A more perfect union (for what and for whom)

Submitted by lambert on Tue, 09/29/2009 - 10:14am

Via the great Field Negro [1], this from Naomi Klein [2]:

In the late 50s and early 60s, angry white mobs were reacting to life-changing victories won by the civil rights movement. Today's mobs, on the other hand, are reacting to the symbolic victory of an African American winning the presidency. Yet they are rising up at a time when non-elite blacks and Latinos are losing significant ground, with their homes and jobs slipping away from them at a much higher rate than from whites. So far, Obama has been unwilling to adopt policies specifically geared towards closing this ever-widening divide. The result may well leave minorities with the worst of all worlds: the pain of a full-scale racist backlash without the benefits of policies that alleviate daily hardships. Meanwhile, with Obama constantly painted by the radical right as a cross between Malcolm X and Karl Marx, most progressives feel it is their job to defend him? not to point out that, when it comes to tackling the economic crisis ravaging minority communities, the president is not doing nearly enough.

That's how the Overton Window works, kidz!*

Now, Klein being Klein, she ties together (a) the reparations movement, (b) the "crisis in African-American wealth, (c) the bailouts (in which Obama played such a prominent role), and (d) the transfer of wealth to banksters:

The biggest gap, however, is in net worth. By the end of the 90s, the average black family had a net worth one eighth the national average. Low net worth means less access to traditional credit (and, as we'd later learn, more sub-prime mortgages). It also means families have little besides debt to pass from one generation to the next, preventing the wealth gap closing on its own. ...

When news came that the Durban follow-up conference [the original Durban conference, where reparations caught fire, was held on... September 9, 2001...] would take place three months into Obama's presidency, many veterans of the first gathering were convinced the time had finally come to restart that interrupted conversation. And at first the Obama administration seemed to be readying to attend, even sending a small delegation to one of the preparatory conferences. So when Obama announced that he, like Bush before him, would be boycotting, it came as a
When disappointed activists reconvened for the Durban Review Conference this April, talk in the corridors often turned to the unprecedented sums governments were putting on the line to save the banks. Roger Wareham, for instance, pointed out that if Washington can find billions to bail out AIG, it can also say, "We're going to bail out people of African descent because this is what's happened historically." It's true that, at least on the surface, the economic crisis has handed the reparations movement some powerful new arguments. The hardest part of selling reparations in the US has always been the perception that something would have to be taken away from whites in order for it to be given to blacks and other minorities. But because of the broad support for large stimulus spending, there is a staggering amount of new money floating around — money that does not yet belong to any one group.

Obama's approach to stimulus spending has been rightly criticised for lacking a big idea — the $787bn package he unveiled shortly after taking office is a messy grab bag, with little ambition actually to fix any one of the problems on which it nibbles. Listening to Wareham in Geneva, it occurred to me that a serious attempt to close the economic gaps left by slavery and Jim Crow is as good a big stimulus idea as any.

What is tantalising (and maddening) about Obama is that he has the skills to persuade a great many Americans of the justice of such an endeavour.

Na ga happen. Of course, there were Cassandras:

There were those who saw this coming. The late Latino activist Juan Santos wrote a much-circulated essay during the presidential campaign in which he argued that Obama's unwillingness to talk about race (except when his campaign depended upon it) was a triumph not of post-racialism but of racism, period. Obama's silence, he argued, was the same silence every person of colour in America lives with, understanding that they can be accepted in white society only if they agree not to be angry about racism. "We stay silent, as a rule, on the job. We stay silent, as a rule, in the white world. Barack Obama is the living symbol of our silence. He is our silence writ large. He is our Silence running for president." Santos predicted that "with respect to Black interests, Obama would be a silenced Black ruler: A muzzled Black emperor."

Many of Obama's defenders responded angrily: his silence was a mere electoral strategy, they said. He was doing what it took to make racist white people comfortable voting for a black man. All that would change, of course, when Obama took office. What Obama's decision to boycott Durban demonstrated definitively was that the campaign strategy is also the governing strategy.

As with so much else.

I'll stop there, and I've probably butchered the analysis because I don't know it well. But, as
usual, Klein’s onto a big idea, and, also as usual, Field Negro’s pointing to something interesting.

NOTE * These lyrics from X seem a propos. I must not think bad thoughts:

The facts we hate well never meet walking down the road everybody yelling "hurry up, hurry up!" but im waiting for you i must go slow i must not think bad thoughts when is this world coming too both sides are right [wrong] but [and] both sides murdered i give up why can't

they i must not think bad thoughts the civil wars and the uncivilized wars conflagrations leap out of every poor furnace the food cooks poorly and everyone goes hungry from then on it's dog eat dog dog eat body & body eat dog i can't go down there i can't understand it im a no good coward & an american too a north american that is not a south of a central or a native american oh i must not think bad thoughts im guilty of murder of innocent men innocent women innocent children thousands of them my planes my guns my money my soul my blood on my hands it's all my fault i must not think bad thoughts i must not think bad thoughtsthe facts we hate you'll never hear us i hear the radio it's finally gonna play new music you know the british invasion but what about the minutemen fleasheaters doa big boys and the black flag were the last american bands to get played on the radio please bring the flag? please bring the flag! glitter-disco-synthesizer night school all the noble savage drum drum drum drum drum astronauts go back in time to hang out with the cave people it's about time it's about space it's about some people in the strangest places woody guthrie sang about b-e-e-t-s not b-e-a-t-s i must not think bad thoughts i must not think bad thoughts the facts we hate

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