

Obama!

WHAT HE MUST DO TO WIN

BY NOEL PEARSON

Last year, Shelby Steele accepted an invitation to the Cape York Institute's 'Strong Foundations' conference. Steele is a leading intellectual of African-American heritage and one of America's most important thinkers on matters of race. His book *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006) had in part provoked my *Griffith Review* essay last May. Alas, we were dismayed when Steele cancelled his trip. After the announcement of Barack Obama's bid for the Democratic nomination for the American presidency, he accepted a commission to write a book on the candidate and was immediately on a tight timetable. The result, *A Bound Man: Why We're Excited About Barack Obama and Why He Can't Win*, turns out to be a fascinating application of Steele's theory of post-'60s race relations in America.

According to Steele, white guilt became a potent force in American culture and politics because, following the civil-rights victories of the '60s, whites were forced to confront their long association with racism. White America suffered a crisis of moral authority because the remedying of discrimination in the present did not absolve it of the injustices of the past and the continuing legacy of black inequality. White America still had to account for its two centuries of infidelity to the founding promise of the American Republic: that "all men are created equal." This is what Steele calls white guilt. The concept does not originate with Steele, but his insight into how white and black Americans responded after formal equality is both original and compelling.

As victims of centuries of oppression, black people possess a moral authority white people can never have. Steele argues that the "black consciousness" which arose in tandem with white guilt defined racism as structural and systemic, and this analysis permeated the American debate. White institutions, burdened by historical white guilt, were forced to show that they were not racist by addressing systemic inequality, which gave rise to policies such as affirmative action and to

the notion that blacks should be exempt from standard responsibilities because their current disadvantage is not of their own making.

White guilt appears to be valuable to African-Americans. It gives them power over whites. But, Steele argues, the interplay between white guilt and black consciousness leaves blacks worse off: the perceived advantages of exploiting white guilt are inferior to the gains blacks would make if they took full responsibility for their own advancement. The policies precipitated by white guilt perpetually project blacks as weak and incapable, and whites' moral authority is restored without the racial stratification of American society changing much.

In *A Bound Man*, Steele continues to explore white and black Americans' thinking about race, this time through the prism of arguably the most momentous event in American race relations since the civil-rights struggles: the emergence of a plausible black candidate for the presidency. His starting point is that a militant ideology, based on grievance and a tight cultural and racial unity, has been dominant in black America for 40 years. Although the civil-rights movement made the case for ending segregation on the basis of a



shared humanity, the politicised post-'60s black movement became an identity movement. This identity, Steele contends, wants black protest to be built into each black person's sense of self, and it "expects many gestures of affiliation – a liberal politics and Democratic Party affiliation among them".

In the dominant black political culture, the price for belonging is to give up being fully oneself, to disregard what is universal. Steele bases this assessment on his own experience, which in some respects is similar to Barack Obama's: Steele's mother was white, and he spent his early adulthood working in poor black neighbourhoods. Steele now realises that in his own quest for belonging in the late '60s, he went along with a blackness he did not really believe in, "searching for authenticity and legitimacy as a black".

He believes that the same quest for authenticity explains Obama's years in community work and his long-term association with his mentor, Pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose black-liberation theology could well be Willie Horton to the power of ten in the forthcoming contest between John McCain and Barack Obama. (I follow the American commentator Dick Morris's months-old view that, short of Obama falling under a bus, there is no way the Democratic Party will survive a failure to honour the candidate who has won both the popular vote and the elected-delegate count – something Hillary Clinton cannot achieve in the remaining contests, despite her strong showing in Pennsylvania.)

Steele develops the theory that oppressed groups and races are forced to use masking strategies to "offset the power differential that so favours those born to the mainstream". In the openly racist and oppressive America before the civil-rights struggles, masking was blacks' only means of securing concessions. Steele cites Louis Armstrong: his beaming smile and reflexive bowing, the great musician's way of signalling black inferiority, were the price he paid for a career in segregated America. Armstrong's contract with the white audience was that he would entertain them but not breach the protocol of segregation, and not expose their racism as a matter of prejudice rather than truth.

