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For Obama, Race Remains Elephant in the Room

By Michael Grunwald

On a swing through Pennsylvania last month, Obama ingratiated himself with the players, who value the bucket values of small-town football. "This is a lot of flashy athletes. We don't come out and come through in the end." A lot like Joe

If you're familiar with the code words of the time in common with McCain: they were white. Code words in common with Barack Obama. I'm not saying we sometimes talk about race even when we don't. We have at least made an effort to shed their stigmatized status that used to be reserved for whites. But for whites; blacks have their own category.

Race is the elephant in the room of the 2008 election. Obama actually admitted to pollsters that race was a factor in their vote; that may be an Appalachian outlier, but even in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Ohio the figure was a troubling 1 in 10. It's a tribute to America's racial progress that a biracial man born before Jim Crow died could come this close to the presidency, but if you believe that contemporary America is color-blind, you probably also believe the Georgia Congressman who recently called Obama "uppity," then claimed he had no idea it was a traditional Southern slur for blacks who didn't know their place. ("Uppity" often modified the slur everyone knows is a slur.) Blacks are still known as "minorities" because this is still a majority white country, and Obama is just as anxious to avoid running as "the black candidate" as McCain is anxious to avoid running as "the Republican candidate." ([See photos of Barack Obama's family tree here.](#))

This is something to keep in mind now that the Thomas Friedmans and Arianna Huffingtons of the world are imploring [Obama to get angry, to shed his above-the-fray cool and fight back](#) against the McCain campaign's silly-season accusations that he's a charismatic chauvinist who wants to teach kindergartners how to have sex. Over the past 18 months, Obama has been attacked as a naive novice, an empty suit, a tax-and-spend liberal, an arugula-grazing elitist and a corrupt ward heeler, but the only attacks that clearly stung him involved the Rev. Jeremiah Wright — attacks that portrayed him as an angry black man under the influence of an even angrier black man.

([See photos of Barack Obama on the campaign trail here.](#))

([See photos of Barack Obama backstage at the DNC here.](#))

White America has shown an abundant willingness to support no-demands blacks like Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell and Will Smith, but a race man like Malcolm X would be another story. It was no accident that Bill Clinton tried to pigeonhole Obama in the primaries as another Jesse Jackson, or that Michelle Obama introduced her family at the convention as a new version of the Cosbys (or the Bradys). Obama's opponents want him to look niche, like BET or Chris Rock or the NBA; his challenge is to prove that he's also attractive to the ABC and Dane Cook and MLB crowds. During the primaries, Joe Biden took flak for his dopey description of Obama as "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." *Articulate* is one of those racially tinged words that sports announcers use to express surprise that a black man can speak proper English, and *clean* hints at even uglier stereotypes. But the key word in that verbal vomit was *mainstream*, because it suggested that most blacks aren't. And the media perpetuates that idea by excluding middle-class blacks from their middle-class calculus.

This is touchy stuff, partly because "the race card" is not always, so to speak, a black-and-white issue. New York governor David Paterson recently accused Republicans of using "community organizer" as a subtle racial put-down; that seems hypersensitive to the point of paranoia. Obama was a community organizer, and his opponents should be able to criticize him without being accused of race baiting. But it's tricky when the attacks wander into the neighborhood of racial stereotypes, like the McCain "Celebrity" ad [linking Obama to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears](#), which had a whiff of lock-up-your-women alarmism about the sexual power of black men. The usually somnolent David Gergen lashed out at [McCain's ad portraying Obama as the Messiah](#), calling it a subtle but intentional effort to paint a black man as The Other. "It's the subtext of this campaign; everybody knows that," Gergen said. "As a native of the South, I can tell you, when you see this ad, 'The One,' that's code for, 'He's uppity; he ought to stay in his place.' "

The McCain camp — before its recent forays into the politics of umbrage and grievance — dismissed the ad furor as political correctness run amok. "Have a sense of humor," spokeswoman Nicole Wallace told me. For his part, Obama never accused McCain (or Biden, for that matter) of playing the race card. He wrote eloquently about race in his books, and he spoke eloquently about race during the Wright flap, but he's avoided the subject ever since the McCain campaign accused him of playing the race card, after he suggested that Republicans would try to remind voters that he doesn't look like the Presidents on U.S. currency. I've already reported Obama's negative response to a New Hampshire voter who asked him to launch another Clintonesque national conversation about race: "All that self-flagellation, it's not useful. African Americans get all riled up, and whites get defensive." In a year when generic Democrats are trouncing generic Republicans and polls suggest that the domestic and foreign policies he supports are much more popular than McCain's, it's certainly not useful for Obama.

So Obama is probably wise to ignore the liberals who keep begging him to drop his air of unflappability and start taking Republican scalps. White America already embraces black celebrities, even "flashy" ones. But it has never really warmed up to an angry one.

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