

“WELL, IT IS BECAUSE HE’S BLACK”: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK  
PRESIDENT IN FILM AND TELEVISION

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## ABSTRACT

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With the election of the United States' first black president Barack Obama, scholars have begun to examine the myriad of ways Obama has been represented in popular culture. However, before Obama's election, a black American president had already appeared in popular culture, especially in comedic and sci-fi/disaster films and television series. Thus far, scholars have tread lightly on fictional black presidents in popular culture; however, those who have tend to suggest that these presidents—and the apparent unimportance of their race in these films—are evidence of the post-racial nature of these texts.

However, this dissertation argues the contrary. This study's contention is that, though the black president appears in films and televisions series in which his presidency is presented as evidence of a post-racial America, he actually fails to transcend race. Instead, these black cinematic presidents reaffirm race's primacy in American culture through consistent portrayals and continued involvement in comedies and disasters. In order to support these assertions, this study first constructs a critical history of the fears of a black presidency, tracing those fears from this nation's formative years to the present. This history is followed by textual analyses of those films and television series featuring a black president, with an emphasis on showing how the narratives and codes within these films reflect those historic fears.

In Memory of Carol Lombard (Watson) Cunningham (February 22, 1944—May 2, 2007)

Greatest. Mom. Ever.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
Filling the Void: Situating the Black President in Film Studies .....	3
CHAPTER I: THE THING SO GREATLY FEARED: HISTORICIZING FEARS OF A BLACK PRESIDENCY .....	12
Harding, Jefferson, and Lincoln: White Presidents as the First “Black” Presidents.....	14
Fear of a Black Republic.....	30
From Impossible to Improbable.....	38
Jesse Jackson and the Changing Face of Politics.....	48
Powell for President.....	51
Return of the Black Cinematic President.....	55
CHAPTER II: BEING BLACK MATTERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAN .....	58
<i>The Man</i> and the Apparently Declining Significance of Whiteness and Racism .....	60
Black Militancy as Barrier to Racial Harmony.....	70
Douglas Dilman: “A Well-Dressed Rebuttal to the Militants” .....	74
CHAPTER III: THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENTS IN CRISIS .....	81
Fear of a Black President: The Birth of a Nation as Precursor .....	83
From <i>Deep Impact</i> to <i>2012</i> : The Black President in Crisis .....	88
Modern Day Ben Camerons: White Heroes in Black Presidential Films .....	97
CHAPTER IV: THIS COUNTRY IS UPSIDE DOWN! THE ABSURD BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENT .....	107
Not Exactly Ideal Presidents: <i>Rufus Jones for President</i> and <i>Idiocracy</i> .....	109
“ <i>That Ain’t Right</i> ”: Black Cinematic Presidents and the Act of “Laughing Mad” .....	121
EPILOGUE: POLITICS AS USUAL: BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENTS IN THE OBAMA AGE. ....	134
WORKS CITED .....	150

## INTRODUCTION

In a *Los Angeles Times* story that appeared shortly after Barack Obama became the likely Democratic nominee for president of the United States, actor Dennis Haysbert, who played President David Palmer in the hit television series *24*, stated, “Frankly and honestly, what my role did and the way I was able to play it and the way the writers wrote it opened the eyes of the American public that a black president was viable and could happen” (Braxton, “Black Like Them”). Legendary actor and comedian Bill Cosby, in his role as family man Cliff Huxtable, has also been implicated in Obama’s success (Braxton, “Talking Obamas, Huxtables”). Cosby himself seems to agree, noting, “I would not be surprised with the comfort level of people looking at a family and not being afraid of them, and not holding them to some strange old thoughts of a nation... It’s what people have done with themselves by watching that show and believing in it” (Arango). In either event, representations of black presidents (and, if Cosby is any indication, of upper middle class black professionals) in popular culture are thought to have had some influence on Obama’s electability.

Of course, this effect is not without coincidence, for as Gary Harmon suggests, popular culture consists of “the arts, rituals and events, myths and beliefs, and artifacts widely shared by a significant portion of a group of people at a specific time” (63). Prior to Obama’s assuming the presidency in 2009, popular culture—particularly film and television—was the only realm in which a black United States presidency had been realized. True to Harmon’s definition of *popular culture*, these depictions largely reflect beliefs about black leadership.

Surprisingly, despite the American presidency’s high visibility and importance and the saliency of race in American culture, cinema’s rendering of a black president has received scant treatment in scholarship. Thus far, the origins, meanings, and implications of the black cinematic



president outside of their contributing to Obama's election have yet to be seriously considered. Granted, outside of the context of a realized black presidency and given the relative infrequency of a black president in film, scholars have had little impetus to seriously consider these matters.

However, outside of the relatively infrequent appearance of the black president in film and television, another reason scholars have tread lightly on the subject is that they seem to envision the cinematic black president as a positive. For instance, of Morgan Freeman as President Beck in *Deep Impact* (1998), Mark Sachlaben and Kevan M. Yenerall write in *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics through Film & Television*, "While not the over-the-top hero president of *Independence Day* or *Air Force One*, Freeman's sober, somber, and steady chief executive reflects a fairly positive view of the presidency" (96). It is important to note that the authors only distinguish Freeman's Beck from his counterparts in other presidential films of the late-1990s by indicating he was not an action hero president; there is no mention whatsoever that Beck is black. That the authors fail to mention that Beck is African American is quite surprising, especially given that he is only the fourth black cinematic president in film history and is the second black cinematic president to appear within nearly three decades by the time *Deep Impact* was released.<sup>1</sup>

That Sachlaben and Yenerall do not draw attention to President Beck's race is likely due more to the prevailing trend among the few film scholars who do discuss *Deep Impact*: These authors see a black president as evidence of the virtues of color-blindness. For instance, of *Deep Impact*, Charles P. Mitchell writes in *A Guide to Apocalyptic Film*, "The best feature of *Deep Impact* is the overall strength of the cast. Morgan Freeman is outstanding as President Beck. Since few analysts doubt that Colin Powell would have been electable as president in 1996 had

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to *Deep Impact*, only three films—*Rufus Jones for President* (1933), *The Man* (1972), and *The Fifth Element* (1997)—featured a black president.

he chosen to run, the question of race is no longer a major issue, and it is refreshing that Beck's background is not even mentioned in the course of the film" (52). Outside of *The Man* and the black comedic interpretations of a black presidency such as the Chris Rock vehicle *Head of State* (2003), similar comments can and have been made about many of the other films and television series featuring a black president. Indeed, that issues of race rarely dog the black cinematic president and that audiences favorably view what appears to be a coincidentally black cinematic president seemingly lends credence to the idea that film can be a space for post-racial narratives.

However, as this project argues, though he exists within narratives in which race often goes unmentioned, the black cinematic president ultimately fails to transcend race and, instead, reifies its saliency in American culture through his continued involvement in absurd, disaster, and dystopic storylines that essentially equates his presidency with disruption and doom. Just as the enthusiasm for Obama and the hopes for a post-racial nation cannot be divorced from harsh realities, depictions of the black president cannot be separated from the persistent fears of a black presidency.

### Filling the Void: Situating the Black President in Film Studies

The year 1933 would prove to be pivotal for cinema's portrayal of the American president. By all accounts, the first fictional cinematic president, Judson Hammond of *Gabriel over the White House*, debuted that year. Though there had been several films featuring actors as actual presidents such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, for example, film would not begin presenting its imaginings of the perfect (or imperfect) fictional president until *Gabriel over the White House*. However, Judson Hammond would not be the only fictional president to appear that year, for September 1933 would see the debut of the short film *Rufus Jones for President*, which featured not only Hollywood's first black president but also the film debut of one of

America's greatest entertainers, Sammy Davis, Jr., in the title role. While *Gabriel over the White House* has been covered extensively in scholarship, nothing has been written about *Rufus Jones for President*.

While there is no shortage of scholarship on politics in film in general and the American president in film specifically, the black cinematic president thus far has received scant or cursory mention. For example, in *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, Ian Scott only briefly mentions *Deep Impact* in his discussion of politics in 1990s films. None of the films featuring a black president are mentioned in Phillip L. Gianos' *Politics and Politicians in American Film* (1998). While *24's* President David Palmer is discussed extensively in the edited collection *Reading 24: TV against the Clock* (2007), the emphasis is more on Palmer as a plot device and less on Palmer as a black president. In short, despite the substantial amount of scholarly inquiry on the cinematic president, the black president is largely absent in these studies. Thus, one of the primary goals of this project is to fill in this gap by providing a more exhaustive examination of the black cinematic president than currently exists.

Nevertheless, despite this glaring dearth of scholarship on black presidents, the current literature on the president in film proves quite useful in discerning not only a space in which this project can prove useful but also a means in which to justify some of the project's main assertions. Most importantly, a review of the literature allows one to see to what degree the construction of the black president is mostly antithetical to that of his white predecessors and counterparts.

First and foremost, as one might imagine and as the literature confirms, fictional (and, in most cases, actual) presidents have been depicted in a rather positive manner. Mark Sachleben

and Kevin M. Yenerall write in *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics through Film and Television* (2004)

By and large, American films prior to the 1990s presented a very positive portrayal of both the individual and the institution. Presidents were commonly depicted as steadfast and heroic in times of crisis and common men who rose to uncommon greatness. Even when presidents were initially depicted as flawed or less than extraordinary, they often, when faced with certain serious situations, could rise to the occasion and redeem themselves and the country. (86)

Indeed, while Sachleben and Yenerall's contentions that more negative portrayals of the president would rise in the late 1990s are true, historically, such portrayals are fairly new. Furthermore, even in the midst of those negative portrayals (such as *Primary Colors* (1998), the John Travolta vehicle that essentially is a fictionalized version of former president Bill Clinton's Whitewater scandal), emerged the action hero president, one who literally takes up arms to defend himself and the nation. As Ernest Giglio notes in *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film & Politics* (2005), such depictions of a heroic president are determined by an often-unrealized American ideal: "Recent Hollywood presidents, such as Bill Pullman [as President Thomas Whitmore] fighting alien invaders in *Independence Day* (1996) or Harrison Ford [as President James Marshall] socking it to hijackers who have taken over his plane in *Air Force One* (1997) reinforce a macho image that defies credibility as well as historical accuracy. Americans expect their presidents to reside in Camelot, but also mingle with common folk, be compassionate but act tough against external enemies, be human but not too seriously flawed" (120). In fact, the president often occupies a seat on the pantheon with other mythic American film heroes such as the cowboy and the soldier. One of the commonalities between these heroic

archetypes speaks volumes: They are all based within spheres of influence and reverence (the frontier, the battlefield, the White House) for which admittance to black men either has been denied or has been fraught with difficulty.

Of course, not every fictional cinematic president is portrayed in a positive light. A review of presidential films of the last decade reveals, for instance, a slew of cinematic presidents who fall short of the expectations of office. Films such as the aforementioned *The Day after Tomorrow*, which features a president willing to ignore aggressive climate change in order to maintain corporate interests, and even comedies such as *American Dreamz* (2006), which features a president who decides to become a judge on *American Idol*-style reality show to boost his low approval ratings, cast aspersions on the presidency. That both films appear during George W. Bush's administration is not coincidental: Both evoke criticisms of the administration frequently offered by Bush's political opponents (that being that his administration catered to corporate interests and that Bush himself was somewhat of a dimwit).

As the literature indicates, such linkages between the fictional cinematic and actual presidents have existed since *Gabriel over the White House*. For instance, as Michael G. Krukones notes in "Motion Picture Presidents of the 1930s: Factual and Fictional Leaders for a Time of Crisis," *Gabriel over the White House* and other presidential films of the 1930s reflected the populace's concerns about political corruption and advocated for tough, decisive leadership in troubling times: "Political leadership was perceived as being ineffective [during the 1930s], and there were even cries for some type of dictatorship for the nation... Political movies of the early 1930s reflected this mood of the nation. Politicians were portrayed as shysters and crooks, politics was viewed as a sham, and corruption was shown to dominate the entire political system" (149-150). The film's protagonist evidences both the ineffectiveness of leadership—he

begins the film as yet another run-of-the-mill, corrupt politician—and, once ordained by the archangel Gabriel, the strong leadership so desired by the American people. This dissatisfaction with politics generally and the office of the president specifically would emerge in film most prominently in the 1960s and would continue into the present.

As a result of these vacillating portrayals, two important points of inquiry regarding the black cinematic president arise: First, while the white cinematic president's portrayal often fluctuates (though, more often than not, he is revered), portrayals of the black cinematic president have remained static. Thus, one of the goals of this project includes discerning why these static portrayals are the rule of thumb in Hollywood. Second, given that the depictions of white presidents in film historically have been rooted in contemporary politics and often are in support of or opposition to whoever presides over the Oval Office, one must question to what contemporary issue(s) or person the black president's portrayal is tied, especially since we only recently elected the first person of color as president.

The virtual absence of blackness in the actual and fictional Oval Office as well as the lack of scholarship on black presidents in film is largely tied to the inherent whiteness of the presidency in both realms. In their essay on *The West Wing* (1999-2006), the popular NBC television series featuring Martin Sheen as President Josiah Bartlett, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles write of the presidency, "Conceived in a Constitution that wrote slavery into the founding of the Republic, and dominated for 213 [in 2002, the year in which the article was written] years by white men, the presidency is defined by its whiteness—a 'social location' that is 'perceived as if it had a normative essence'" (221). The primacy of whiteness in the Oval Office indeed went virtually without question until the late-1950s, when questions regarding the possibility of a predominantly white populace electing a black president first were broached. For

example, it would take until 1958 before the idea of a black president was taken under any serious consideration by most Americans. A Gallup poll taken that year asked, “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified man for President and he happened to be a Negro, would you vote for him?” (Gallup). As the poll results—only 38 percent of those polled answered yes—and the continued questions as to whether America is prepared for a black president even after the election of Obama suggest, the notion of an inherently white presidency has indeed waned yet still endured.

