

## Viewpoints, Outlook

April 9, 2008, 7:48PM

# We won't transcend race before settling racial issues

By CLARENCE PAGE

So, how's that national conversation on race coming along?

After Sen. Barack Obama delivered his "More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia in mid-March, many well-meaning folks agreed that it's time we Americans had a national conversation on race.

And a lot of others said, let's not.

As Mickey Kaus put it in his Kausfiles blog at [Slate.com](http://Slate.com), "Actually, a lot of voters supported Obama because they'd kind of like to ignore race, you know?"

In fact, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly argues that Obama's not going to get the national conversation on race that he wants.

Why? Because liberals are so quick to condemn white people as racists if they "make a mistake," that white Americans are "afraid" to talk about race at all.

"African-Americans should realize that this stuff drives good people away from constructive dialogue that might advance racial harmony in America," O'Reilly preached. "The race baiters and profiteers actually hurt minorities by inhibiting sincere discussion."

Yet it lifted my optimism that, after that explanation of why Americans won't have a conversation about race, O'Reilly proceeded to hold a conversation about race.

As one of the participants, I pointed out this apparent contradiction. Bill was unmoved. Most ordinary people won't converse, he said, except with people they know really well. "They're too scared," he insisted.

True enough. In today's etiquette, race talk is a lot like sex talk.

Everybody thinks they're an expert, but nobody wants to discuss it with strangers or in front of the children. Instead, if we talk about race at all, we tend to do it with people who are just like us and who can be safely presumed to agree with us already.

That's comforting, at least temporarily, but it's not educational. Without knowledge of one another's cultures, we avoid understanding what's really on other people's minds. Instead we stumble in our ignorance into the occasional racial shock — like the famously polarized reactions of blacks and whites to the O. J. Simpson murder trial verdict.

It was just such a racial shock that led to Obama's Philadelphia speech. Inflammatory snippets from the Illinois senator's former minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, shocked many Americans.

"In the past week," Gwen Ifill, a senior correspondent for PBS' *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer* and moderator of *Washington Week*, told The New York Times, "we have seen a distinct difference in commentary on Rev. Wright from people who have spent time in black churches and those who have not."

Before Rev. Wright's stuff hit the fan, Obama carefully avoided specifics on the touchy issue of race in his campaign. He knew a political mine-

field when he saw one.

Some of his own supporters resented Wright's emergence, as Kaus implies, precisely because he forced race back into the spotlight.

For that reason, among others, I agree with O'Reilly that some people are too eager to accuse others of racism or to use racism as an excuse to avoid personal responsibility. But some people can be too eager to claim that they have been accused of racism, too.

Many of Wright's critics who have never heard him give a full sermon have accused him of racism. Yet, as his white supporters have pointed out, his sermons have attacked racism, but not any particular race. But the difference is lost on folks who are less comfortable than even they might realize about the candor that is needed to cross our country's deep racial and cultural divides.

O'Reilly has a point. White folks tend to be uneasy about a candid conversation about race because, by the end of the conversation, they're afraid that somebody's going to have their hand out, asking for something.

And a lot of us black folks can be just as reluctant to expose our own vulnerabilities on issues that call for personal responsibility.

Obama received a lot of praise early in his campaign for "transcending race," whatever that might have meant to those who said it.

I think quite a few folks made the mistake of thinking that "transcending race" meant that Obama would take race off the table.

Wrong.

If getting rid of racial problems were that easy, we Americans would have done it long ago. Instead, before we can get beyond race, we have to work out some more racial issues.

*Page is a Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist specializing in urban issues. He is based in Washington, D.C.*

**COMMENTS**

Readers are solely responsible for the content of the comments they post here. Comments are subject to the site's [terms and conditions](#) of use and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or approval of the Houston Chronicle. Readers whose comments violate the terms of use may have their comments removed or all of their content blocked from viewing by other users without notification.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

**Most recommended comments**



**love522 wrote:**

Thermonuclear wrote:  
If obama wants to trnscend race, perhaps he should quit hanging around and endorsing race-baiters and racists.

-----  
You just proved the article's point!!

**4/10/2008 9:31:09 AM**

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)



**Thermonuclear wrote:**

If obama wants to trnscend race, perhaps he should quit hanging around and endorsing race-baiters and racists.

**4/10/2008 8:37:05 AM**

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Report abuse](#)

[Read all comments \(4\)](#)



**ADVERTISING:** [Contests](#) | [Fraudulent Ads](#) | [Information & Rates](#) | [Place An Ad](#) | [Singles In Houston](#) | [Yellow Pages](#) | [CHRONLINKS](#)

**CHRONICLE:** [Subscribe Now](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Buy Photos & Page Prints 2005-Present](#) | [Historic Page Prints 1901-2004](#) | [Chronicle in Education](#) | [Public Affairs](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)  [RSS](#)

**SERVICES:** [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Help](#) | [Registration](#) | [Report a Problem](#) | [Site Map](#) | [News Alerts](#) | [Newsletters](#)



**HEARST** *newspapers*