

Jesse Jackson's self-criticism and the state of American politics

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For the last two days, the US public has been subjected once again to the degrading spectacle of a political figure issuing seemingly unending apologies for a supposed gaffe deemed outside the realm of acceptable discourse.

This time it is Jesse Jackson, the former civil rights activist and two-time candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Speaking privately—albeit with a microphone attached to his lapel—to a fellow guest in a Fox News studio, Jackson criticized the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee, Sen. Barack Obama, for his embrace of “faith-based” social service operations and for “talking down to black people.” Expressing his frustration with Obama's policies, Jackson whispered that he wanted to “cut his nuts off.”

Once Rupert Murdoch's Fox News discovered tape of the off-air comment, it drove the story to the top of the news, touching off a feeding frenzy on other networks, with announcers feigning shock and employing tortured castration euphemisms out of their supposed inability to repeat Jackson's scandalous words.

This kind of infantilism is an insult to the intelligence of the American people. Politics, as the saying goes, isn't beanbag. Interests—both social and personal—are at stake, and those involved are prone to anger, and even on occasion rude comments.

The broadcast of the remark, which was not intended for public consumption, could have been dealt with quite easily by Jackson. He could have made the point that he was obviously speaking metaphorically, meant Obama no physical harm and, from a political standpoint, there really was nothing there to cut, in any case.

Instead, Jackson conducted a press conference in Chicago and appeared on every television program available to him to engage in ritualistic self-flagellation and declarations of unconditional support for Obama.

“Any hurt or harm I caused his campaign, I apologize, because I have such high regard for him,” he said. “I cherish his role—the role he's played in making the nation better and making the world rejoice.” The junior senator from Illinois,

Jackson proclaimed, “represents the redemption of our country.”

Meanwhile Jackson's son, Jesse Jackson Jr., a co-chair of the Obama campaign, got in on the act, rebuking his own father in decidedly harsh language.

“I'm deeply outraged and disappointed in Reverend Jackson's reckless statements about Senator Barack Obama,” he declared. “His divisive and demeaning comments about the presumptive Democratic nominee—and I believe the next president of the United States—contradict his inspiring and courageous career.... I thoroughly reject and repudiate his ugly rhetoric. He should keep hope alive and any personal attacks and insults to himself.”

Criticism and self criticism, ritualistic confessions, vows of fealty to the leader and repudiation of a father by his son; the political atmosphere in the US increasingly resembles the worst features of a Stalinist-style police state.

Nor is Jackson's predicament unique. Obama found himself in a similar position last spring over his comment, delivered in private, that workers are “bitter” over the loss of jobs and the failure of successive administrations to do anything about it and that, as a consequence, they “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them.”

While initially attempting to defend the validity of the observation that many are bitter over the economic and social situation in America, the Illinois senator quickly bowed before media frenzy over the statement and engaged in numerous acts of public contrition.

This peculiar form of political discourse emerges from a deeply socially stratified and ideologically brittle system within the framework of whose two-party set-up it has become virtually impossible to discuss any fundamental question.

The political context for Jackson's remarks is obvious. He spoke as Obama, having won the Democratic presidential nomination, is carrying out a calculated and breathtakingly rapid turn to the right. Since last month, he has embraced causes long associated with the Republican right, such as

“faith-based” social policy and the death penalty, backed off from his campaign pledge on a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq and, finally, voted earlier this week to legalize the Bush administration’s domestic spying operation and cover up its crimes by granting immunity to the telecommunications companies.

As part of this process, Obama has delivered a series of speeches to black audiences essentially blaming the conditions of poverty and oppression in which millions of poor and working class African Americans live on poor parenting and absentee fathers. There is a clear class content to these moralistic lectures from the multi-millionaire Obama, and, many believe, cynical political calculations as well. It appears that Obama is going before these audiences not to provide them with moral uplift, but to prove to America’s ruling elite that he is not one to “coddle the poor.”

The emphasis on the individual rather than the social roots of the myriad problems confronting millions of black Americans—substandard housing and education, poverty wages, unemployment, homelessness and more young men incarcerated than in college—is of a piece with the extolling of “faith-based” social initiatives, for which Obama vowed to double current funding. Together, they send a clear signal that no one should expect an incoming Democratic administration to engage in any meaningful social reforms or depart from the escalating attacks on social programs carried out by both Democratic and Republican administrations alike for the past three decades.

There are obvious differences in terms of personal and political background between Obama and Jackson and not merely, as the media suggests, those of a generational character.

Jackson’s formative experience was the mass civil rights struggles of the 1960s. He was unquestionably on the right wing of that movement, and his political opportunism and careerist ambitions were the source of bitter friction between himself and Martin Luther King Jr. His rise to prominence as an advocate of “black capitalism” reflected the decline of the civil rights movement and the turn by those within its leading echelons to the right.

Obama, on the other hand, has no connection with the civil rights struggle, or, for that matter, any significant social movement. He is a thoroughly cynical and conventional big business politician who worked his way up the ladder of Chicago’s corrupt Democratic Party machine. With precious little political experience or achievements of any kind, he has been groomed by leading figures within the party’s national leadership to serve as the front man for the implementation of a series of changes in US policy at home and abroad aimed at salvaging the interests of the ruling

elite.

While Jackson is routinely referred to as standing on the “left” of the Democratic Party, he is a decidedly centrist figure and a vocal supporter of the profit system. Nonetheless, he is understandably antagonized by Obama’s rightward trajectory and his personal responsibility mantra.

For the whole past period, Jackson has dedicated himself—through Operation Push and the Wall Street Project—to invoking the historical oppression of black people in America in order to extract minority contracts from corporations and finance houses. While enriching a thin layer of the upper middle class and turning himself, as well as his children, into millionaires, these programs have no impact on the vast majority of minority workers, whose real income, like that of the working class as a whole, has declined over the past two decades.

To the extent that Obama dismisses the social causes of poverty in favor of the individual, and to the extent that his Democratic Party handlers calculate that he can ignore the concerns of millions of black workers and still count on their votes, this cuts across Jackson’s own interests, which are predicated on the phony identification of his operations with the interests of the masses of black working people.

In this sense, the conflict between Jackson and Obama, in a highly distorted way, reflects the fundamental contradiction in American society, which is not a matter of race, but rather of class. It calls attention to the vast social gulf separating the thin financial elite, which controls the policies of both political parties, and the vast mass of working people.

Under conditions in which the crises of American economy and society are creating the conditions for a new eruption of class struggle, this is one subject that the political establishment wants to exclude from public debate. Far better, from their standpoint, to divert popular attention with manufactured media scandals about off-color “gaffes.”



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