The inherent whiteness of the presidency is tied into the processes of normalizing whiteness in America that scholars such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks, Noel Ignatiev, George Lipsitz, and David Roediger (amongst others) have been addressing since the early-1980s. Understanding these processes—along with the act of making whiteness “strange”—are central in whiteness studies, one of the more recent trends in ethnic studies (Dyer 4). Given this and given the widely-held perception that the presidency is “a social location” of whiteness, some of the scholarship that has emerged from whiteness studies will prove particularly useful for this project.

A key aspect of whiteness studies has been the study of racial imagery. In *White* (1997), a formative text within the field, Richard Dyer emphasizes the importance of racial imagery: “Racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world. At what cost regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidised and sold, in what terms they are validated—these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery” (1). To the degree that racial imagery is important to these societal aspects, controlling the depiction and meaning of images and endowing images of

whiteness with normalcy and superiority has been crucial to whiteness. Thus, scholars justifiably have questioned how film functions in these processes.

Their conclusions are largely as one might imagine: Film is indelibly linked to the favorable construction and maintenance of whiteness in American culture. In *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema*, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster succinctly states, “[W]hiteness is a form of social control that erupts and continues to be reinvented in cinema. The white race, supported by laws based on skin color, was invented primarily as a form of social control, and it would be up to all forms of popular culture, including vaudeville, theater, and motion pictures, to maintain and further the construction of whiteness. It is thus important to remember that... social control is at the center of whiteness” (26). As such, it is of no surprise then that cinema, a field of whiteness itself, often is used to reify the whiteness of the presidency. After all, what better target is there than the highest office in the land? As Michael Coyne notes in *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* (2008), “[T]hough not overtly prone to white *supremacy*, Hollywood’s output [of political and presidential films] is often refracted through a prism of white *primacy*, and certainly white *centrality*. Most American films feature white heroes, and they frequently depict racial issues as problems for white society to solve” (13). In short, whiteness is embedded in both medium and genre.

With these factors in mind, this project attempts to offer a more comprehensive interrogation of the black cinematic president. Chapter I, “The Thing So Greatly Feared: Historicizing Fears of a Black Presidency,” provides an exhaustive overview of the fears of—and to a lesser degree, hopes for—a black presidency prior to Obama’s election and outside the realm of cinema and television. The chapter first examines the ways in which white presidents Warren G. Harding, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln were framed as black as a means to



delegitimize their candidacies or presidencies. Next, the chapter highlights the anxieties and hopes that surrounded black political ascendancy, particularly of those black men and women who either pursued the presidency or were considered likely candidates for the office.

In Chapter II, “Being Black Matters: A Critical Analysis of *The Man*,” the project provides a critical analysis of *The Man*, the 1972 political drama starring James Earl Jones as Douglass Dilman, a hapless black senator who becomes president through a series of unfortunate events. *The Man* is unique because it is the only political drama featuring a black president and is the only non-comedic film that attempts to address matters of race. However, as the chapter indicates, *The Man* reflects a particularly new right conservative ideology that attempts to reframe what the primary barriers are to a colorblind society and the election of a black president.

Given that two genres primarily dominate black presidential films and television series, the two chapters that follow critique the disaster thrillers and comedies in which a black president appears. Chapter III, “The End of the World As We Know It: Black Cinematic Presidents in Crisis,” focuses on the ways in which the black president frequently linked to impending doom in film and television. As the chapter asserts, the black president primarily serves as a harbinger of disaster that eventually must be assuaged or ended by white hero. Indeed, the chapter highlights the ways in which these disaster thrillers featuring a black president re-embody some of the central themes of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—the threat of national and racial ruin as a direct or indirect result of black leadership; the resurgence of a fallen white hero; the reunification of the disjointed white family; and the restoration of order—all while seemingly muting the importance of race.

Chapter IV, “This Country Is Upside Down! The Absurd Black Cinematic President” focuses on the comedies featuring a black cinematic president. The emphasis is on the portrayals of black presidents by legendary comedians Dave Chappelle, Richard Pryor, and Chris Rock and how these portrayals serve as effective means of social commentary. As one might imagine, their portrayals differ greatly from the two comedies—*Rufus Jones for President* (1932) and *Idiocracy* (2006)—from white filmmakers that, even if unintentionally so, present the black president as an object of ridicule.

The project concludes with the Epilogue, “Politics As Usual: Black Cinematic Presidents in the Age of Obama.” The Epilogue focuses on those fictional presidents—Matthew Santos of *The West Wing* and Eli Martinez of *The Event*—who are based on or appear during Obama’s presidency, respectively. Given the postracial narratives and rhetoric that have surrounded the Obama presidency, an examination of these series—particularly *The Event*, which debuted in 2010—serve as an appropriate conclusion. As the Epilogue suggests, the nation’s first black president thus far has had little effect on the way in which black presidents are portrayed; thus, these series featuring characters based on Obama exemplify the degree to which the postracial themes of black presidential films and series are false and illusory.

## CHAPTER I

### THE THING SO GREATLY FEARED: HISTORICIZING FEARS OF A BLACK PRESIDENCY

Given the increase in presidential films during Bill Clinton's presidency, scholars, of course, look to Clinton himself as impetus. For instance, Michael Coyne writes in *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*, "This [increase of presidential films during the Clinton administration] was perhaps in part fuelled by 'happy days are here again' sentiment indulged by Clinton supporters in Hollywood" (89). However, Mark Sachleben and Kevan M. Yenerall contend the opposite, highlighting the wealth of scandal during the Clinton administration as a reason for the increase of negative portrayals of the presidency: "[It] may not be much of a stretch to concur with... former Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos, who asserts that the 'new presidential thrillers have a common premise: crime and corruption are routine at the highest levels'" (107). This bifurcated view of Clinton's presidency becomes apparent when one considers the nature of the films based on Clinton. For example, *Dave* (1993) is a comedy in which everyman Dave Kovic (Kevin Kline), a doppelganger for President Bill Mitchell (also played by Kline), fills in as president while Mitchell recovers from a stroke induced by sex with his mistress. The Kovic/Mitchell character effectively captures Clinton's duality: on the one hand, he was revered greatly for his ability to connect with working class Americans; on the other hand, he was greatly demonized for his philandering. As films such as *Dave* and others such as *Absolute Power* (1997) and *Primary Colors* (1998) suggest, film's renewed interest in the presidency in the mid- to late-1990s is indelibly linked to Clinton's presidency, one that was equally filled with promise as it was fraught with scandal.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As did *Dave* before them, both *Absolute Power* and *Primary Colors* feature a Clintonian president noted for his populist appeal and his numerous affairs. The former film, however, is a political thriller while the latter is a

Not only does the Clinton administration coincide with the resurgence of the president in film, it also marks the reappearance of the black president in film. *The Fifth Element* (1997), in which Tommy “Tiny” Lister appears as President Lindberg, is the first film featuring a black president since *The Man* (1972), which featured James Earl Jones as President Douglass Dilman. A year later, Morgan Freeman appears as President Beck in *Deep Impact* (1998). It would seem that there is some relationship between Clinton’s election and the black cinematic president’s reappearance. As best articulated by author Toni Morrison in her (in)famous *New Yorker* article, Clinton often had been characterized as “the first black president”:

Years ago, in the middle of the Whitewater investigation, one heard the first murmurs: white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas. (“The Talk of the Town: Comment”)

Here, Morrison likens Clinton to black men particularly based on his humble beginnings and—as she would suggest later in her article—the highly publicized criticisms of his (hyper)sexuality. While Morrison’s article met with criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, it nevertheless has held some cachet with many Americans.

It is important not to overstate the degree to which Clinton’s presidency contributed to the increase of black presidents in film and television. In many regards, the portrayal of the black

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dramatic comedy. As scholars such as Ian Scott have noted, Clinton’s presence can be felt in many of the political films of the 1990s. Scott writes in *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, “In short, Clinton’s persona, his intuitive feeling for his public, for minorities, for those less fortunate and excluded from society, makes him stand out as a Dave Kovic or Andrew Shepherd in 1990s’ Hollywood parlance; alternatively his private life and political wheeler-dealing away from Washington also offer him as prime candidate to be Presidents William Haney from *My Fellow Americans* (1997) or Alan Richmond from *Absolute Power* (1997)” (156-157).

cinematic president during the Clinton years is incongruent with the ways in which Clinton himself was portrayed in the press and in film. Whereas Clinton's infidelity was a prime source of scandal and inspiration for several political films during his presidency, this theme is absent in the two films featuring a black president made during the Clinton era. Furthermore, neither of the black presidents of this era have Clinton's populist leanings.

As such, a set of questions arises: if America's "first black president" had a limited impact on the ways in which black cinematic presidents of the late 1990s were portrayed, what factors did? Furthermore, why—in his first two appearances after a nearly three decade hiatus—does the black president reappear in apocalyptic narratives, particularly when such was not the norm for presidents in films of this period? In short, if portrayals of the black president—unlike those of his predecessors—are not based directly upon the person presiding in office, then upon who or what are they based?

Portrayals of the black president are rooted in historical fears of and misgivings about black political ascendancy. As this chapter will assert, these fears and misgivings have been quite extensive and longstanding. In particular, it will focus keenly on fears and misgivings about of a black presidency before Obama's election. First, the chapter examines the ways in which white presidents have been framed as black by their political opponents in order to incite fear and resentment. Next, the chapter traces a pattern that suggests fears of a black presidency tended to arise at moments of great social or political uplift for black Americans.

#### Harding, Jefferson, and Lincoln: White Presidents as the First "Black" Presidents

The primary fault that critics have found in Morrison's comparison of Clinton to black men is that is a false analogy. For example, even as she argues that Morrison's comments have been taken out of context, Elizabeth Alexander writes, "African-American men have been

demonized for centuries without having done anything but be black men, while people of all political stripes would likely agree that Clinton put himself in a compromised position with the Lewinsky situation, even if the political reaction was out of proportion to his alleged ‘crime’” (“Our First Black President?”). In other words, the criticisms of Clinton’s sexuality, as overextended and hyperbolic as they may have been, were not based on fears, myths, or projections about an innate hypersexuality based on his race—as has been the case with black men—but rather on evidence of his actual extramarital affairs.

However, for the purposes of this study, the second and more recent criticism of Morrison’s remarks is that they ignore previous renderings of white presidents as “black.” If some affiliation with blackness, whether it be through some apparent advocacy for African Americans or an embracing of the pathologies assigned to African Americans, is any indication of a white “black president,” then Clinton is certainly not the first. In the wake of Obama’s election, the blackness—both figurative and literal—of previous presidents has been revisited. While the emphasis mostly has been on the figurative, there has been some added speculation as to the literal blackness of several presidents. As one might suspect, it is in this speculation that some of the strongest fears of a black presidency are realized.<sup>2</sup>

Such speculation was quite fervent during the presidency of 29th President Warren G. Harding. Sociologist William Estabrook Chancellor’s 1921 monograph of Harding is the first and most prominent investigation into Harding’s ancestry. Most accounts of Chancellor’s work on Harding also indicate the motivation for his extensive work on Harding’s genealogy:

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<sup>2</sup> Obama’s election opened up the floodgates of speculation and rumor of previous black presidents. Perhaps the most egregious and erroneous example of this speculation is the case of John Hanson. Hanson was a Maryland public official who became the first President of Congress under the Articles of Confederation in 1781. This Hanson has been confused with John Hanson, a Liberian senator in the mid-1800s. This mistake gained some attention in 2008, particularly when former presidential candidate/activist/comedian Dick Gregory posted an article advancing this idea on his website: [http://www.dickgregory.com/dick/14\\_washington.html](http://www.dickgregory.com/dick/14_washington.html).

Chancellor was an ideologue who objected to Harding's presidency partly because he believed Harding was African American. For instance, in *The Available Man* (1964), one of the first Harding biographies to briefly revisit Chancellor's work, Andrew Sinclair succinctly describes Chancellor's misgivings about Harding:

He claimed that Warren Harding was "big, lazy, slouching, confused, ignorant, affable, yellow and cringing like a Negro butler to the great," that he had been a deserter from the army had delirium tremens several times; that he was a Republican only because all Negroes were Republicans; that he was loose in sex morals, like all Negroes; and that if he became a good President, "we should, all of us, seek to marry our sons to colored girls; though, of course, not our girls to colored men." (170)

As Sinclair's summation of Chancellor's biography suggests, Chancellor was opposed to Harding on both racial and ideological grounds. However, as the above summary makes evident, Chancellor surmised that Harding's failures, politics, and threat could be ascribed to his blackness. Sinclair sees little justification in Chancellor's biography and notes, "Such marked racial bias confirmed that Chancellor's mind was disturbed and that his evidence was prejudiced and untrustworthy" (170).