Today, when blacks have equal rights but much less power than whites, African-Americans employ two main masking strategies: bargaining and challenging. A bargainer makes this deal with whites: 'I will not use America's history of racism against you, if you promise not to use my race against me.' Shelby Steele relates how his first encounters with white people who do not know his beliefs always follow the same script: as soon as it becomes apparent to them that he does not give off coolness or ambient hostility, he senses their relief and gratitude that he is not an angry black.

Challengers, in contrast to bargainers, do not magnanimously give whites the benefit of the doubt: they stigmatise whites as racist until the whites prove themselves innocent.

However, both the bargaining and the challenging strategies are premised on white guilt: white innocence is traded for black power. Bargainers grant whites innocence upfront; challengers make whites earn it.

The most successful bargainers, such as Oprah Winfrey, Steele calls iconic Negroes. Iconic Negroes offer absolution for whites, who can experience themselves shorn of racism by identifying completely with an African-American. Obama is, Steele observes, the first to test the special charisma of the iconic Negro in national politics. After decades of racial challenging, white America longs for a bargaining relationship with black America. Obama appears born to answer the call.

A Bound Man purports to explain why Barack Obama, seemingly the perfect bargainer, cannot win the presidency; at the time of writing the book, Steele did not even believe Obama had much hope of winning the Democratic nomination. The resulting work is an intriguing failure: the reader is left to deduce why Obama cannot win, because the subtitle is somewhat misleading and the argument to this effect that can be extracted from the book is not convincing. Its usefulness lies more in what it adds to Steele's insights into the psychology and recent history of race.

In the first half of the book, Steele appears to be making a moral case that Obama does not *deserve* to win, and why, if he does win, he may be a flawed president, because the political and personal choices he has made have obliterated his self. Steele said last year of Obama: "there's no self there. I think it comes from a lifetime of being bound up and playing one side, and another side, and never feeling that he had the right to be his own man." He is convinced that Obama (unconsciously, but consistently) has made life choices solely on the basis of race, such as leaving a woman whom he was close to marrying because she was white. Steele asks, "How can Obama sit every week in a church preaching blackness and not object – not stand and proclaim that he was raised quite well, thank you, by three white Middle Westerners? More important, how can he not let his actual experience inform his ideas and his politics?"

Steele contends that what drives Barack Obama is the need to resolve the ambiguity he was born into, and asks:

Does this disqualify Obama for the presidency? It may. There is a price to be paid for fellow-travelling with a racial identity as politicized and demanding as today's black identity. This identity wants to take over a greater proportion of the self than other racial identities do. It wants to have its collective truth – its defining ideas of grievances and protest – become *personal* truth. And then it wants to make loyalty to this truth a reflex within the self, within one's own thoughts, so that all competing thoughts are conceived in disloyalty.

It is a testament to the Clintons' complete lack of squeamishness that they don't mind finding out exactly how the blood of an iconic Negro feels on their hands.

Obama is disqualified because the Achilles heel of both bargainers and challengers is that they can “never concede that only black responsibility can truly lift blacks into parity with whites”. If blacks made this concession, there would be no market for white innocence. Steele believes that Obama has become “the kind of man who can close down the best part of himself” by internalising “the first discipline of both bargainers and challengers”, which is to deny that “black responsibility is the greatest – if not the only – transformative power available to blacks.”

According to Steele, Obama works within the current paradigm of race relations – bargaining and challenging – “to move himself ahead”, when he should instead be advancing a new kind of relationship between whites and blacks, or working to end race as a significant issue altogether. Steele exhorts him to go the way of Bill Cosby: to voluntarily give up his status as an iconic Negro and make an argument for black responsibility. And white responsibility. White guilt, Steele has argued in the past, is really the mirror image of white supremacy, not its opposite: it allows whites to regain their moral authority without addressing society's unequal power relations.

