

## You Choose

We can let this moment pass and deal with the disastrous consequences, or we can organize to get unregistered people in our communities registered and driven to the polls on Election Day



Archon Khephra Burns

America today is a tale of two nations: red and blue, separate and seemingly irreconcilable; poised on the cusp of a precipitous fall on one side and its last best hope of redemption on the other; torn between words and deeds, between its highest ideals and insatiable greed, between noble aspirations and primitive, reptilian-minded responses to perceived threats (real and conjured), between a global humanitarian impulse and bigoted, xenophobic nationalism. As Dickens wrote

of London and Paris before the French Revolution, these also are the best of times and the worst of times.

Ours is a time of awakening political and social consciousness, but also new revelations of old racial hatreds roiling up from the depths of America's tortured soul. Who among our generation could have imagined the possibility of an African American serving as president of the United States in our lifetime? Who ever thought we would live to see millions of white Americans chanting "Yes we can" in support of a black presidential candidate? Two years ago, I did not.

In its raw intensity and virulence, the backlash, too, has been a revelation. Typical of the reactionary comments found online in even mainstream forums is the following from the Huffington Post, shouted into the World Wide Web in capital letters without pause for thought or punctuation:

I PRAY FOR HIS DEATH DAILY I HOPE THE NIGGER DIES...YOU ALL KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE IF HE LIKES MALCOLM X SO MUCH LET HIM JOIN HIM AND MARTIN LUTHOR [sic] KING TOO....

The *Philadelphia Daily News* reports that a woman emerging from a Bucks County polling place said to a volunteer in an Obama T-shirt, "So you actually voted for Buckwheat?" Congressman Geoff Davis of Kentucky has opined about Senator Obama, "That boy's finger does not need to be on the button." And the McCain campaign has accused Obama of being "disrespectful" to a white woman (Sarah Palin), a charge that in living memory has served as a provocation to lynch mobs. Until the emergence of Barack Obama from the Democratic primary, racism in America had mostly grown more subtle and sophisticated.

Decades of purposefully cultivated ignorance and fear have given us two terms with "a guy you could have a beer with" and, more recently, an otherwise inexplicable enthusiasm for a gal who can field dress your moose – both in lieu of someone actually qualified to run the country. This from an electorate for whom demonstrations of patriotism extend to pressuring Duncan Donuts to remove an ad in which Rachel Ray wears a scarf whose pattern was vaguely reminiscent of one once worn by Yasser Arafat. These are the same Americans whose misgivings about Obama find expression in such statements as: "While he claims not to be a Muslim, he certainly gives every indication of having deep roots in Islam at the very least."

We must tell black youth they cannot equate intelligence with "acting white"; not when such large swathes of the majority population have come out of the closet to declare themselves proudly, defiantly ignorant, as if ignorance was virtue; not when Alaska's governor can crusade for the banning of books and the elevation of Creationism as state dogma; not with millions of her supporters chanting, "Mrs. Vice President, tear down that wall" (the one erected by the Constitution separating church and state); and not when she and her constituents can suggest that the destruction of Iraq and the killing and maiming of thousands of Iraqis is God's will – just one small step on the merry path to the Rapture.

"When fascism comes to America," Sinclair Lewis wrote in 1935, "it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross." (If this sounds like hyperbole, Google Father Coughlin.)

According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and a U.S. Census Current Population Survey, 35.6 percent of voting-age African Americans were not registered to vote in 2004. That's 9,389,500 ballots not cast. Of the 64.4 percent that did register, only 56.3 percent voted in the 2004 presidential election. That means 2,136,375 *registered* black voters did not vote in the 2004 presidential election. Had even a fraction of them gone to the polls, America might have been spared eight years of the worst presidency in U.S. history, the loss of thousand of lives, the collapse of the economy, embarrassment before the world and what may yet prove irreparable damage to the nation and the world and to African Americans more than any other group. Where were our churches? Where were the fraternities? And where are they now? We can let this moment pass as before and reap the disastrous consequences, or we can organize our congregations and encourage college students to enlist other students to get unregistered people in our communities registered and driven to the polls on Election Day. History, for better or worse, is ours to write right now.