Given that Sinclair believed that Chancellor's contentions amounted to little more than a "vile plot" by a racist ideologue, Chancellor's work is discussed only briefly in Sinclair's text (172). However, later scholars would give Chancellor's work more attention. The most cited and often criticized text to do so is Francis Russell's *The Shadow of Blooming Grove: Warren G. Harding in His Times* (1965). Russell provides more insight on Chancellor's racism, noting that Chancellor frequently railed against African Americans during his lectures as a professor of the

College of Wooster and advocated strict racial segregation and black disenfranchisement. Furthermore, Chancellor believed that “Harding’s candidacy... was an attempt to create a Haitian-type [black rule over a white minority] United States” (372). Russell also notes that Chancellor’s assault on Harding did not begin with the biography but on the campaign trail, where Chancellor followed Harding and distributed flyers—titled *The Right of the People to Know*—that spelled out the basis for his claims about Harding’s ancestry: Chancellor believed that Harding’s father Dr. George Tyron Harding, Sr., was biracial and that Harding’s great-grandmother Elizabeth Madison Harding was African American (372).

While Russell seems to be in agreement with Sinclair about the depth of Chancellor’s racism, he seems to disagree about the impact of the speculation about Harding’s ancestry set forth by Chancellor’s pamphleteering. While Sinclair suggests that Chancellor’s revelations only had a limited impact, Russell details the degree to which the rumors affected Harding’s campaign for president.<sup>3</sup> For example, Russell points to correspondence from George H. Clark, the chairman of the Ohio Republican State Committee, to Harry Daugherty, Harding’s lead adviser and later U.S. Attorney General, in which Clark indicates how prominent the speculation was in Harding’s native Ohio. Daugherty wrote, “It is everywhere. *It is affecting the woman vote.* We cannot get [Republican National Committee Chairman Will] Hays and the National Committee fixed on any questions of policy with respect to the matter” (404). In response to the traction these rumors were gaining, the Harding campaign called on promotions magnate Albert D. Lasker. In a rather poignant demonstration of damage control, Lasker “sent out elaborate Harding genealogies and issued a lily-white Harding family tree” to newspapers across the

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair further claims that Chancellor’s findings had little real impact, for “Nobody really believed that such a fine-looking, hawk-nosed, gray-eyed specimen could have Negro blood” (172).



country (404). The intent was clear—to establish Harding’s whiteness before Chancellor’s pamphlets became widely accepted.

However, the campaign trail would not be the only time in which Harding would have to denounce Chancellor, whose life had taken a turn for the worse in the aftermath of Harding’s election. As Russell notes, after Chancellor’s efforts to demean Harding on the campaign trail failed, Chancellor returned to Wooster where he immediately began work on the biography. In seclusion because of his vehement objections to Harding, Chancellor completed the biography and began promoting its pending publication in 1921. Harry Daugherty caught wind of Chancellor’s manuscript and immediately moved to suppress Chancellor’s work. Weeks after Daugherty had met with President Harding to discuss the matter, Secret Service agents and post office inspector C.S. Zimmerman arrived at Chancellor’s door and forced him to burn his manuscript. Afterwards, Chancellor fled to Montreal (Russell 432).

Nonetheless, this only slowed—not stopped—Chancellor’s efforts. After a year in self-imposed exile in Canada, he returned to Ohio with another copy of the manuscript. This time, however, the manuscript reached print via fly-by-night press. Russell characterizes the biography as a “mishmash of obsessive fantasies, lies, occasional shrewd political observations, and a number of facts unrecorded anywhere else” (529). Once again, Harry Daugherty intervened, and, according to Russell, “Agents of the Bureau of Investigation combed Ohio, buying, borrowing, or seizing every copy they could lay hands on” (531). The Bureau also confiscated and destroyed the unsold texts and the original printing plates. This time, Harding’s suppression efforts proved successful, as Russell notes that the biography “became one of the rarest bibliographical items in twentieth-century American history” (531).

While Chancellor's claims have been a source of some scholarly inquiry over the years, they largely have been unknown to most Americans. Between the suppression of Chancellor's manuscript and the host of other issues that dominated the Harding presidency (particularly the Tea Pot Dome scandal), Harding's ancestry had remained of little concern to the general public until Obama's election. Following Obama's election, however, historians such as Beverly Gage and Phillip G. Payne have revisited the topic.<sup>4</sup> Both authors speak to the need to substantiate whether Harding indeed had any black ancestry and to think about what historical implications it would have. Gage, for example, argues that the uncertainty about Harding's background makes it "worth thinking about why that truth has been so hard to come by for so long—about what makes it into our official history and what we choose to excise along the way." However, particularly for the purposes of this study, Payne asks the more intriguing yet troubling question: "[W]ould Harding's new racial identity serve as justification for his shortcomings as president?" (117)

Payne's reference to Harding's shortcomings is rather mild in light of how Harding is conceived in the court of public opinion. In short, Harding often is considered one of the worst presidents in American history. Should his black ancestry be confirmed, it would be interesting to see if the issues that hampered his presidency—a penchant for alcohol, alleged and confirmed affairs, cronyism, amongst others—are attributed to that ancestry. Certainly, Chancellor's work explicitly made such connections. However, despite his strong yet unconfirmed ties to a black ancestry, Harding is neither the first nor most prominent white president to garner the label of "Negro President" or have his ties to blackness presented as a threat to national and racial unity.

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<sup>4</sup> Other claims have been made about the possibility of Harding having some black ancestry. In 2005, Martha Stewart, a black Michigan schoolteacher, wrote *Warren G. Harding US President 29: Death by Blackness*, in which she claims Harding was her great-grandmother's first cousin.

In order to find the root of these fears of a blackened white presidency, one need look any further than one of the nation's Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson.

Unlike Harding, Jefferson did not face much questioning of his racial background during his campaign or his presidency.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, like Harding, his ideological opponents used Jefferson's links to blacks as a means to foster opposition against him. The Federalists, whose opposition to Jefferson had intensified after he won the 1800 presidential election, began using incidents in Jefferson's personal life as a means to chastise him. In this case, it was not a matter of Jefferson's ancestry but of his progeny with his slave Sally Hemings. As Fawn Brodie notes in *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), the first iterations of these attacks appeared in 1802 in the form of an anonymously written ballad published in *Port Folio*, a Federalist literary sheet. The ballad is written in the narrative voice of one of Jefferson's slaves and implies that, amongst other things, Jefferson preferred black women and that his preference would bring forth an imbalance that would lead to interracial marriage and black-led violence (Brodie 347).<sup>6</sup>

However, the most vitriolic attacks on Jefferson would come from noted muckraker James T. Callender, whom Brodie suggests "caused more mischief than any newspaperman of his age, and left the reputations of both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson badly

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<sup>5</sup> Rumors about Jefferson's ancestry did exist but failed to resonate during his lifetime. Much of the speculation, however, would emerge in the late 1800s with the arrival of "Shepherd Tom" Hazard's *The Jonny-Cake Papers*, which noted folklorist Richard M. Dorson describes as a "rich harvest of diversified folk-narratives... recalling the yarns, legends, traditions, and local lore of [Hazard's] beloved Narragansett country [southwestern Rhode Island]" (104). *The Jonny-Cake Papers* began appearing periodically as letters to the *Providence Journal* beginning in 1879. Within one of the folktales, Jefferson is referred to as "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father" ("Son of a Half-Breed Squaw (Quotation)"). According to David C. Coyle, this tale emerged from Paris Gardiner, a former Revolutionary War officer who recounted the tale to Hazard (69). This assertion apparently has no factual basis, yet it has been disseminated as truth, most notably by historian J.A. Rogers in his booklet *The Five Negro Presidents* (1965).

<sup>6</sup> A few stanzas from the ballad indicate as much. For example, one stanza suggests that Jefferson's alleged penchant for black women leads the slave narrator to believe that he should be entitled to wed a white woman: "For make all like, let blackee hab/De white womans... dat be de track!/Den Quashee de white wife will hab/And massa Jefferson shall hab de black." The next stanza suggests a subsequent black uprising: "Huzza for us den! We de boys/To rob, and steal, and burn, and kill/Huzza! Me say, and make de noise!/Huzza for Quashee! Quashee will/Huzza for massa Jefferson!" (Brodie 347).

charred” (315). In *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, Annette Gordon-Reed characterizes Callender as a “rabidly racist Scottish émigré” who often used his column in the *Richmond Examiner* to chastise the frequent and open coupling of white Virginians with their black mistresses (525).

In a stunning turn of events, Callender became a columnist for the Federalist *Richmond Recorder* in 1802. He began publishing the research he had been gathering on Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings on September 1, 1802. In the first attack of many, Callender wrote:

It is well known that the man, whom it delighteth the people to honor, keeps and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is SALLY.... By this wench Sally, our president has had several children. There is not an individual in the neighbourhood of Charlottesville who does not believe the story, and not a few who know it. (Brodie 349)

The piece contained all of the hyperbole, misinformation, and passionate rhetoric for which Callendar had been known. Gordon-Reed notes, for example, that Callender purposefully fails to mention that only two of Hemings’ five children born before 1802 had survived, for “Telling his readers, in the midst of articles meant to be jeering and hostile, that Hemings had once had five children, but that only two survived, might actually have triggered some empathy with her” (555).<sup>7</sup>

As harsh as the first article was, it paled in comparison to articles that would appear only a few weeks later. In these later articles, Callender amped up his attacks on Hemings herself—referring to her as “a slut as common as the pavement” and exaggerating the number of children she had to “fifteen or thirty gallants of *all colours*” (Brodie 350). However, Callender would also

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<sup>7</sup> In total, Hemings is believed to have had six children with Jefferson, four of whom lived past childhood.

heighten the rhetoric of potential racial ruin in these later articles. For instance, Callender presented miscegenation by the president as disastrous for the nation: “If eighty thousand white men in Virginia followed Jefferson’s example... you would have FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND MULATTOES in addition to the present swarm. The country would no longer be habitable, till after a civil war, and a series of massacres. We all know with absolute certainty that the contest would end in the utter extirpation of blacks and mulattoes” (Brodie 350).

Callender’s articles were widely disseminated in Federalist newspapers, and while the vitriolic nature of his remarks went unmatched, the floodgates opened for Jefferson’s political opponents. Some of the attacks came from northern Federalists who used the revelations about Jefferson’s relationship with Hemings to further attack the institution of slavery. For instance, former President John Adams wrote that Jefferson’s children with Hemings were “a natural and almost unavoidable consequence of that foul contagion in the human character—Negro slavery” (Brodie 353). Nonetheless, as James Hill asserts in “The Press and the Sally Hemings-Thomas Jefferson Story: 1802-2001,” the majority of those who reprinted Callender’s articles or lampooned Jefferson on the matter were not being altruistic: “The underlying issue appears to have been the inferiority of a black slave juxtaposed to the Caucasian pedigree of President Thomas Jefferson. In this perspective, whites are lowered in status by an association with blacks, but blacks are never elevated in return.”

Jefferson’s relationship and children with Hemings would not be the only instance in which Jefferson’s connection to blackness would be of great concern to the American populace. While panning Jefferson’s relationship with Hemings, satirical poet Thomas Green Fessenden—under the pseudonym Christopher Caustic—hints at the larger issue:

And if, by example, he goes

To recommend the raising negroes,  
 The chance is surely in his favour  
 Of being President forever.

A southern negro is, you see, man  
 Already three fifths of a freeman,  
 And when Virginia gets the staff,  
 He'll be a freeman and a half!

Great men can never lack supporters  
 Who manufacture their own voters;  
 Besides, 'tis plain as yonder steeple  
 They will be *fathers* to the *people*. (106-107)

Here, Fessenden is making light of an issue that foremost Jeffersonian scholar Gary Wills suggests “was at the very core of sectional division in the country”: the three-fifths compromise that provided for counting slaves as three-fifths of a person when determining representation in the House of Representatives and the distribution of taxes (2). As Wills notes, Jefferson’s presidential victory over John Adams in 1800 was partly due to the three-fifths compromise, which awarded Jefferson at least twelve votes in the Electoral College (2).<sup>8</sup> As such, Jefferson’s Federalist opposition grew increasingly concerned about the effect the compromise could have on future elections.

From this Federalist disdain for the three-fifths compromise emerged the notion that Jefferson was a “Negro president.” The term was coined by Timothy Pickering, a former

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<sup>8</sup> Wills writes, “Though Jefferson, admittedly, received eight more votes than Adams in the Electoral College, at least twelve of his votes were not based on the citizenry that could express its will but on the blacks owned by Southern masters” (2). Adams won the popular vote.

Secretary of State under Washington and Adams. Pickering, like many of his Federalist compatriots, feared the growth of “slave power,” or the prospect of states that permitted slavery maintaining a hold on the presidency and Congress as a result of the compromise. Pickering, like many Federalists, argued that with the proliferation of this “slave power,” a seemingly likely occurrence given the growing number of slave states after the Louisiana Purchase, the North would have to consider secession from the Union. Hence, in 1804, Pickering wrote, “Without a separation, can those [New England] states ever rid themselves of Negro Presidents and Negro Congresses, and regain their just weight in the political balance?” (Wills 5)

It is important to note, as Wills does, that Pickering and the Federalists’ use of the terms *Negro president* and *slave power* were not to be taken literally (3).<sup>9</sup> After all, their fear was not of black rule—though those fears did abound. Pickering, a staunch abolitionist who even advocated for continued support of a post-revolution Haiti, was not interested solely in fighting slave power on the grounds of opposing slavery: his primary goal was to protect New England’s commercial and political interests (Wills 106). Whatever the case may be, one can see in the Jefferson presidency the beginnings of black representation—albeit representation by proxy in this instance—being conceived as a threat to nation and to whiteness.

