

Playing the Political Race Card

Inflammatory remarks led to accusations, resignations, apologies

by Aisha Jefferson

March 19, 2008 -- It may have been nearly two weeks since former Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro remarked to a small California newspaper that she attributed Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's success as a Democratic presidential nominee to his being a black male. But it seems to have been the starting point of the presidential campaign's focus on racial issues.

The Obama camp immediately cried foul, demanding that Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton denounce Ferraro's remarks and remove her from the New York senator's campaign finance committee. Repudiating claims that she's a racist and suggesting she's the victim of unfair treatment, Ferraro unapologetically defended her comments but stepped down from her post.

Clinton released a statement rejecting, repudiating, and deeply regretting Ferraro's comments. She also offered a series of mea culpa to the African American community. During the National Newspaper Publishers Association's presidential forum, Clinton apologized for remarks her husband, former President Bill Clinton, made in January that insinuated that Obama won the South Carolina Democratic primary because of his race, much like the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Up until now, Obama had not intentionally injected race into his campaign. But over the last couple of days, he called attention to the subject after negative news stories began circulating about controversial and racially charged comments made by his longtime pastor and spiritual adviser, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Wright recently left his post on the Obama campaign's African American Religious Leadership Committee.

During a speech on race and politics given Tuesday morning at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Obama threw down the gauntlet and openly addressed the United States' racial history and current racial situation, his biracial heritage, the black church, and Wright's political views, which he described as "wrong" and "divisive." At the same time, Obama said of Wright, "I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother."

Roland S. Martin, **author, columnist**, and radio talk show host and CNN contributor, says, "You know the problem with this campaign? We've gotten to the point of people issuing apologies, denunciations, repudiations-and you don't have people talking about facts anymore. You don't have people talking about the issues of the day, and that is what this has boiled down to."

Martin says Obama has to walk a fine line in reaction to potentially inflammatory situations mainly because of his stance as the candidate for change who doesn't engage in dirty politics; otherwise he could turn voters off. "People don't want him to be that kind of campaigner."

About Clinton's apologies to the black community, Martin says the New York senator was getting "all kinds of reaction and had to own up to it. Hillary Clinton already had a difficult time getting African American voters." He believes that Clinton will continue concentrating on luring middle-class white women and blue-collar voters to the polls. "That's her focus; pure and simple."

Weighing in on the Ferraro fallout, Ronald Walters, professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland at College Park, says her comments were "a crude attempt to explain why Barack Obama is doing as well as he is. And a lot of whites have fallen into that, some blacks too, because they don't quite understand what he means by change." Ferraro's remarks overlook Obama's primary election victories in states such as Wyoming and Iowa, which have overwhelmingly white populations, he adds.

Walters predicts that Obama will start "really focusing on the economy because he realizes that's the one thing he got beat out in Ohio." Martin says that in the next five weeks leading up to the Pennsylvania primary, both campaigns will have to spotlight the economic hardships many voters, regardless of their race, are facing.

In spite of their hopes that the campaign will shift to concentrate on more pressing issues such as the economy and the Iraq War, among others, Martin and Walters believe the drama has just started. "I think you have elements on the Republican side that want to keep it going . we're just seeing the beginning of this. . There's no doubt in my mind that we're going to continue to see a lot of this," Martin says. Walters agrees, "The closer [Obama] gets to really winning this thing, it's going to frighten a lot of people.

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