

Response to Harris-Lacewell

Professor Harris-Lacewell's article on the religious nature of the relationship between the US Presidents and the African American community provokes many ideas and thoughts.

Chief, to my mind, is the obvious chronic failure of Presidents of both parties to truly support African Americans. Doubtless, we would all find the obvious candidates of failure: Wilson for his support of segregation, Reagan for his stigmatizing African Americans as typically poor and drawing unfair shares of "American" (read: white) resources, or the present Bush for so many things, refusing to meet NAACP leaders until his second term (and in that meeting acknowledging that he was unfamiliar with the Voting Rights Act), slashing funding for programs that aid African Americans at the expense of his own reallocation of funding to the wealthiest of this country, or worst of all, sending a disproportionate number of African-American troops into combat.

But perhaps there are others where the line between hostility, exploitation, indifference, and actual aid are less obvious. Perhaps people like Franklin Roosevelt, but even when African-Americans shifted their allegiances to support for the Democrats, within the most solidly Democratic part of the country they could not cast a vote. Perhaps JFK, but only for symbolism: his support for the Civil Rights movement was halting and tentative. Lincoln, surely, for his Executive Order initiating the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet look closely at the words of Lincoln and it is clear that the North did not fight the South for the eradication of slavery, that the ascendancy of business interests in the country dominated his own calculations, that his own rhetoric was frighteningly racist, and that even the Emancipation Proclamation was more Political Calculation about the destabilizing effects this order may have upon Southern slaveholders. I suppose that Lincoln, like Truman (integration of the Federal troops) and LBJ (passage of the key civil rights legislation at the national level) may be forgiven for their political calculations if only for the positive outcomes those calculations had for African American lives.

Much of the article focuses upon Bill Clinton as the "first Black President." I don't buy this canard at all. Clinton may have felt comfortable around African Americans, but the man was patently easy with everyone. Clinton may have known how to eat chitlins, but he also knew how to slam aspects of Black popular culture to his own political advantage. Clinton may have grown up in poverty, but he went on to Yale, Oxford, and the Governor's mansion in Little Rock

before the White House.

The short of it is that Democrats consistently count on the African American vote as in their pocket and are fearful of demonstrating much in the way of allegiance to the issues that African American voters care most about, in order not to offend marginal Democrats.. And at best the Republicans cynically appeal to issues of religious social conservatism such as gay rights and abortion in order to divide the African American voting bloc.

Religion has been a key component of the relationship between African Americans and American politics, with Presidents swept along in the tide. The Black church in its earliest days provided guidance and hope, and later, a plan for how African Americans might demand equity. Belongingness to a powerful moral institution like the Black church has patently made an enormous difference to all our lives. To the extent that the Black church can mobilize and make demands upon our polity, then the church serves a powerful purpose. To the extent that Democrats and Republicans alike can use the Black church as a vehicle for ugly social conservatism as a means to suppress the rights of others, this is a very problem-filled relationship.

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