However, the literal and figurative ties to blackness that hounded Harding and Jefferson were exacerbated in and most prevalent during Abraham Lincoln’s presidency. As one might imagine, many of Lincoln’s political opponents certainly harbored racial animus and utilized it as an effective means in which to build resistance to his presidency. As such, linking Lincoln to blackness became a key strategy for his opponents, even as early as Lincoln’s Senate career.

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<sup>9</sup> Wills writes, “They did not mean the power that plantation owners exerted over their black slaves, or the power slaves might someday use in retaliation. They meant the power that slave states wielded over non-slave states” (3).

Dorothy Wickeden highlights the early embrace of this strategy by Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln's opponent for the Senate in 1858 and for president in 1860:

Race was the issue that launched Lincoln's career in national politics... Douglas charged that the Negro race was inferior and thus not entitled to the inalienable rights accorded to whites. Conservative voters responded enthusiastically when Douglas referred to Lincoln as a "black Republican" and an extreme abolitionist (like 'Fred. Douglass, the Negro') who was advocating intermarriage and Negro suffrage and officeholding." (103)

While he was not the first to be labeled as a "black Republican," Lincoln, as the preeminent member of the party most vehemently pushing for the abolition of slavery, certainly would become the person most often associated with the term.<sup>10</sup> Though for many other Republicans, the term simply referred to their abolitionist stance, for Lincoln, the term would take on even deeper meanings and consequences. Lincoln's election as a "black Republican" was impetus enough for Southern states to begin the process of secession (Cauthen and Power ix).<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Harding, Lincoln apparently did not have to debunk any published genealogies suggesting that he may have had black ancestry.<sup>12</sup> However, his political opponents often explicitly stated or implied that he had black ancestry. These assertions likely came easy due to Lincoln's physical appearance. By most accounts, including Lincoln's own, he was particularly

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<sup>10</sup> The term *black Republican* was used first in Wisconsin in 1854, the year in which the Republican Party was formed.

<sup>11</sup> In 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union. In *South Carolina Goes to War, 1860-1865*, Charles Edward Cauthen and J. Tracy Power attribute South Carolina's decision on Lincoln's being a "black Republican": "In 1860, with the election of a 'Black Republican' president, the radicals finally found the justification they had sought for so many years and convinced moderates, cooperationists, and even Unionists to join them" (ix).

<sup>12</sup> However, there seemed to be particularly great interest in Lincoln's ancestry near the turn of the 20th Century, with several investigations as to who was Lincoln's father. William Eleazar Barton's *The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln* (1920), for instance, investigates the possibility of seven different fathers while also conceding that "It would have been possible to increase the number beyond seven" (21). Nonetheless, Barton's book was only one of a slew of books that investigated Lincoln's parentage between the late 1800s and the early 1900s.



dark-skinned.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Lincoln's political opponents surmised that Lincoln was at least part-black and often depicted him as such, particularly in political satires and scathing editorials.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, when his opponents were not claiming Lincoln was African American, those around him, particularly his mother Nancy Hanks and his vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, were frequently defamed as "mulatto."<sup>15</sup>

However, much of these assertions of Lincoln's blackness were based more on his political leanings than his actual appearance—though the latter was often alluded to in derogatory terms not unlike those that have been directed towards black men. For instance, many Democrats often referred to Lincoln as a "gorilla."<sup>16</sup> Among that number was his own Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who frequently referred to Lincoln as the "original gorilla" and once stated, "[French anthropologist Paul] Du Chaillu was a fool to wander all over Africa in search of what he could find so easily in Springfield, Illinois" (Sumner 20). When Lincoln was not being called a "gorilla" himself, he often was mentioned in articles in which African Americans were likened to gorillas. For instance, historian William Hanchett notes, "A Maryland editor noted in February 1865 that a black man had preached before the state's House of

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<sup>13</sup> Lincoln wrote of his own features, "If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said that I am in height six feet four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing, on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds, dark complexion, with coarse black hair and gray eyes" (Brooks 167). Numerous accounts of Lincoln's physical appearance reaffirm Lincoln's self-description.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Lincoln historian Harold Hozer notes that "[S]everal caricatures hinted that Lincoln had African heritage. One plate by Baltimore etcher Adalbert J. Volck showed the president as an Arabian dancer, veiled to conceal his ethnic features. And in an anonymous 1864 campaign cartoon, he was an actor on stage, portraying Shakespeare's evil Moor, Othello" ("Abraham Lincoln Takes the Heat").

<sup>15</sup> As evidence of these rumors, the official U.S. Senate site biography on Hamlin notes, "Robert Barnwell Rhett, editor of the Charleston [S.C.] *Mercury*, wrote that 'Hamlin is what we call a mulatto. He has black blood in him.' An amused New Yorker, George Templeton Strong, observed that Hamlin seemed 'a vigorous specimen of the pure Yankee type. His complexion is so swarthy that I cannot wonder at the demented South for believing him a mulatto.'" Rumors of Hamlin's being biracial seemed to have some traction in the South. For instance, record has Confederate Secretary of the Treasury Christopher G. Memminger publicly declaring at the Georgia capital building in Milledgeville "that HANNIBAL HAMLIN, or, as he is called there. 'Cannibal' HAMLIN, was a mulatto—that the North had elected an Abolitionist to be President, and a mulatto to be Vice-President" ("House of Representatives, The National Troubles").

<sup>16</sup> While many of the gorilla insults towards Lincoln were racist in nature, some used the term to refer to Lincoln's apparent lack of refinement. For instance, even Lincoln admirer and New York diarist George Templeton Strong one wrote of Lincoln, "He is a barbarian, Scythian, yahoo, or gorilla, in respect of outside polish" (Cmiel 119).

Representatives. ‘Shall we have a civilized gorilla next?’ he asked. ‘How long before Lincoln will invite them [blacks] to diplomatic dinners and lead the way to table with a greasy wench hanging on his arm?’” (13).

However, when C. Chauncey Burr wrote that Lincoln was a mixture of “two grains of sense, fifteen grains of nonsense, eight grains of smut, eleven grains of mirth, and twenty pounds of lamp-black, mix well together, and pack loosely on the skin of a gorilla,” he was not only racializing Lincoln but also offering a harsh critique of his ability to govern (144). Perhaps the most virulent attacks on Lincoln that either marked him as black or as a tyrant acting on the behest of blacks came from Burr, editor of the anti-abolitionist and anti-war journal *The Old Guard* and one of the more outspoken opponents of the Lincoln administration. Burr, an avid white supremacist, fueled fears of black equality and interracial marriage by constantly blackening—both literally and figuratively—Lincoln and suggesting that Lincoln was in favor of miscegenation, the end result of which would be total ruin.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in 1865, he wrote, “Abraham Lincoln proposed to change the relations of white men and negroes... in a word, Abraham Lincoln proposed to mongrelize American society, and thus destroy our civilization, as well as our political institutions” (“Union, Disunion, and Reunion,” 249). For Burr, the only means in which to reform the Union was to reconvene a convention of States in order to add a Constitutional amendment that “shall provide for a severe punishment of all abolitionists, and all other mischief makers, who wish to use the poor negro as a means of breaking the unity and destroying the peace of these States” (“Does Mr. Lincoln Wish to Save the Union?” 278).

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<sup>17</sup> *The Old Guard*’s full title was *The Old Guard, A Monthly Journal, Devoted to the Principles of 1776 and 1787*. As such, Burr saw himself as an adherent to the principles of the Founding Fathers, of whom he suggested founded the nation on the premise of white supremacy: “The supremacy of the white race, and the consequent subordination of the inferior or negro race, was one of the prominent ideas on which the Federal Union was established... It is proper to say that the Democracy has not adhered so tenaciously to this idea of white supremacy with any spirit of intolerance towards the inferior race, but only as a means of preserving our own race from the deplorable conditions of *hybridism*, and of saving our country from that mongrelism which has destroyed some flourishing republics” (“White Supremacy and Negro Subordination,” 193).

Though *The Old Guard* was only published between 1863 and 1867, it was well-received and highly regarded, receiving praises from the likes of famed Confederate General Robert E. Lee.<sup>18</sup>

Burr was not alone in racializing Abraham Lincoln. In 1863, the Copperheads, a group of Northern Democrats who also vehemently opposed the Civil War, produced *Abraham Africanus I: His Secret Life, As Revealed under the Mesmeric Influence; Mysteries of the White House*, a highly satirical yet venomous pamphlet that, amongst a host of charges, accuses Lincoln of creating a despotism. The pamphlet, a mixture of poems and prose, implies that Lincoln may indeed have some hidden black ancestry—amongst a whole slew of other secrets. The title is the most overt suggestion; however, the strongest allusion is within the narrative itself. While under induced hypnosis, Lincoln reveals that his legendary flatboat trip to New Orleans as a teenager was only the first of several, and that he often “picked up a good deal of money by dancing jigs and singing nigger songs” (*Abraham Africanus* 32). His inquisitors question why this has never been mentioned in any of his biographies, and Lincoln implies that it has all been stated but “only in different language” in other texts (*Abraham Africanus* 32). In other words, the narrative suggests that the evidence of his blackness is hidden in plain sight.

However, Lincoln’s secret black ancestry is not the only connection to blackness implied by *Abraham Africanus I*. Like Burr, the Copperheads accused Lincoln of being a hypocrite and lying about his intentions towards blacks in order to garner votes from those who would otherwise oppose him.<sup>19</sup> In the first few chapters of *Abraham Africanus I*, Lincoln is approached

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<sup>18</sup> In 1866, Lee wrote to Burr, “I am glad to know that the intelligent and respectable people at the North are true and conservative in their opinions, for I believe by no other course can the right interests of the country be maintained... Please accept my thanks for your advocacy of right and liberty and the kind sentiments which you express toward myself, and believe me to be” (Lee 225-226).

<sup>19</sup> Besides referring to Lincoln as Abraham Africanus I, the Copperheads apparently also often referred to Lincoln as “Nigger President,” according to Reverend H.K. Carroll in an article in *The Methodist Review*. Carroll writes, “The majority [of New Jersey residents] supported the call of the President for troops and many of them enlisted. But the minority belong to a cabal called ‘Copperheads,’ and rejoiced over the defeats which came to the Union armies, and treated the ‘Nigger’ President, as they called him, with contempt” (266).

by the Devil, of whom he proves even more deceitful and with whom he makes a pact to become president-for-life. In his conversation with the Devil, Lincoln reveals his fiendish plot to keep both abolitionists and conservatives in line: “We say it is necessary to the public peace that the negroes shall not be roaming about the country. That keeps them at work, and while their labor benefits the men I have appointed to cultivate the plantations, all of whom are creatures of mine, the measure will give assurance to the Conservatives that I am not in a hurry to emancipate” (*Abraham Africanus* 14).

The Copperheads would continue the *Abraham Africanus* meme in their subsequent publication *The Lincoln Catechism Wherein the Eccentricities & Beauties of Despotism Are Fully Set Forth: A Guide to the Presidential Election of 1864*. The cover of the pamphlet features a caricature of a black Lincoln with a wide, mischievous smile. The text itself is written in the form of a Catholic catechism, with a host of questions and answers, many of which suggest that Lincoln favors blacks to the detriment of the nation and whites. Among the first questions posed and answered are “By whom hath the Constitution been made obsolete? By Abraham Africanus the First... What is a President? A general agent for negroes” (*The Lincoln Catechism* 3). *The Lincoln Catechism* also offers a new set of Ten Commandments, a few of which assert that Lincoln seeks to make blacks superior to whites: “What are the Ten Commandments? Thou shalt have no other God but the negro. Thou shalt make an image of the negro, and place it on the Capitol as the type of new American man. Thou shalt swear that the negro shall be the equal of the white man” (*The Lincoln Catechism* 12). Later, it asserts that a Union victory in the Civil War will result in the reversal of fortunes for whites and that Lincoln encourages interracial coupling: “What is a negro? A white man with a black skin.... What is a white man? A negro with a white skin... What will be the affect of amalgamation? It is the doctrine of the Leagues

that a superior race will spring from amalgamation” (*The Lincoln Catechism* 27).<sup>20</sup> Lastly, it suggests that a Union victory will result in a drastic change: “Does the Republican party intend to change the name of the United States? It does... What do they intend to call it? *New Africa*” (*The Lincoln Catechism* 38).

Harding, Jefferson, and Lincoln were not the only white presidents linked to blackness by their political opponents. Calvin Coolidge, Dwight Eisenhower, and Andrew Jackson were also rumored to have some black ancestry. However, these rumors either failed to materialize during their presidencies or did not gain much traction when they did—certainly not to the degree in which they would in the presidencies of Harding, Jefferson, and Lincoln.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, as was evident in the administrations of Harding, Jefferson, and Lincoln, linking white presidents to blackness proved to be a useful—if ultimately ineffectual—ploy. Indeed, the fears of a blackened white president serve as a salient precursor to the fears that would emerge as an actual black presidency grew from impossibility to probability.

