in the rhetoric of politicians across the spectrum of “mainstream” politics – from Republican President George W. Bush (“the United States has been the greatest force for good in history. [It] provides the single surviving model of human progress”), to activist Jesse Jackson (“America is God’s country”), to Democratic Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (“We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future”) to Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin (“America is a nation of exceptionalism”) to candidate and then President Barack Obama. This rhetoric is so routinely voiced that it has become an expected part of an American politician’s repertoire.

During Obama’s first trip to Europe as President a reporter asked him specifically whether he subscribed, as many of his predecessors had, “to the school of American

exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world?” He responded by stating:

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. . . . The fact that I am very proud of my country and I think we’ve got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we’re not always going to be right, or that other people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise and that includes us.

Obama’s remarks were revealing. They showed his impulse towards a gracious cosmopolitanism (“recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries”), realistic modesty (“we’re not always going to be right”), and sensible multilateralism (“in order for us to work collectively, all parties have to compromise,” including the United States). His remarks, moreover, revised the standard American claim of exceptionalism by deemphasizing ideas of American superiority and instead internationalizing what is sometimes seen disapprovingly as a peculiarly American attitude. In the end, though, Obama did what the bulk of the American electorate expects and demands of him and any other President. He stressed what he views as the beneficent specialness of America, including a core set of democratic values that, “though imperfect, are exceptional.”

When Americans elected Obama to the presidency they selected him to become the head of the American political family. He is expected to do for the American political family what a decent head of any household does – love his family to the fullest twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He is expected to put the family’s interest before his own and, if need be, to sacrifice himself for it. He is expected not only to work on behalf of the American political family, not only to lead it, but to be its very embodiment. Every American President becomes temporarily, the Father (or one day soon, the Mother) of the country. That is why there is more
intimate emotionality associated with the election of a President than with any other office in American politics.

By electing Obama, America made it vividly clear that, yes, indeed, certain blacks are fully included in the American polity not only as workers or athletes, soldiers or singers, but at the highest level of governmental authority. Nothing in American history has more powerfully elicited patriotism among black folk than seeing a fellow black elevated to the Presidency.\textsuperscript{15} The ascendant, grand story of American redemption has assimilated this development in stride. In the age of the first black president the conventional patriotic narrative continues to hold pride of place in America’s self-understanding. Obama will do nothing to subvert it. He, too, will allow Andrew Jackson’s portrait to retain a place of honor in the White House and in the pantheon of the Democratic Party despite Old Hickory’s aggressive defense of Negro slavery and his cruel depredations against Indians. He, too, will portray the United States as fundamentally different, better, more moral than other nation-state – “the world’s last best hope” – a country enjoying divine guidance. He, too, will posit other propositions that are, at once, popular and misleading. When he nominated Sonia Sotomayor for a seat on the Supreme Court it was not enough to congratulate her and her family on the commendable pluck involved in her difficult journey from the South Bronx to Princeton, Yale Law School, and the most elite circles of the American legal profession. Obama also reiterated one of his favorite tropes of American exceptionalism – the vision of a “magical place” in which social confinements are no match for individuals who are sufficiently industrious. “No dream is beyond reach in the United States of America,” the

\textsuperscript{15} “I wasn’t expecting this man. He blindsided me. I had heard back in 2004 of a black man with an African name who was putting his name on the ballot in the near future. I thought: ‘so what?’... Four years later, I can hardly believe what’s happened. I don’t care what color he is, but damn if I don’t have a hard time holding back tears every time I hear him speak. I can’t help but to string the images of slaves, lynchings, fire hoses, and Barack Obama into a reel of silent pride that plays over and over in my mind. There is no smug. There is no gloat. Just lightness, hope, love, solidarity with ALL Americans. I have a new-found reason to be a patriot... Bless you all.” Anonymous respondent to Ariel Gonzalez, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner: From Booker T. Washington to Barack Obama, Huffingtonpost.com, October 25, 2008.
President intoned, obscuring with an unusual instance of social mobility the frustrating inertia that hard-working poor people know all too well.

Obama’s election brightens the allure of the conventional patriotic narrative. It is one of those landmark events that prompts the utterance of the congratulatory slogan: “Only in America!” It would have moved my father deeply. It would not, however, have turned him into a patriot.