Steele concedes that Cosby has today lost much of his influence with whites as well as with blacks, and predicts that if Obama made such a move he would lose political capital. At this point the argument comes closer to what the subtitle promises: electoral reasons why Obama cannot win. Previous black presidential candidates such as Jesse Jackson (let alone Al Sharpton) were not plausible candidates because they were challengers. Obama is the first plausible black candidate, Steele says, because white voters recognise in him a bargainer who will afford them the racial innocence they long for. Yet, in order to carry the black vote, Obama sometimes speaks to black audiences employing a rhetoric that would be perceived as racially challenging if the audience were white. Sooner or later, Steele predicts, it will become impossible for Obama to satisfy the needs and aspirations of both his two key constituencies, liberal whites and African-Americans. This will destroy him during the nomination process, or at the latest in the election campaign.

Steele's mistake is to assume that the potential tension

within Obama's support base is necessarily a fatal contradiction, a dilemma. All electoral support bases are coalitions of constituencies. It is normal to have fundamental tensions between the policies necessary to build a majority; political winners manage, transcend or resolve such tensions. Steele does not show why Barack Obama would be unable to do that. Obama has, in fact, defied all predictions ever since – as a junior senator with only two terms' experience and the most liberal voting record of any national politician – he put himself forward for the world's highest office. He usurped Hillary Clinton's position as the Democratic frontrunner. The Clintons' fundraising among big donors has been dwarfed by Obama's fundraising among ordinary Americans. And Obama, the outsider, has neutralised the Clintons' advantages within the Democratic establishment.

However, it remains to be seen whether he will be able to maintain his success through to the general election, now that he has encountered two so-called firestorms: first, in March, damaging reports about his pastor, Jeremiah Wright; then, in April, his own “bitter” analysis of small-town America. Short of photographs showing Obama giving Osama the black handshake of brotherhood, there could not be two more profound threats to the campaign. They are not merely firestorms; they may be long-burning bushfires.

On their own, the events of March constituted a formidable test of Shelby Steele's hypothesis: first came news of Jeremiah Wright's extraordinarily vitriolic (for those who are unfamiliar with the traditions of America's black churches, as most white Americans certainly are) sermons; then Obama's ‘A More Perfect Union’ speech, given in Philadelphia in response to the furore; and the public reaction to that speech. The polls showed a steady flow of Democratic voters to Hillary Clinton immediately after the Wright revelations, but Obama's Philadelphia speech reversed the trend and he maintained his lead. Talk about being the pull-the-money-out-of-the-fire kid.

Then Bittergate, as the press refer to it, broke on 11 April. Obama was revealed to have given, to a private audience in liberal San Francisco, the following reasons for why he was not faring well in regional Pennsylvania:

victories of the '60s.

I believe that the racial question in countries with oppressed racial and ethnic minorities cannot be settled until the constitutional issue of the minority's rights is properly settled and honoured. In America, the constitutional issues have been long settled. After 1965, when discriminatory voting practices were outlawed, none remained outstanding. Socio-economic parity remained, and remains, a problem; but this must be separated from the issue of constitutional inclusion. The effects of racism also must be separated from the formal guarantee of rights.

Shelby Steele's great insight is that America faced a fork in the road after guaranteeing equality in 1965, and the country took the wrong turn. Whites could have said to blacks: 'You have long taken responsibility, but we failed to respect your rights. You now have rights and you need to continue to take responsibility.' And blacks could have said in turn: 'We will take our rights and we will continue to take responsibility for ourselves, as we did during the days of discrimination.' Instead, whites said to blacks: 'We failed to respect your rights in the past and now you are entitled to them. We now also undertake to take up our responsibilities to you, so that you can overcome the legacy of inequality.' And blacks said: 'We are entitled to our rights and yes, you have a responsibility towards us.'

The basic principle informing policies for black advancement should have been: after 1965, black responsibility should and will pay off. Whereas black responsibility before civil rights was mostly a burden, now there arose a chance for black responsibility to yield rewards, because it was accompanied by rights and opportunities. But the post-civil-rights trajectory of race relations in America (as in Australia) took the nation's people down the wrong road, because the wrong deal was made.

Barack Obama understands many things about black responsibility, but on balance his analysis is structural and much concerned with the legacy of oppression. While there is now a broad-based group of people – including Obama – who accept that human prospects are affected by both structure and behaviour, people generally fall on one side of this line. In Obama's philosophy, as in that of his liberal fellow-travellers and those who see themselves as part of the "long march" for social justice, structure and legacy outweigh behaviour and responsibility.