### Fear of a Black Republic

Despite the long-term unlikelihood of a black presidency, the fears of its possibility have existed nearly as long as the nation itself. As the references to Thomas Jefferson as “Negro President” suggest, the fears of blackness in the highest office in the land—even if by proxy—were nascent just a few decades after the Constitution was enacted. Interestingly enough, one can

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<sup>20</sup> Here, *The Lincoln Catechism* is referring to the Union League (also known as the Loyal League), a group of Lincoln loyalists. *The Lincoln Catechism* actually precedes a catechism released by the Union League in 1867, which was intended to court freedmen voters.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson was the only one who bothered addressing the rumors. Rumors of Jackson having black ancestry apparently emerged from Charles Hammond, who printed a series of handbills attacking Jackson that have become known as the “coffin handbills.” Among the many claims made in these handbills were that Jackson’s mother was a prostitute who eventually married a black man. Jackson addressed these rumors in correspondence with a friend: “Mrs. Jackson is not spared, and my pious Mother, nearly fifty years in the tomb, and who, from her cradle to her death, had not a speck upon her character, has been dragged forth by Hammond and held to public scorn as a prostitute who intermarried with a Negro, and my eldest brother sold as a slave in Carolina” (Coyle 127). Otherwise, much of the questioning of the genealogies of Coolidge, Eisenhower, and Jackson emerged after their presidencies.

look to Jefferson himself as both a recipient and as a provocateur of these fears. As Jefferson contended with his opponents' labeling him as a "Negro President," he was predicting doom in the wake of another revolutionary government forming in North America: the Republic of Haiti.

Slaves in what was then French colony Saint-Domingue began revolting against their masters in 1790. Under the leadership of freedman Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former slaves fought valiantly enough that the French government enacted unilateral emancipation in 1793. Though emancipation momentarily curtailed the insurrection, the success of such a massive slave revolt resounded throughout not only the Caribbean but also the United States. J. Michael Dash writes of the American reaction:

[T]he fear of slave insurrection ran deep in the white American imagination in the nineteenth century. Reports of carnage in St. Domingue; the arrival in 1793 of the first white refugees fleeing the war-torn 'French Island'; the restlessness among American slaves, when reports about the revolution in St. Domingue began to spread meant that the initial sympathy that existed among some would be swept away by the growing alarm in the United States over the potential for insurrection created by the Haitian example. (6)

Early American studies scholar Simon P. Newman also agrees that L'Ouverture's revolt frightened Americans, noting, "American blacks inspired by the Haitians were to be feared above all else. During the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century, white Americans were terrified that black revolutionaries would destroy liberty, property and society itself, bringing race war into the communities of the United States" (80). Among those white Americans was Thomas Jefferson.

In many regards, Jefferson's position on Haiti was paradoxical. Just as he sought to end slavery yet entered office as a result of its power, so did he support revolutionary-created governments yet opposed the one that eventually led to the formation of the Republic of Haiti. Historian Conor Cruise O'Brien suggests that, for a time, Jefferson had a "near manic enthusiasm" for the French Revolution and that it was "of central importance to [Jefferson's] thought and emotions... and also to his far-reaching political calculations" (xii). However, as one might suspect given that he was a Virginia plantation owner himself, Jefferson shared some of the Southern planters' fears of slave revolt. Jefferson concurred with others such as then-Virginia governor James Monroe, who stated that "scenes which are acted in Saint Domingo, must produce an effort in all the people of color in this and the States south of us, more especially our slaves, and it is our duty to be on guard to prevent any mischief resulting from it" (Newman 83). The rebellions confirmed Jefferson's fears that emancipation would lead to a race war "which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race" (Matthewson 225, Newman 79).<sup>22</sup>

However, the end of the slave revolts and the establishment of a republic did not assuage Jefferson's fears. Perhaps nothing is more indicative of Jefferson's aversion to Haiti than his decision to reverse the United States' diplomatic and trade agreements with Haiti after he took office. Northern Federalists—particularly the aforementioned Timothy Pickering—actually supported American interaction with Saint-Domingue and, later, Haiti. Donald R. Hickey writes that Pickering and the Federalists "believed that Toussaint [L'Ouverture] was 'a prudent and

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<sup>22</sup> Gabriel's Rebellion, named after the literate slave Gabriel who organized it, was inspired by the rebellion in Saint-Domingue. According to Douglas R. Egerton's *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802*, the most extensive look at Gabriel's Rebellion, "Saint-Domingue served as an inspiration to Gabriel and completed his development" (48). However, torrential rainfall plus a traitorous fellow conspirator ultimately quelled the rebellion. Nonetheless, the rebellion, which was well-planned and had rallied nearly 1,000 slaves in support, posed enough of a threat to Virginia planters that they largely reversed their growing willingness to ease their treatment of slaves.

judicious man possessing the general confidence of the people of all colours’... ‘Nothing is more clear,’ [Pickering] wrote in 1799, ‘than, if left to themselves, that the Blacks of St. Domingo will be incomparably less dangerous than if they remain the subjects of France’” (365). As Hickey’s remarks make clear, Pickering and the Federalists shared the Southern planters’ concerns about the newly freedmen of Saint-Domingue conquering the South—albeit under the control of the French—but saw diplomacy and trade as the means in which to prevent this from occurring. While Pickering and the Federalists continued advocating for relations with the now independent republic of Haiti after Jefferson took office, it would be to no avail.

When Haiti’s first emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines sought to maintain the relationship Haiti had with the John Adams administration, Jefferson balked. Tim Matthewson writes of Jefferson’s relationship with Dessalines, “Jefferson's shift in policy arose from domestic considerations, and, in this context, recognition of Haiti was out of the question” (232). As a result of these “domestic considerations,” which were primarily Southern economic concerns and fears of slave revolts, Jefferson refused to officially recognize Haiti and cut all diplomatic and trade ties with the island, both of which were policies that would remain in place until 1862.

The formation of a black republic over a thousand miles away forced Americans to consider not only the threat of slave rebellions but also the possibility of black liberty within their own land. As Newman notes, “[T]he Haitian Revolution racialized the age of revolution, raising the possibility that liberty, equality, and fraternity could overturn slavery and extend republican liberty to all” (72). At the very least, one of the first major blows to slavery in North America—one struck by the slaves themselves—certainly made Americans acknowledge the likelihood of black republics within close proximity to their own. Even Northerners such as Charles Brockden Brown, early American novelist and editor and primary contributor to *The*



*Literary Magazine*, and *American Register*, expressed some trepidation over the potential of black liberty on American soil. After referring to blacks as “a lawless and ferocious race,” he suggests that blacks in America would “at some remote period, become what St. Domingo has already become, sovereign nations or communities of negroes, by whom the whites shall be tolerated, at one time, as useful guests, and persecuted, at another, as detested enemies” (Brown 656-657). Thus, while Americans were beginning to conceive of black republics formed in their own image, their conceptions were of republics outside of their bounds. The United States as a black republic or as one helmed by a black leader was still unimaginable, primarily because, as Brown and Jefferson’s comments suggest, blacks were more likely to destroy the union rather than to reign over it.

However, as the movement to abolish slavery in the United States began to solidify, so did thoughts of a black president. The white abolitionist movement began to take shape in the 1830s.<sup>23</sup> It would seem that the possibility of a black president was a part of the broader discourse on the effects of abolishing slavery, for a few abolitionist writers—particularly within the pages of much-heralded abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper *Liberator*—addressed this possibility. The most intriguing of the articles that did so was “A Dream,” written in 1831 by an anonymous author under the pseudonym “T.T.”

“A Dream” is a fictional narrative that takes place in a United States a generation ahead of T.T.’s own. After a few moments of daydreaming, during which time and space are seemingly distorted, the narrator notices an invitation to a gathering left on his table by an unknown party.

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<sup>23</sup> Historian Michael D. Pierson writes of the early white abolitionist movement, “Beginning in the early 1830s, white abolitionists attempted to prove that American slaves suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually at the hands of those who claimed ownership over them. They felt that they needed to convince the American public that slaves were badly treated. Time and again they argued the basic facts of southern plantation life: slaveholders divided families, legalized rape, and did not recognize slave marriages as legitimate... Masters beat slaves, denied them food and rest, and kept them from schools and churches. The most famous works of American abolitionist literature argue these ideas with passion, finding new ways to prove their points and to retell the stories of abuse over and over again” (383-384).

After arriving at the gathering, he is surprised to see blacks and whites mingling together on equal terms. Thereafter, the narrator learns that a black man has been elected as president, and it is his election that put an end to any notion of black inferiority. After meeting the president, “an intelligent looking black gentleman of most dignified aspect” and finishing his conversation with the other partygoers, the narrator heads home. However, as the narrator overhears the sounds of people celebrating the anniversary of emancipation, he awakens to find that he had been dreaming and that slavery is still intact.

“A Dream” is an important text for the purposes of this study for a few reasons. First, it is perhaps the first document with a narrative in which a black president is presented as the ultimate realization of an equal, color-blind society. In that regard, “A Dream” is a standard bearer for those filmic narratives featuring a black president that would emerge in the late 1990s in which the race of the president seemingly is of no consequence. Second, it presents the prototype for an acceptable black president in one who is “intelligent” and “dignified.”<sup>24</sup> As historian James Brewer Stewart suggests, T.T. most likely presented the black president of “A Dream” in this manner because being respectable “was an abolitionist value” (190). This narrative convention would also carry over into black presidential films, for, with a couple of exceptions, the black president is indeed often “respectable.”

However, not all abolitionist papers would address a black presidency as a net positive. While other *Liberator* articles would reaffirm T.T.’s narrative, articles in other abolitionist newspapers and journals would not.<sup>25</sup> For instance, in 1833, an article in *Christian Watchman*

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart mentions members of the black elite whom one might suggest served as models for the black president in “A Dream,” including wealthy Philadelphia businessman and black abolitionist James Forten and Reverend Peter Williams (197).

<sup>25</sup> The other notable *Liberator* article to argue in favor of a future black presidency is “The Prison Anecdote.” In an argument with a slaveholder, the author of the piece is asked by the slaveholder “Well, sir... how would you like to see a black man President of the United States?” to which he responds, “As to that, sir, I am a true republican, and

that presents a strong argument against slavery does so while presenting a black presidency as both unlikely and undesirable. After chiding his fellow Americans and Christians for their commitment to freedom and liberty while forsaking those of the slave, the author—writing under the pseudonym “N.B.”—addresses the problem of prejudice. He refers to a conversation he had with a “professor of religion” who says, “I am not conscious... of any prejudice against the blacks, but who wishes for a black President, a black Governor; or, who wishes for a black man to be seated in the drawing room with our daughters, and perhaps ultimately united with them in marriage?” N.B. replies, “To the question then, ‘who wishes for a black President,’ I answer, not one white man in a million. There is no probability, therefore, *the thing so greatly feared* [emphasis mine] will come upon us.” After the professor raises the probability of a black presidency in the future, N.B. responds:

Not, however, until these mere sloths in knowledge, (so considered) this comparatively fragment of our population, shall have outstripped us in point of number and qualifications. Not until a mighty and strong current of prejudice shall have changed its course. Not until the majority of our enlightened or eagle-eyed citizens shall desire it; nor even then, unless the black men consent. But, though there is a moral certainty that the evils feared will never take place; let us for a moment suppose such a period should at length arrive. Who shalt interfere with, or control the will of the majority of the free citizens of these United States? Our allowing some sixth part of our fellow citizens their unalienated rights, does not require that a man who resides in a body, deemed uncomely, should become

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bow to the will of the majority. If the people prefer a black president, I shall cheerfully submit; and if he be qualified for the station, may peradventure give him my vote” (191).

our President; it only allows *the people*, our only sovereign, to do as they please;  
to exercise their constitutional and unalienated right of suffrage. (1)

N.B.'s point is clear: A black presidency is undesirable and unlikely, yet the potential for a black presidency is no reason to withhold inalienable rights from the slaves.<sup>26</sup> While N.B.'s article does not present a black presidency as one that Americans should fear, it does highlight the degree to which many Americans perceived its possibility as something "greatly feared" and "evil." While N.B.'s article and those that appear in Garrison's *Liberator* diverge in their advocacy for a black presidency, they both serve as evidence that many saw emancipation as a gateway to a black presidency.

Emancipation did much to advance the thought of a black presidency from being unlikely to being probable. For instance, in the midst of the Civil War, "The Balance of Power," an article in the premier literary magazine *The Knickerbocker Monthly*, saw a black president as a definite outcome of continued Northern aggression towards the South. Written in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation, the second order of which had just gone into effect, the article equates emancipation with colonization: "If men remain unchanged in nature, and if the present policy towards the South and the Negro be preserved in and be successful, the only possible result is the colonization of a portion of the South by free negroes, and the prospect (very remote indeed) of a negro republic or a negro president" ("The Balance of Power" 409). While the article does not offer any musings about a black president, it does conclude that compromise—

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<sup>26</sup> A similar opinion would be advanced thirty years later in the midst of the Civil War in an article titled "Justice Not Dangerous" that appeared in *The Independent... Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* in April 1864. The article highlights the absence of black governors and legislators in Massachusetts, a state that permitted blacks to vote and run for office if they met the property requirements. As such, the unnamed columnist suggests that fears of a black president amounted to little more than "vivid fancy" and a severe case of "Nigger on the brain" ("Justice Not Dangerous" 4).

and thus not the continued aggression that would result in a black republic or presidency—is the better, more principled action.

However, the abolitionist zeal for and the white supremacist fears of a potential black presidency both were quieted by the harsh realities of post-Reconstruction America. The passage of the Fourteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866—both which granted citizenship to black Americans—and the Civil Rights Act of 1875—which granted equal access to public accommodations and transportation—and a whole host of other gains, including the election of hundreds of black legislators, were all nullified by the enactment of Jim Crow laws.

