

Week Six of the National Media Assault on Obama

By Aaron Wilson-Ahlstrom, May 4, 2008

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In the first chapter of the *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the author recounts a story from his youth. At his high school graduation, he'd given a speech in which he'd argued that humility was the key to progress for the Negro race. The (white) superintendent of the school was so impressed that he invited the young man to give the speech again the following night, at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. When he arrives at the gathering, however, the young man finds out that he must first participate in a "battle royal" where he and 9 of his peers are stripped to their wastes, given boxing gloves and blindfolded, and pushed into a makeshift boxing ring and told to fight it out. White men who were well respected and dignified in normal public life became raving drunks, making bets with one another on who would win, and screaming obscenities at the blacks in the ring, punching and kicking them if they tried to take off their blindfolds or escape from the ring. As the young black men punched, kicked and clawed each other, the men swung from uproarious laughter to violent intensity, and back.

I thought of this image as I talked to a friend Tuesday about all that's happened in the last 6 weeks since Fox "News" first started airing short clips of some of Rev. Wright's most fiery sermons. On Monday of this week, Rev. Wright had spoken at the Press Club, first giving a powerful speech on black liberation theology, and then, in the Q&A portion, acted in a way that I found irresponsible, undignified, and completely out of character. (Among other things, Rev. Wright repeated an explanation of the differences between himself and Obama as being the difference of someone who is a politician vs. someone who's job it is to speak the truth to power and answer only to God). On Tuesday, Obama distanced himself further from Rev. Wright, calling statements his former mentor and pastor of 20 years had made "ridiculous," "offensive" and "divisive." The sight of two such powerful, intelligent, inspiring leaders participating in the mis-characterization and cheapening of one another's dignity filled us with sadness, anger and confusion. But, while both Obama and Rev. Wright had done and said things we found disappointing, we reminded each other that there were other people, the countless commentators and pundits and newsroom executives – the ones deciding where to shine the media spotlight—who have had a much greater role in bringing about what has been so violent and damaging to our collective dignity and our ability to work together for the lifting up of all people.

For over a month we have watched Obama and Rev. Wright on national display. Through the power of the media, we have stood on the outside, looking in, watching as Obama and Wright were insidiously attacked; we watched as the soundbytes of Rev. Wright, deliberately taken out of context, deliberately selected to be the most shocking to people who did not know Rev. Wright or have the experience to understand the context in which the remarks had been made, were played over and over again on the nightly news and talk shows.

Fox “News” created the “story”, but the mainstream media brought it to the mainstream. Fox “News,” I’m sure, had had clips of Rev. Wright for months, and was waiting for the right time to air them. They launched their smear campaign on Obama just as the political convenience of doing so was close to coming to an end (for, if they had let Rev. Wright’s retirement in late March come and go, the soundbytes would have just been from Obama’s *former* pastor, and far less damaging to him). And even if those in the mainstream media have not been conscious of their role in the insidious racism of this past month, make no mistake about it that Fox News was *very* conscious. Their whole purpose was to damage Obama and his campaign. They used Rev. Wright to “shock” people; to connect Obama to white people’s fears (mostly unconscious) – fears of black people, especially angry black men; fears that black people have allegiances that are different from ours as white people; and, finally, the fear that if black people ever get into positions of power that they will use that power to do the things to white people that white people have done to them for centuries. Rev. Wright was used; used for the purpose of preying upon the racist fear and hate that they have so cynically accused Wright of.

For a month we’ve watched Rev. Wright and Obama endure relentless attacks and accusations. We’ve watched as the soundbytes flew and Wright’s “introduction” to the ring was announced with the unquestioned descriptors of “offensive,” “ridiculous,” “racist” and “hurtful.” And those descriptions of Rev. Wright went unquestioned, picked up from Fox “News” and broadcast by the other major networks to be universally accepted as true and accurate. All the major networks have spent tens if not hundreds of hours on the “story,” aired the soundbytes from Rev. Wright over and over again, but I don’t think any of them has spent even 7 minutes playing the part of the sermon that led up to the “America’s chickens have come home to roost” comment. And no one that I saw spent *any time* (and Alicia and I have watched tens of hours of news and political talk shows and spent hours reading blogs on the issue) discussing the merits of what Rev. Wright was saying there. (Essentially quoting the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, who said after 9/11 that America’s chickens had come home to roost; that violence begets violence, and that the pervasive and ongoing violence that our government had wrought across the globe had understandably angered many people, some enough to attempt, and in this case succeed, in attacking the U.S.). And there is healing that needs to happen around that – healing that is impossible as long as we in this country are unwilling even to acknowledge our violence overseas and its effects on others.