Obama's Philadelphia speech failed to speak to black responsibility. (His galvanising keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Convention, which launched the Obama phenomenon, was powerful precisely because he spoke to responsibility as well as to unity.) When he did speak of it in Philadelphia, he did so in a paragraph which the audience would likely interpret as a discussion of class and gender injustices:

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances – for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs – to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives – by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Bittergate was equally telling. Here is a lesser-known part of the speech to the San Francisco audience:

We’ve gotta give people a stake in this new economy, because if they don’t have it they are going to be angry about it ... and obviously that is true in places like Oakland and ... South Side Chicago ... we’ve got a whole generation of kids, they don’t need to be discriminated against because they’re already redundant, they’re already forgotten ... kids are not stupid, they understand when they have been rendered irrelevant ... and then we are surprised when they resort to the drug trade or violence as a way of shouting out, “I am relevant, I am here!”

This is the same structural thinking that underpinned the analysis of small-town Americans clinging to guns and religion. Irresponsible behaviour is interpreted as a symptom of economic change, as protest. In his Philadelphia speech, Obama said, “A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family, contributed to the erosion of black families – a problem that welfare policies for many years *may* have worsened.” (The emphasis is mine.) Despite the long debate on welfare reform and the clear benefits of America’s *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act 1996*, Barack Obama hesitates to accept a social-policy truth that sticks out like canine testes. Responsibility and choice should never be subsumed by a focus on structural solutions; when this happens, you end up with the kind of shallow determinism that Obama ultimately falls victim to. He would be truly radical if he was equally vehement about equipping citizens to seize

opportunities and to convert them into capabilities.

In Philadelphia he also gave this explanation for black educational underachievement: “Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven’t fixed them, 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students.” But the achievement gap in black education – as Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom make clear in their book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (2003) – extends beyond segregated schools; it is widespread among the black, college-educated middle class, whose members live in good neighbourhoods and send their children to desegregated schools. To construe the crisis in black education as a legacy of ongoing segregation is to be simplistic about a critical policy challenge for Americans.

Like Steele, I firmly believe that “black responsibility is the greatest – if not the only – transformative power available to blacks.” And the same goes for the white underclass. The conservative emphasis on personal responsibility and the liberal emphasis on individual choice and self-interest are as important as – nay, more important than – opening up opportunities for social progress. Access and opportunity are necessary but not sufficient for uplift, while personal responsibility and self-interest are indispensable.

Underclass and black uplift: this is perhaps the most intractable of all policy challenges. Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society did not materialise. Bill Clinton presided over a strong economy and implemented sensible welfare-reform policies, and yet he made no major inroads into lifting up the lower classes. For me, perhaps the most hapless image of his final six months in power was his attempt to do something belatedly for poor whites in the Appalachians. Too little, too late.

Tony Blair, in Britain, was the most active and committed recent political leader in this regard. He understood the problems and seemed to grasp what was needed, but his Labour government’s policies for “social inclusion” were still based on the “co-ordinated service delivery” paradigm, and they have not produced very impressive outcomes. Andrew Mawson’s recent account of the English experience, *The Social Entrepreneur: Making Communities Work* (2008), does not bode well for Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard’s social-inclusion agenda in this country. The proposed establishment of a Social Inclusion Board (presumably comprising the usual suspects, such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Smith Family) indicates *prima facie* that the Australian attempt will fare no better.

Rudd, in the second of his *Monthly* essays in 2006, in which he outlined his political philosophy in preparation for his bid for the Labor leadership, did the debate about social

uplift a great service by returning to first principles and to Adam Smith. “Modern Labor,” Rudd wrote, “following Smith, argues that human beings are both ‘self-regarding’ and ‘other-regarding.’” He argued that members of the political Right distort Smith’s liberalism when they selectively “speak of the self-regarding values of security, liberty and property”. Social democrats, he contended, are truer to Smith’s original philosophy because they add “the other-regarding values of equity, solidarity and sustainability”.