The passing of Jim Crow laws, state and local laws which hampered African Americans in nearly every aspect of life including suffrage, coupled with the Supreme Court's declaration of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 as unconstitutional in 1883 and upholding of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which set the precedent for separate but equal laws, eliminated whatever slim possibility that had existed for a black president. In fact, by the end of the 19th Century, black representation in government dwindled from a Reconstruction high in the hundreds to absolute zero by 1901. Furthermore, there would not be another form of civil rights legislation to be put into law until Dwight Eisenhower's Civil Rights Act of 1957, which established the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department and gave federal officials increased ability to prosecute those who would infringe upon voters' rights.

### From Impossible to Improbable

It should be of little surprise, then, that with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957—no easy feat given South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's record 24-hour filibuster—the possibility of a black president re-entered the popular imagination. For instance, just over a year after the act became law, New York Senator Jacob K. Javits boldly predicted a black

president in office by 2000 in a December 1958 article he wrote for *Esquire*.<sup>27</sup> He described this future black president in the following manner:

Undoubtedly, he will be well-educated. He will be well-traveled and have a keen grasp of his country's role in the world and its relationships. He will be a dedicated internationalist with working comprehension of the intricacies of foreign aid, technical assistance and reciprocal trade... Assuredly, though, despite his other characteristics, he will have developed the fortitude to withstand the vicious smear attacks that came his way as he fought to the top in government and politics those in the vanguard may expect to be the targets for scurrilous attacks, as the hate mongers, in the last ditch efforts, spew their verbal and written poison.

(Javits)

Here, Javits evokes the rhetoric of abolitionists such as T.T., who, as one might recall, constructed a black president steeped in “respectability.” He even follows in T.T.’s stead in presenting a narrative of a future generation in his introduction. Indeed, Javits—one of the more liberal Republicans in the Senate in his time—was a pro-civil rights senator in the mold of those abolitionist Republicans of the mid-1800s, having campaigned strongly for the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964.

It is likely, however, that Javits had been swept up in the euphoria of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957 when he wrote his article. While the new law did open the doors to increased black voting power, African Americans were still fighting for suffrage in districts throughout the country. The country had yet to face the violence of 1964’s Freedom Summer in

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<sup>27</sup> Along with the prediction of a black president by 2000, Javits makes a number of other predictions, including the election of a black senator and a black Supreme Court justice by 1968. Javits was right on both accounts as Edward Brooke would be elected as Massachusetts senator in 1966 and Thurgood Marshall would be appointed to the Supreme Court in 1967 (Gates).

Mississippi, in which civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were killed by Klansmen for attempting to get black Mississippians registered to vote. Furthermore, public opinion did not seem to be any indication of a greater probability that a black president would be elected in the near future. Polls from that period indicated that, by and large, Americans quite simply were not ready to vote for a black president, even one with whom they were ideologically aligned.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, Javits was not alone in the late 1950s-early 1960s in predicting a black president in the not-too-distant future. In a 1961 Voice of America broadcast addressing the anti-segregationist Freedom Riders movement, then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy remarked, “Now an Irish Catholic [President John F. Kennedy] is president of the United States. There is no question that in the next 30 to 40 years a Negro can be president, also” (“Broadcast Airs U.S. Race Clash”). Three years later, and just a few short months after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became law, Martin Luther King, Jr.—en route to receive his Nobel Peace Prize—predicted on a British television show that he believed that the United States would elect a black president within 25 years (“A Negro as President Foreseen by Dr. King”). King’s prediction was delivered after not only a landmark civil rights law was enacted but also after the third black presidential nominee of any party, Clifton DeBerry of the Socialist Workers Party, received over 30,000 votes in the popular vote.<sup>29</sup> His prediction also emerged at the height of his sociopolitical capital

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<sup>28</sup> A Gallup poll reveals that, when asked, “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified man for President, and he happened to be a Negro, would you vote for him?” 53 percent of the respondents answered “No”, 38 percent answered “Yes” and 9 percent expressed no opinion in 1958 (Gallup A6).

<sup>29</sup> The very first black presidential party nominee is George Edwin Taylor of the National Negro Liberty Party in 1904. The second is Clennon King of the Independent Afro-American Party in 1960. Both received less than 2000 votes nationally.

and at a time when his name was tossed—though not at his own behest—into the ring for presidency.<sup>30</sup>

Opinion polls seem to substantiate Kennedy and King's prediction. Just five years after a Gallup poll indicated that the vast majority of Americans would not vote for a black presidential candidate even if he or she were well-qualified and of the voters' party of choice, the same poll in 1963 showed a slight majority—47 percent in favor versus 45 in opposition—would vote for a black presidential candidate (Gallup A6). However, though these polls indicate a degree of progress, one cannot ignore a few tangible realities, the first being that black political leaders, especially King himself, were still considered highly dangerous by many—if not most—Americans; the second being that neither of the two most powerful political parties had ever offered a non-white presidential candidate; and the third being that the first black presidential nominee would not arrive until over four decades later. In short, this somewhat positive outlook on the potential of a black presidency was greatly assuaged by the improbability of a black person making it to candidacy.

The unlikelihood of a black presidential candidate was undoubtedly heightened by the tumultuous period of race relations following King's speech in Washington. This period culminated in the assassinations of both Robert F. Kennedy and King in 1968, the latter of which sparked riots in several major cities. African Americans were unable to capitalize on their

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<sup>30</sup> Just days away from the 1964 presidential election, King denounced a call for African Americans to cast write-in votes for him. In *Packaging the Presidency*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson suggests that this call was actually a last minute Republican ploy to strip the black vote from the Democrats: "[A] week before the election, a black implying that he was a Republican National Committee representative ordered 1,400,000 simulated telegrams urging blacks to write Martin Luther King in on their presidential ballots. The telegrams... were authorized by 'Committee for Negroes in Government, Louisville Kentucky'" (218). Jamieson also notes that, in that same week, a man representing this committee purchased radio ad time in Louisville for an ad that was broadcast "in eleven cities with large black populations" (218). The telegrams read, "We can vote for Dr. King for president. A write-in vote for Dr. King shows that Negroes are united. It will prove that Negroes will vote for the greatest Negro in America for president" ("GOP Denies Drive for King Write-In" 4A). King blamed GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater and denounced the ads as "a cruel and vicious attempt to confuse Negro voters and nullify their votes," charges which the Republican National Committee denied ("GOP Denies Drive for King Write-In" 4A).



newfound voting power, for the political capital of many of the black civil rights leaders had been spent. This is particularly true of King, who by 1968, was very unpopular among whites for his strong anti-war stance and had even lost a great deal of his black following as well.<sup>31</sup> This absence of voting power coincided with the relatively strong showing George Wallace, the segregationist former governor of Alabama, had in the 1968 presidential election.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the severe losses of 1968, other black political gains made a black presidency seem a little less unlikely. Certainly not lost in the furor of 1968 was the appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. Marshall's appointment proved to be quite divisive, in part due to his liberal leanings and in part due to his race. Given that he was most noted for successfully arguing for school desegregation in the now famous *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, Marshall was the target of conservatives and pro-segregationists. The more modest attacks against Marshall conceded that he was an "honorable man" and "a heartwarming success story," whose appointment would "drive civilized moderation and conservatism...right out of the hall of justice" whose appointment was "almost disastrous news" (White 8-B, Kilpatrick 4). However, by all accounts, his confirmation hearings were far worse. In "The Politics of Being First," Ellis Cose provides a succinct account of the racist tone in these hearings:

And as Northern cities burned, the old lions of the South fought the desegregation that the Supreme Court had told them was coming. James Eastland, a Mississippi

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Eric Dyson long has insisted that King's later politics have been erased in public memory. Dyson suggests that, after his 1963 speech in Washington, King's politics became far more complex and more troubling for many Americans: "It is convenient to forget that in 1967 King failed to make the Gallup Poll's list of the top ten most popular Americans. His growing radicalism was spoiling the canonization that had begun his career in earnest in 1964, when he won the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, when he was murdered, King was unpopular with white America and had lost his sure hold on huge segments of the black population as well" (Dyson 303).

<sup>32</sup> Wallace received over 9 million votes in the popular vote and 46 electoral votes. He soundly defeated Republican nominee Richard Nixon and Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey in a few Southern states, particularly his home state of Alabama and in Louisiana and Mississippi. Wallace appealed strongly to working class Southerners who felt that the civil rights movement was moving too quickly.

cotton farmer and avowed white supremacist, was one of those old lions...

[Arkansas senator John] McClellan set the tone during the first minutes of testimony with questions about the “reign of lawlessness and chaos” sweeping the country, and Eastland demanded to know what Marshall intended to do about it. At one point Eastland inquired of Marshall, “Are you prejudiced against white people in the South?” [South Carolina Senator Strom] Thurmond wanted to know whether the Constitution permitted shooting rioters on sight. He also subjected Marshall to a detailed cross-examination on slave codes, involuntary servitude, and other matters related to slavery. And he quoted an Ohio congressman who had observed in 1850 that “no sane man ever seriously proposed political equality to all, for the reason that it is impossible.”

However, despite the tone of the hearings, Marshall was confirmed by an overwhelming majority, 69-11. Furthermore, not all of the reactions to Marshall’s appointment were negative. Famed syndicated columnist Robert Spivack, for example, saw Marshall’s appointment offered not only the opportunity for “the recognition that comes after 177 years of waiting” but also gave whites the opportunity to “recognize that America’s Negroes are just as pluralistic as the rest of the nation” (4).

Equally as significant as Marshall’s appointment was the growing number of African Americans elected to Congress. Just three years after Marshall’s confirmation, Congress had 13 black representatives serving simultaneously, then an unprecedented number. These representatives went on to form the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), a body that charged itself with the duty of working and protecting black permanent interests. Within months of becoming a formal organization, the organization found themselves issuing a boycott of

President Richard Nixon's 1971 State of the Union address after he had refused to meet with caucus members (Office of History and Preservation). The CBC's fortitude caught national attention, which its members used to push for legislation that they believed was in the best interests of their constituencies.

With Marshall on the bench and black representation growing, Americans apparently grew less inclined to hold a presidential candidate's race against him or her. The aforementioned Gallup poll given in 1971 yielded remarkable results: 70 percent of respondents stated that they would vote for a well-qualified black person of their party if that person was the presidential nominee. Polling that year also revealed that only 24 percent of respondents would be less inclined to vote for a white candidate who chose a black person as his or her vice president (Gallup A6). However, these poll results belied the reality, for they arrived shortly after Democratic presidential hopeful and Maine Senator Edmund Muskie bluntly told a group of black California Democrats that a black running mate would make him unelectable. Few found it hard to disagree with Muskie, including John Marshall, who wrote in his national column, "It is very easy to talk about, to theorize, to advocate blacks for vice-president. But it is an unfortunate truth that this country's political establishment, right now, does not want a black man that close to the White House. Muskie knows it and he said it" (4).

"Muskie's truth," as John Marshall had dubbed Muskie's comments, must not have reached the ears of CBC members and New York Representative Shirley Chisholm. Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, formally entered the race for the presidency in January 1972. In her bid to become president, Chisholm became the first black woman to receive votes at the national convention of one of the two major political parties, earning 152 at the 1972

Democratic National Convention.<sup>33</sup> To make Chisholm's bid even more impressive, she managed all of this without many prominent endorsements, without a well-trained staff on-hand, and on a shoestring budget. As *The Nation*'s John Nichols states, Chisholm's audacious undertaking "challenged her party and her country to think more boldly than it ever had before about what the occupant of the White House should look like" ("Shirley Chisholm's Legacy").

Nonetheless, the boldness of Chisholm's campaign is only part of the legacy of her historic run for the presidency. The other is the great unlikelihood that she could have ever become president because she was both African American and female. As Chisholm herself notes in *The Good Fight*, her account of her historic run, she did not face much public scrutiny because political columnists and her opponents believed she had absolutely no chance of receiving the nomination:

To the extent that they noticed me at all, the movers and shakers wished only that I would go away. A wild card, a random factor that might upset some detail of their plans, an intruder into the real contest among the white male candidates. Their response was ridicule—in private, not in public, because a gentleman doesn't make fun of a lady and a politician doesn't want to risk losing the black vote. But their attitude came through clearly: treat her with respect, but of course you don't have to take her seriously. (3)

Chisholm was correct: Most of her opponents—both Democrat and Republican—spoke very little of her. Furthermore, despite her relatively strong showing, there was no talk of including her as a vice-president by the frontrunner and eventual Democratic nominee George

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<sup>33</sup> Chisholm is not the first black woman to run for the presidency, however. She was preceded by Charlene Mitchell, the Communist Party of the United States presidential nominee in 1968. She is also not the first black person to receive votes at the DNC: Channing Phillips received 67 votes in 1968 in the wake of Robert Kennedy's assassination.

McGovern.<sup>34</sup> Even the press treaded lightly on Chisholm by highlighting her role as an unlikely underdog and chronicling the enthusiasm of her supporters—all while reminding readers of just how unlikely it was that she could get elected.

As such, the Chisholm bid for the presidency not only represents the first relatively viable black presidential campaign but also confirms the degree to which the presidency is perceived as a white and a male space. Perhaps nothing is more indicative of the latter than the complete absence of black female presidents in popular film and television. Such a pronounced absence is certainly not surprising given that many of the fictional cinematic presidents are based on the person in office or, as is the case with most of the black presidents, an aspirant for office. As such, there are only a handful of films and series that feature black or female presidents, and none are women of color. Prior to Jesse Jackson, Chisholm was the first black person to receive any votes at a major party national convention as a result of an actual presidential campaign. Prior to Hillary Clinton's presidential bid in 2008, she had received more delegate votes at the Democratic National Convention than any other female candidate in history. Furthermore, other black female presidential candidates—most notably independent party candidates Lenora Fulani in 1988 and Cynthia McKinney in 2008—have received more actual presidential votes than women of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, despite her valiant and historic presidential run, Chisholm—and other black female presidential candidates—unfortunately has not served as a prototype for black or female cinematic presidents, and her legacy has failed to resonate with many Americans.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chisholm managed nearly seven times more delegate votes than Edmund Muskie (25), who had previously remarked that a black vice-president would hurt the Democratic ticket. She had the fourth most delegates among all who received convention votes, falling behind nominee McGovern, Henry Jackson, and George Wallace. It should be noted, however, that Chisholm received an undetermined number of black delegates from Hubert Humphrey.

