

US media, Clinton assail Obama for “bitter” truth

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The American media and the political rivals of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama opened fire on the Illinois senator this weekend after he committed the unpardonable offense of speaking the truth, or at least a part of it, about the bitterness among working class Americans over the steady erosion of their living standards and jobs.

Obama’s comments at a closed-door fundraising event in San Francisco were reported Friday on the *Huffington Post* political blog. He was asked by supporters why he was trailing Senator Hillary Clinton in polls in Pennsylvania, where a state-wide primary takes place on April 22.

“Our challenge is to get people persuaded that we can make progress when there’s not evidence of that in their daily lives,” Obama said. “You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing’s replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate and they have not. And it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

Obama had just completed a six-day bus trip across Pennsylvania, which included dozens of town hall meetings in small towns, rather than the rallies in huge arenas that have been a feature of his campaign in other states. As a result, he engaged in face-to-face discussion with hundreds of working class voters, who told him stories of plant closings, lack of opportunity for their children, and countless broken promises from Democratic and Republican politicians alike.

Apparently, the Democratic senator is guilty of a double offense against the norms of contemporary American electoral politics: He allowed real-life experiences of social deprivation to affect him, and then spoke frankly in front of an audience, albeit a privileged one at a private fundraiser, of the economic realities of American society.

He compounded this political sin with the suggestion that religion, gun rights, economic protectionism and anti-immigrant agitation were used to divert working people from the economic oppression they face.

The response from the American media, once his remarks were published, was immediate and hostile. Obama was guilty of a “blunder,” he had “offended” rural America, he faced “a full-blown political disaster.” A commentary on the influential web site *politico.com* said, “this is a potential turning point for Obama’s campaign,” one that could result in the loss of the Democratic nomination to New York Senator Hillary Clinton.

It is instructive to compare this reaction to the treatment of the speech on race relations that Obama delivered last month in response to controversial comments made by the expastor of his Chicago church, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The bulk of the media treated Obama’s address favorably—an indication that in the America of 2008, class divisions are a much more sensitive issue than race.

Nothing that Obama said was a surprise to the media pundits or his political rivals. If anything, he understated the level of bitterness in rural and small-town America, since he left out one of the most important factors in fueling popular anger—the war in Iraq, which has taken a disproportionate toll in these communities, where a far higher percentage of young people volunteer for the military than in urban or suburban areas.

Republican political strategists have relied for years on appeals to religious sentiments—“God, gays and guns,” in the parlance of political consultants—to win support among voters whose jobs and living standards have been devastated by the decline of American industry and the unrestrained “free market” policies of successive Republican and Democratic administrations.

Thomas Frank wrote a best-selling book four years ago (*What’s the Matter with Kansas?*), which examined this process in his home state, and his conclusions about the use of coded appeals to religion to induce voters to ignore their own economic interests have become conventional wisdom

in ruling class political and media circles.

While Frank's book had certain insights into American culture and politics, he ignored the most fundamental factor enabling the Republican appeals to prejudice and backwardness to produce electoral successes—the drastic shift by the Democratic Party to the right and its abandonment of any policies to alleviate economic inequality or improve living conditions for working people.

Spokesmen for the campaign of the presumptive Republican presidential candidate, Senator John McCain, denounced Obama for “dismissing” the “values” and “American traditions” that “have contributed to the identity and greatness of this country.”

The response of the Clinton campaign to Obama's remarks was no less reactionary. Her spokesman accused Obama of “offending small town America,” adding, “Americans are tired of a president who looks down on them—they want a president who will stand up for them for a change. The Americans who live in small towns are optimistic, hardworking and resilient.”

At a rally in North Carolina, Clinton campaign workers handed out stickers bearing the motto, “I'm not bitter.”

The candidate herself declared, “I was taken aback by the demeaning remarks Senator Obama made about people in small town America. Senator Obama's remarks were elitist and out of touch. They are not reflective of the values and beliefs of Americans.”

The charge of “elitism” is remarkable coming from Mrs. Clinton, who last week released tax returns showing that she and the former president had raked in \$109 million in income over the past seven years, putting them squarely in the top .01 percent of American society.

Clinton went on to identify herself with religion and patriotic values. “I was raised with Midwestern values and an unshakable faith in America and its policies,” she said. (The 60-year-old candidate grew up in the 1950s, the years of the McCarthy witch-hunt, Cold War conformism and the domination of racial oppression in the American South.)

“I grew up in a church-going family,” she continued, “a family that believed in the importance of living out and expressing our faith. The people of faith I know don't ‘cling’ to religion because they're bitter. People embrace faith not because they are materially poor, but because they are spiritually rich.”

Obama's initial reaction to the barrage of criticism was to reiterate his views at a town hall meeting in Indiana, where, as a *Washington Post* reporter described it, “he repeated the offending word [“bitter”] three times.” He ridiculed Clinton for denying that working-class people in Pennsylvania are resentful over the state of the economy, and he called both McCain and Clinton “out of touch” for their apparent lack of

understanding of the growing anger against the political establishment.

“People are fed up,” Obama said. “They're angry and they're frustrated and they're bitter, and they want to see a change in Washington.”

By the following day, however, Obama had begun to change his tune and back away from this too-blunt assessment of the popular mood in America—and above all from any implied criticism of the role of religion. “I didn't say it as well as I could have,” he told a campaign rally in Muncie, Indiana. In an interview with the *Raleigh News & Observer*, he said, “Obviously, if I worded things in a way that made people offended, I deeply regret that.”

By Sunday, he was in full contrition mode, prostrating himself before those who accused him of offending the religiously devout, although he continued to assert his original statement that there is widespread alienation in rural and small town America.

It remains to be seen whether the political furor of the last few days has a lasting effect on the outcome of the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, or the November election contest. But the episode has been a revealing exposure of both the media and the political establishment.

The near-unanimous consensus that Obama has committed a huge blunder by referring to working class bitterness and resentment has two sources: the enormous social distance of the millionaire pundits and politicians from the real lives of working people, and the fear that under conditions of convulsions in the financial markets and the onset of a deep recession, any discussion of the underlying social antagonisms in America has potentially explosive consequences.



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