Yet social-democratic solidarity has its limits: the fate of the disadvantaged can be seen to depend too much on the altruism of the economically and socially integrated mainstream. The state has a responsibility to ensure equal access to opportunity, of course, but the provision of opportunity alone cannot effect the inclusion of marginalised groups. Disadvantaged people need to develop capabilities. Capabilities develop when opportunity is combined with personal responsibility.

We need policies that increase self-regard among the disadvantaged. To put it crassly: poor people need to become at least as greedy as those who are not poor. Until disadvantaged people become as self-interested as advantaged people, they will not rise above their disadvantage. Until we crank up the engine of self-interest among the under-privileged, we won’t get individual, and therefore social, uplift.

One of the few political leaders who understood this was Mark Latham. His view of the lower classes was that they needed to be as aspirational as the middle classes, and he was sensitive to the kind of classism (akin to racism) which maintains that poor people should suffer with dignity rather than grasping for – albeit in an unseemly way – a better lot for themselves. Latham’s policy ideas in pursuit of this conviction may have been flawed, but he was barking up the right tree. If Rudd and Gillard intend to persevere with a Social Inclusion Board, then appointing Latham to be its chief provocateur would bring to the pursuit of this agenda the kind of seriousness it requires.

Those who are well off and who devise other-regarding policies for the disadvantaged forget that they themselves are well off because of their own self-regard. Politicians of the centre-left are particularly prone to this kind of patronising double standard: ‘Mate, I do well with my own self-regard, thank you very much, but self-regard isn’t for you; you need everyone’s else’s other-regard, and I’m in government to organise the very other-regarding policies you need.’

Barack Obama’s response to black and white disenfranchisement has, so far, been to summon up the twin spectres of evil corporate America and special interests in Washington. His challenge is to find a policy framework that indeed seeks to better perfect the union and to create the Great Society, but to do this he needs to understand the reasons for the failure of previous attempts – the principal lesson being that

a government *cannot* plan and deliver a Great Society. Rather, the sole aim of a government should be to allow, indeed to mandate, individuals to take responsibility for bettering their lives, and to provide them with the maximum opportunity to do so.

Shelby Steele writes in *A Bound Man*: “despite the fact that [Obama] clearly seems to accept the importance of individual responsibility in social reform ... he offers no thinking on how to build incentives to responsibility into actual social policy.” There is time enough for Obama to correct his analysis and to move beyond the critical shortcomings of his Philadelphia speech. If that speech gave expression to the dialectical turbulence of America’s racial inheritance, then it must be superseded by a speech which locates and articulates its radical centre. Without learning from the keen analysis of black conservatives like Steele, this centre will elude Obama. I wondered if Obama was referring to Steele in his Philadelphia speech: “On one end of the spectrum, we’ve heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it’s based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap.” If he was, Obama simply does not get Steele’s critique, which is more substantial and complex than this caricature. He needs to grapple with Steele if he is to break through his intellectual shortcomings.

I believe that the Philadelphia speech was insufficient to answer the questions that will emerge in the presidential campaign. This is even more the case now that Republicans will be (to use the appropriate parlance) doing their darnedest to make sure every second yokel east of San Francisco and west of the *New York Times* is minded to ask of him, ‘You saying I’m a redneck, nigger?’ For the reasons advanced by Steele, race is a double-edged sword, capable of alienating voters from Obama as well as attracting them to him. For any number motivated by racial guilt or a desire for reconciliation, how many more will be motivated by defensiveness or racial defiance, come November?

Ironically, Obama’s hope to prevail over the pessimistic view of American race relations represents the very kind of audacity which he says he learned from his mentor, Jeremiah Wright. His candidacy, as Shelby Steele observes, “asks the American democracy to virtually complete itself”. If Obama comes to grips with Steele’s critique, he could immunise himself against any Republican campaign targeting his association with Wright, and against the notion that he condescends to white Americans of the heartland. The occasion for a radically revised account of the fundamental issues discussed in Philadelphia and San Francisco should come in August, when the Democratic National Convention ordains Barack Obama as its candidate for president.

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