<sup>35</sup> A 2005 PBS documentary on Chisholm's campaign, *Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*, brought Chisholm into the spotlight, albeit momentarily.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, black political power continued to grow yet the viability of a black presidential candidate remained in question. The 1976 election, for instance, featured African Americans—former Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley and former Texas congresswoman Barbara Jordan—as potential nominees for vice president.<sup>36</sup> However, it is in Bradley that one can see the precarious nature of being a black candidate for high office. Before Jesse Jackson made his two runs at the presidency, in the early 1980s, Bradley was the foremost black politician seeking a high profile elected office—the governorship of California. Public opinion polls and a slew of endorsements from prominent Californians had many convinced that Bradley would win the election, in some cases convincingly so. Indeed, polls taken in September and early October had Bradley leading by as much as 14 percentage points, and just three weeks before the elections, Bradley led by 7 percentage points (“Bradley Slips in Poll Lead” B-3). However, Bradley lost the election by just over 50,000 votes to Republican candidate George Deukmejian. Bradley’s loss called into question both Californians’ willingness to elect a black person as governor and the legitimacy of opinion polls that indicate a white willingness to vote for a black candidate. The discrepancy between favorable polls for and election outcomes of black candidates became known as the “Bradley effect.”

Much has been written as to the validity of the Bradley effect.<sup>37</sup> Those who deny the existence of the Bradley effect suggest a host of other factors that kept Bradley from winning the California gubernatorial race, particularly Bradley’s decision to support Proposition 15, which would have permitted a freeze on the importation of guns into California and would have prohibited gun purchases through the mail. Those who argue in favor of the Bradley effect point to the over half-million registered Democrats and independents who voted Republican. Whatever

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<sup>36</sup> Of the two, Jordan was the only one to receive an actual primary vote for vice president.

<sup>37</sup> See Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Kline and Stout 2009; Mathews 2009.

the case, Bradley's failure to win the California gubernatorial seat is significant for three reasons: First, though only one California governor, Ronald Reagan, has ever held the presidency, governors of California frequently have been viewed as strong candidates for either the presidency or the vice-presidency. Second, despite being viewed as a relatively conservative, cooperative politician who avoided racial controversies, Bradley failed to secure a bid for governor or become a serious contender for a vice presidency. Lastly, the discrepancy between polls and election outcomes that occurred during Bradley's gubernatorial race continued in other elections featuring black candidates, including some of Jesse Jackson's primary losses in his 1988 presidential bid. In other words, a palatable black politician who polled favorably still could not secure a position that would allow for him to be considered as a presidential hopeful.

However, the 1984 election season would see the rise of Jesse Jackson as a strong force in Democratic politics. Despite his losses in the 1984 and 1988 bids for the Democratic nomination, Jackson became, as Robert C. Smith suggests, "not only the preeminent leader of the party's black constituency, but also an eminent, if not preeminent, leader of its influential left wing" (228).

### Jesse Jackson and the Changing Face of Politics

After Jesse Jackson's conciliatory speech at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, one in which he apologized for his missteps on the campaign trail and pledged his support to eventual nominee Walter Mondale, the editors of *The Economist* wrote the following:

The Jackson campaign was never likely to bring many immediate technical changes in the Democratic political machinery. What it achieved was more pervasive. It has created an atmosphere in which old taboos have less place. It has opened windows for the Democrats. Mrs Geraldine Ferraro, many delegates

believed, became the first woman to run for vice-president on a major-party ticket only because Mr Jackson so stirred up the Democrats' thinking that even the super-cautious Mr Mondale was forced to try something new. ("The Jackson Factor")

In short, despite his late start, mishaps, and distant third-place finish at the Democratic National Convention, Jesse Jackson forced the Democratic Party to realize that the politics of old were no longer as effective as they used to be. The Democratic Party and Americans in general could no longer ignore growing black political ascendancy.

Indeed, Jackson's relatively strong run for the Democratic nomination in 1984—coupled with increasing black representation in the party and growing black voter turnout—was thought to have caused a white flight from the party, particularly in the South. For example, after Mondale's overwhelming loss to Reagan in the presidential election, noted political columnist Godfrey Sperling wrote, "At the time Jesse Jackson gave his emotional and inspirational 'Our time has come' speech at San Francisco, it was widely hailed by those who were there... But it frightened a lot of whites, particularly in the South. Thus, the ensuing white flight brought about a rallying of Southern whites to Reagan's side" (14A). Sperling's comments are based primarily on the nearly 90 percent Southern white vote for Reagan and the equally black vote for Mondale in 1984. While sociologist John F. Zipp sees little evidence of whites leaving the Democratic Party as a result of Jackson's nomination, he does acknowledge that the Democrats responded as if such was the case, and, as a result, they "deliberately started to gear their appeals more to 'middle America,' even at the risk of alienating some groups, especially blacks" (209).

Democratic vice presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro confirmed Zipp's assertion as, post-election, she chided those who suggested that the Democrats needed to change course: "[W]hen



critics get around to naming the groups whose agendas they object to, they usually name blacks, teachers, women, unions. They never mention oil interests, banks, the right-wing PACs. And then in the next breath, the reappraisers tell us to appeal to whites, to the middle class, and to men” (Fibich 4A).

Nonetheless, Jackson had made inroads with white voters. To everyone’s surprise, for example, Jackson had won the Michigan primary with a 55 percent vote. Jackson’s showing in Michigan punctuated a strong showing on Super Tuesday, after which he was actually leading in the popular vote. Jackson’s performance in the early primaries surprised and frightened many Americans, including Jackson himself. As evidence of the tremors felt throughout the Democratic Party after Jackson’s win in Michigan, Roger Wilkins, Jackson’s campaign adviser, recalled the “absolute panic” that ensued. While aboard a plane with well-established Democratic operatives, Wilkins overheard them lament Jackson’s success: “‘This Michigan thing, what is this? What is this Jackson thing? What are we going to do?’ Their distress over Jackson was such that they were expressing their dismay right through me about this black guy forging out ahead. But it was the whole party, I mean, it was thrown into a perfect whip-snitch” (Frady 392). Another Jackson adviser, former Jimmy Carter adviser Bert Lance, saw Jackson’s success in Michigan as an unfortunate wake-up call to white voters. Though polls indicated that he would fare well in the predominantly white state of Wisconsin, Jackson experienced a rather sound defeat, earning only 28 percent of the vote while Dukakis earned 48 percent. Lance said of Jackson’s defeat in Wisconsin, “But as soon as he got close to actually winning the nomination, I think people just said, ‘Whoa. We’re not going to do this’... The fear factor took over” (Frady 397).

Fear of Jackson not only resulted in fewer votes in the primaries but in death threats. A target for assassination since the late 1960s, Jackson faced a multitude of death threats when he became a presidential candidate, reaching as high as 311 in 1984 (“Jesse Jackson”). The threats continued even after the 1984 election; furthermore, Jackson had to have Secret Service protection extended to him early into the 1988 campaign season. By the time Jackson began winding down his campaign in the face of inevitable defeat by Dukakis, he had already received over 100 death threats in less than half a year, according to campaign staffers (“Running for President Is Not Entirely Glory” 12).

Nevertheless, despite the fears that hounded his presidential bids, Jackson became a transformative figure in politics. By the close of his final campaign, Jackson had ushered in a politics of inclusion that would make it possible for the continued appointment and election of African Americans into high office and for the eventual election of Barack Obama in 2008. Arguably, he also made Americans shift from wondering “Are we ready for a black president?” to wondering “What type of black president do we want?”

#### Powell for President

Months before Obama won the 2008 presidential election, conservative journalist Alicia Colon remained unconvinced that Americans would elect a black man. In her article “First Black President Will Be a Republican” for *The New York Sun*, she wrote, “Is America ready for a black president? Absolutely; it has been for some time. We probably would have had one by now if the black community had ever supported a conservative the way they are now supporting one of the most liberal. More than likely the first black president will be a Republican.” While Obama’s win on Election Day proved her wrong, Colon seemingly spoke conventional wisdom: The

knock against the most viable black contenders for the presidency not only was that they were black—and in the case of Shirley Chisholm, female—but also that they were liberal.

However, despite Colon's conventional wisdom, the Republican Party never has fielded a serious black contender for either the presidency or the vice presidency. In fact, only two black men ever have received a delegate vote at the Republican National Convention: Frederick Douglass in 1888 and Alan Keyes in 1992, 1996, and 2000.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, most of the black elected officials in recent history have been Democrats, including all thirteen founding members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Waning black support for the Republican Party began as prominent Republicans stalwarts such as Strom Thurmond and Barry Goldwater openly opposed civil rights legislation in the 1960s. Since then, the Republican Party, despite its history as the party of Lincoln and the party of America's first black legislators, has not fielded many black candidates for elected office.

Nonetheless, it seems as if after Jesse Jackson's historic run for the Democratic nomination, even the Republican Party realized that a black presidency was becoming inevitable. However, in the early 1990s, the Republicans did not have any strong black candidates of which to speak. Gary Franks of Connecticut was the only black Republican congressman in office, as Alan Keyes had proven unable to win any of the Maryland Senate races in which he was involved. Furthermore, with George H.W. Bush as the incumbent, there was no immediate need to seriously consider any black candidates. Despite this lack of urgency, however, the Republicans did set their sights on a probable candidate: then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell.

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<sup>38</sup> Douglass apparently received one vote from a Kentucky delegate in 1888 after delivering a speech at the national convention. Douglass did not campaign officially for the presidency. Keyes received 1 delegate vote in 1992 and 1996 and 6 delegate votes in 2000.

The hopes that Colin Powell would eventually pursue the presidency actually precede the election of the “first black president” Bill Clinton. As early as 1990, Powell was heralded as a likely candidate for the presidency after having served only a year as the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a position from which he successfully guided American armed forces in removing Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega from power and orchestrated Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf. The timing could not have been better for Powell: Candidates such as Chisholm and Jackson had forced Americans to conceive of a black presidency as more than a flight of fancy; a cloud of uncertainty loomed over a lackluster Bush presidency; and after the Democrats’ poor showings in two straight elections, enthusiasm for the forthcoming Democratic ticket was at a low point. Americans were in dire need for a strong leader, and seemingly one had been served to them in the form of Powell. In “America’s First Black President?” noted *Times* journalist John Griggs favorably compares Powell to Dwight Eisenhower: “Colin Powell's character and career recall Eisenhower's, especially in his proven ability to inspire trust and get along with every kind of person. Like Eisenhower, he has been dealing with politicians for years, and learning how government works, without any of the odium of being a professional politician. The main difference in his favour is that before he came to Washington as a military adviser and staff officer, he had considerable combat experience.”

Further adding to Powell’s appeal was his background. As Doug Fischer points out, “[Powell’s] life is a political spin-doctor's dream, a Horatio Alger story with a military twist: Son of Jamaican immigrants raised on the mean streets of Brooklyn, a self-made army man decorated in Vietnam who became the first black national security adviser and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff” (B4). As such, despite being black, he shares the immigrant background of most white Americans, which, alongside his storied military career, made him even more favorable. In 1996,

despite his remaining non-committal to either of the major parties let alone to a presidential run, Powell had an even higher approval rating in the National Election Study (NES) than those who were either in office or actively seeking it. As Donald R. Kinder and Corrine M. McConnaughy's analysis of the NES indicates, among whites, Powell averaged 70.4 on the "feelings thermometer" of the study, nearly 9 points higher than Elizabeth Dole, the most favorable white politician (61.8), and nearly 30 points higher than Jesse Jackson, the most favorable black politician (41.9) (143). Kinder and McConnaughy succinctly state the reasons for such strong white sentiment for Powell and perhaps an inkling as to how some might distinguish him from Jesse Jackson: "By American social conventions, Powell is black, but he is very far from a representative instance. Powell is an anomaly, and for a bundle of reasons. He is of Jamaican heritage. He is light-skinned. He keeps company with white people. He is a Republican. He does not use his prominence as a platform to push liberal policies. He speaks, Powell says himself, 'like a white person' ... And perhaps not least, he is a victorious general" (163).<sup>39</sup>

However, what also would have made Colin Powell an appealing candidate was that he would not have been a particularly divisive one—at least not in 1996. Powell also had high favorability with the African Americans polled in the NES. While his ratings with African Americans were not as high as then-President Bill Clinton's (83.3)—or, for that matter, Hillary Clinton's (75.1) or Jesse Jackson's (71.2)—ratings, he still fared quite well, with an average of 69.0. He certainly was the highest rated Republican amongst African Americans, with the next being Lamar Alexander at just over 50 (Kinder and McConnaughy 143). While Powell's appeal with black Americans would gradually decline as Powell became more associated with George W. Bush's administration, at the time, they also appreciated Powell for his ability to refute stereotypes and for his broad appeal.

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<sup>39</sup> Powell officially declared himself as a Republican in his speech at the 1996 Republican National Convention.