And so Fox “News” was immensely successful, yet again, in creating the frame through which the rest of the country viewed an issue. We watched as the question of the day was not “Whatever you think of Rev. Wright’s style and language, what are the merits of what he’s saying?” but “How will Obama respond to these controversial and incendiary statements?” Would he distance himself from Wright? How much? But how would he explain, then, his 20 years in the church? His having Rev. Wright perform the marriage for him and Michelle? Obama was pushed to distance himself from the righteous indignation and fierce anger of a black man, and to describe those qualities as things of the past, of a “different generation”; he resorted to descriptions of Wright as being like an “uncle” that you love, though you disagree with much that he says.

And that “frame,” so cynically and skillfully created by Fox News, reinforced through endless airing of the soundbytes across all the networks, set the tone for a breathtakingly shallow and often racist month of political reporting. We had a nationally televised debate in Pennsylvania where the first 45 minutes were dedicated to questions like “Do you love the American flag, and if so, why don’t you wear a flag lapel pin?” We’ve heard countless pundits take the bait of the Clinton campaign and ask whether Obama is “electable” in the general election (despite the fact that he’s beaten her in the democratic primaries and caucuses and there’s no way for her to win the race except by calling on the subdelegates to go against the will of the people), and analyze whether he’s winning enough of the white vote. We had a whole week of Obama defending his use of the words “bitter” and “cling” and whether that pointed to Obama’s being “elitist” and “out of touch.” In a hundred different ways, he’s had to prove he’s “in touch with *our* values” (the *our* being implicitly *us white people*) – with unbelievably inane examples being raised as possible indications that he doesn’t (he ordered a glass of orange juice instead of a cup of coffee; he doesn’t where a lapel pin like other congressmen and women; he’s a shitty bowler, etc. etc.)

And in this media race to the bottom, what stories have been missed? I think of Obama’s speech – a speech that raised goosebumps on my arms at times; a speech that had me in tears by the end; a speech in which he responded to the relentless negative attacks on himself and on Rev. Wright with such incredible poise; when he turned what had been a toxic wasteland of cheap shots and soundbytes into a cohesive narrative on our heritage of racial strife that people across the racial spectrum could identify with; when he responded to all the negativity not by retreating from the issue, or by offering cheap platitudes, but by challenging the country to raise the dialogue on race to a higher level, to confront our troubling racial past head-on, so that we might be in a different place four years from now. What should have been a turning point not only in the campaign but in our nation’s troubled history when it comes to race, was discussed for about three minutes before the inane distracting question of whether Obama had distanced himself enough from Wright was returned to, and the narrowest and most superficial of frameworks for discussing issues raised by both Obama and Wright once again reigned over the airwaves.

I think of the fact that Obama’s passport files were broken into on three separate occasions, and yet it was months before this was reported to authorities (high-ranking officials, the day that news broke, said on national news that the security breaches and subsequent attempts at a cover-up were obviously politically motivated; interestingly, Bush’s daddy oversaw an administration where the same crime was committed with Governor Clinton’s passport files when he was running for president). I think of the police officers in New York city who shot 50 bullets at an unarmed black man, killing him, and who were acquitted and found innocent of any crime. I think of Jeremiah Wright’s retirement – an occasion that was all but ignored by the mainstream media, but which should have been a national celebration of 40 years of tireless service to his community and to God. 40 years of brilliant, fiery sermons where Biblical texts were brought to life and the liberating messages of the Gospel were made relevant to today’s

world. 40 years of fighting for justice; 40 years of condemning the injustices and violence of the U.S. government, from its support of South African Apartheid in the 1970's and '80's, through the CIA's infamous "work" in Latin America, to the illegal and aggressive war in Iraq and the torture and mistreatment of inmates at Abu Grhaib and Guantanamo. For 40 years, he has criss-crossed the country to lecture on the African American history and ethnomusicology, to preach at revivals, and to support community efforts of all kinds. The number of people who have been helped to get off of drugs, the number of people living with AIDS who were spurned by other churches but who found refuge in the sanctuary of Trinity, the sheer number of lives that have been touched in so many positive ways by Rev. Wright and the ministries of Trinity Church, the number of deeds he has done that cannot be re-paid. This country owes Rev. Wright thanks. And instead his name is now synonymous with racist hatred and anti-americanism. (at least he's in good company)

And so my anger tonight is not at Rev. Wright and Senator Obama. My anger is at Fox News and, maybe even more so, at the mainstream media who need to stop lending credibility to the cynical, tawdry political entertainment stories that Fox News authors by picking them up and running them as "news." I'm outraged at the lack of moral courage. At the failure to provide leadership or even to effectively "cover" leadership when it is so brilliantly and unmistakably demonstrated by others. At their complicitness in amplifying Fox "News's" destructive, divisive, and racist attempts to damage Obama and his campaign in the eyes of the country. At their walking into a room where Fox News had thrown two black men in the ring together, and responding, not by challenging the racism and cynicism of Fox News, or by lifting up the fuller story and providing context that would help people to understand and respond in creative and productive ways, but by placing bets and covering "the fight."

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