### Return of the Black Cinematic President

An indication of Powell's appeal was the influence he had on the return of and the depiction of the black cinematic president. The black presidents of the two black presidential films of the late 1990s—*The Fifth Element* (1997) and *Deep Impact* (1998)—have far more in common with Powell than Clinton. While a more thorough analysis of these films appears in Chapter III, it is worth noting here that the presidents in these two films are stoic, measured chief executives. They lack Clinton's level of charisma, yet they do not suffer from any of his vices. Instead, as was the popular perception of Powell, they are quiet, respectable statesmen. In fact, *The Fifth Element's* President Lindberg (Tiny Lister, Jr.) certainly looks the part of the general, as throughout the entire movie, he is surrounded by military experts, clad in a military-style uniform, and presides over the efforts to stop the alien presence threatening to destroy the planet.

This re-emergence of films featuring a black president in the late 1990s-early 2000s may very well be linked to the ever-increasing likelihood of a black presidency and the euphoria over Colin Powell as a potential president. As such, it is not surprising that these films feature narratives in which the black president's race goes unmentioned. As one might say of Powell, race in these films is apparent but not central. In all fairness to Powell, he has not shied away from discussing race. As Clarence Lusane notes in *Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice: Foreign Policy, Race, and the New American Century*, Powell has been forthright in expressing his disapproval with certain aspects of the Republican Party platform, including the infamous Willie Horton ads of the George H.W. Bush campaign (46). Furthermore, he has remained in favor of affirmative action as long as it does not result in a quota system (Lusane 47). Nonetheless, as Lusane also indicates, Powell—a self-described social moderate—did pledge allegiance to the Republicans even as Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich presided over a particularly

neoconservative Congress (47). Furthermore, one cannot forget the ways in which Powell and others frame him, which is as a proud son of hard-working, willful immigrants and not the unfortunate descendant of slaves.

The intent here is not to qualify Powell's racial bona-fides. However, it is to indicate that, to some degree, white support for black candidates is partly based on these candidates' refusal to fully participate in an overtly racial politics. Former Jack Kemp speechwriter Bryant Burroughs' 1991 guest column in *The Tuscaloosa News*, "Political Spoils of Desert Campaign" is indicative of this. He writes of Powell, "Unlike Jesse Jackson, Powell tells young blacks that advancement lies in their own skills, not in a paternalistic government, and he is an example of that success. Gen. Powell represents the dream of Martin Luther King for a color blind society, and his example is crucial if the dream is to make flesh" (8B). Here, Burroughs not only assails Jackson for more marked racial politics, but praises Powell for his distance from it. Burroughs' rearticulation of King's dream rhetoric—a familiar trope across the political spectrum—is endemic of what Omi and Winant refer to as a "neoconservative racial project," or an interpretation of racial dynamics in which "the significance of race is denied" (58). As a result, it becomes easier to understand the Republican enthusiasm for Powell, who in his autobiography, *My American Journey*, suggests that his sense of racial identity developed relatively late and that racial identity does not play a central role in his politics.

The films that emerged in the wake of Powell's rise to prominence function similarly to the aforementioned neoconservative racial projects. With the exception of Chris Rock's film *Head of State* (2003), films featuring a black president seemingly do not require viewers to consider the president's race as significant; indeed, they do attempt to be post-racial texts. However, as the following chapters suggest, the failings of the colorblindness can be found

within the industrial and narrative constraints placed upon and the codes transmitted by these films. Just as the disavowal of race's significance often reaffirms its centrality in American society, so do these constraints and codes within black presidential films.



## CHAPTER II

### BEING BLACK MATTERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MAN

In the concluding scene of *The Man* (1972), the first full-length film to feature a black president, beleaguered President Douglass Dilman (James Earl Jones) issues a rather poignant statement<sup>1</sup>:

We live in a time when violence is offered up as the panacea. The bullet seems to be the final instrument of political discourse. Men die violently, we bury them, we mourn for them, and we seek retribution. It is a deadly pattern. From Abraham Lincoln to John F. Kennedy to Robert Kennedy to Medgar Evers to Martin Luther King, the list grows. Violence, burial, and retribution. It simply must not go on. It can't go on.

Dilman's speech serves as an afterword to his announcing his decision to extradite black militant Robert Wheeler (Georg Stanford Brown) to South Africa after Wheeler's assassination of that country's defense minister. More so, however, his closing remarks, though they are in reference to the assassinations of major political figures, serve as a loud indictment of black militancy as a response to racial injustice.

The timing of Dilman's remarks is important, for not only do they follow his order to extradite Wheeler but also they precede his appearance in front of his party's national convention to seek its nomination. The Wheeler incident had been the defining moment of Dilman's brief term in office, a term that came about through happenstance and not the will of the American people. However, Dilman's initial refusal to extradite Wheeler angers many—especially after

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<sup>1</sup> While *The Man* is the first full-length film to feature a black president, it is not the first film in which to do so. That distinction belongs to *Rufus Jones for President*, a 1933 short film starring a then-ten year old Sammy Davis, Jr. and Ethel Waters.

Senator Watson (Burgess Meredith) unveils filmed footage of Wheeler tossing a grenade into the South African defense minister's car. This mishandling of the Wheeler incident prompts Congressman Walding (Charles Lampkin), a black senior elected official and one of Dilman's chief advisors, to caution, "With that Wheeler issue stuck to your hide, you're dead. Without it, you've got a chance." In other words, Dilman need only to shed his ties—no matter how tangential—to black militancy in order to have a fighting chance at gaining his party and the nation's favor. Given Dilman's decision to extradite, viewers can speculate that when he appears at the party's convention to a rousing applause, he does indeed have a chance at the party's nomination and actual election as president.

*The Man* presents a narrative that suggests white racism, while not absent, has depleted to a level in which the election of a black man as president is a possibility. The film does its best to portray white racism as either antiquated—in the form of elder statesmen Senator Watson—or foreign—in the form of the South African ambassador (Patric Knowles). Indeed, after the ambassador provides Senator Watson with the damning footage of Wheeler, Watson laments, "I'm going to walk out of here and strike a very damaging blow on behalf of white supremacy. Now there was a time that I could've done that with a very great sense of accomplishment. But now I do it with a kind of sick reluctance, holding my nose as I do." Of course, this "sick reluctance" does not prevent Watson, *The Man*'s lead antagonist, from attempting to capitalize on Dilman's mishandling of the Wheeler incident. Nonetheless, his inability to derail Dilman's interim presidency or dash Dilman's chances for his party's nomination seemingly lends credence to his suggestion that America's reluctance to elect a black president is a thing of the past.

As such, *The Man* not only presents a highly probable election of a black president as evidence of racism's denouement but also shifts the burden for racial reconciliation on the shoulders of African Americans. In doing so, *The Man* functions similarly to what Omi and Winant have deemed *rearticulation*, or the right-wing repackaging of those notions of racial equality advanced by minority civil rights movements of the 1960s. According to Omi and Winant, *rearticulation* is a racial reaction to minority sociopolitical gains that presents racial equality and a color blind society as desirable yet also suggests that "racial problems from the 1970s on consisted of new forms of racial injustice" in the form of preferential treatment for African Americans and discrimination towards whites, particularly men (117). Black radicals in particular were targeted with the claim that they aided in "upsetting the pluralist applecart of tolerance, individualism, accommodation of conflicting interests through established political processes" (Omi and Winant 131).

Therefore, as shall be argued here, *The Man* can be viewed as a text that attempts to rearticulate what the primary barriers are to realizing a colorblind nation. In order to back this assertion, this chapter will look at the ways in which *The Man* reflects a burgeoning new right ideology, in particular what Omi and Winant refer to as a "conservative egalitarian version" of civil rights movements (124). The chapter will conclude by considering the means in which the narrative—and hence the tactic of rearticulation—is inherently problematic.

### *The Man* and the Apparently Declining Significance of Whiteness and Racism

*The Man* chronicles the brief yet tumultuous presidency of Douglass Dilman, the president pro tempore of the Senate who becomes president of the United States after beloved President Fenton and an unnamed Speaker of the House are killed in a building collapse in Frankfurt, Germany. The Cabinet prepares to turn over the presidency to elderly and infirmed

Vice President Noah Calvin (Lew Ayres); however, Calvin refuses, citing the likelihood of his own death in the coming weeks. The Cabinet turns to swear in Secretary of State Arthur Eaton (William Windom), but Eaton informs the members that he is not the next in line. Citing the Succession Act of 1947, Chief Justice Edward Williams (Philip Bourneuf) reveals that the line of succession leads to the president pro tempore of the Senate.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet collectively reacts with horror as they realize that the president pro tempore is a black man, Douglass Dilman.

As Dilman begins his first days as president, members of Fenton's Cabinet limit his ability to govern. Several scenes show Dilman acting as a needless interloper as he enters and exits important meetings without being noticed. After a few days of virtual silence, Dilman finally makes his presence felt: as Cabinet members discuss the Minorities Rehabilitation Bill, Dilman suggests that he would like to see the bill passed.<sup>3</sup> Senator Watson, his strongest opponent and an overt racist, assures Dilman that should he throw his weight behind the bill, Congress will vehemently reject it. While the meeting ends with Dilman still relegated to the role of figurehead, his sudden boldness earns him an ally, Jim Talley (Martin Balsam), the White House chief of staff.

As Dilman's confidence grows, two major challenges arise to test his mettle. Shortly after his confrontation with Senator Watson, Dilman learns an unidentified African American allegedly attempted to assassinate a South African public defense minister. Later, Dilman learns of the Watson Bill, which prohibits the president from firing any Cabinet member without Congressional approval. Dilman then prepares for his public address as president, an event that

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from the official U.S. Senate website: "On July 18, 1947, President Harry Truman signed the Presidential Succession Act. The original act of 1792 had placed the Senate president pro tempore and Speaker of the House in the line of succession, but in 1886 Congress had removed them. The 1947 law reinserted those officials, but placed the Speaker ahead of the president pro tempore" ("Presidential Succession Act").

<sup>3</sup> The Minorities Rehabilitation Bill is not described in the film. However, in Irving Wallace's 1964 novel of the same title upon which the film is based, the Minorities Rehabilitation Bill is very similar to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the New Deal project that provided public works employment and other initiatives geared towards the unemployed.

causes Eaton—who has assumed much of the president's responsibilities—a great deal of consternation.

A few days later, Dilman makes his first public address with scripted responses to prepared questions provided by Eaton. Finally, Webson (Robert DoQui), a reporter for Negro Press International, challenges him to answer the questions on his own, particularly those on the South Africa incident. Much to Eaton's displeasure, Dilman answers Webson's questions by insisting that, regardless of the assailant's color, the Justice Department should investigate before extraditing. He also strongly indicts South Africa by calling attention to the unlikelihood that a black man would be tried fairly. Dilman's strong showing not only sparks his confidence but also fosters concern and dissent from Eaton and Watson. As they begin conspiring against Dilman, a news broadcast reveals the identity of the South African assailant, black Dartmouth College student Robert Wheeler.

As Dilman asserts himself as president, his close friend Reverend Otis Waldren (Reginald Fenderson) brings Wheeler to the White House. Dilman cautiously interviews Wheeler, who claims to have been at the American consulate in Burundi at the time of the incident. Wheeler admits involvement in an anti-apartheid parade in South Africa the week before the assassination attempt and notes that the defense minister had ordered the police shooting of several protestors at the parade. After the meeting, Dilman publically denies Wheeler's involvement in the incident and refuses extradition. Dilman's order infuriates Eaton, who has kept the angry South Africans at bay. As a dejected Eaton leaves, Dilman and Talley discuss Dilman's possible entrance in the presidential race.

Later that evening, Watson meets with a South African ambassador, who reveals that the defense minister has died. The ambassador also provides Watson with film of Wheeler tossing a

grenade into the public defense minister's car. Watson phones Eaton with orders to copy and distribute the film. The next morning at the White House, Watson reveals to Dilman and Talley that he has possession of the Wheeler film and an affidavit from the consulate of Burundi stating that the person who identified himself as Wheeler did so with forged documents.

After Wheeler's hearing in front of a Senate committee, Dilman berates Wheeler for lying. Wheeler admits to the attack and accuses Dilman of being a "house nigger." Dilman's daughter Wanda (Janet MacLachlan)—who has overheard the exchange—chastises her father for considering extradition. Nonetheless, following a rather moving press conference statement on violence and morality, he announces that he will extradite Wheeler and enters the party's convention to a rousing applause as the film ends.

Given the black sociopolitical gains and other social upheavals which occurred, the 1960s is often marked as a decade of great transformation. However, this transformation has been viewed negatively by many, particularly political and social conservatives. For instance, political commentator and former Republican and Reform Party presidential candidate Pat Buchanan laments these changes in his book, *Day of Reckoning*. According to Buchanan, the 1960s represent the very dissolution of what held America together: "Since the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the Immigration Act of 1965... the ethnocultural core has begun to dissolve... There is no longer a unifying culture. Rather, we are fighting a cultural war" (186). As Buchanan would lead us to believe, the losers of this cultural war are the nation as a whole and white men in particular. As a former Nixon advisor and speechwriter, Buchanan was instrumental in the emergence of what scholars such as Omi and Winant have deemed the "new right" in the late 1960s-early 1970s, the period in which *The Man* was written and produced. As such, Buchanan's anxieties about the dissolution of an "ethnocultural core" are important, for they reflect not only

the stance of the Nixon administration in office when *The Man* debuted but also the stance taken by those right-wing conservatives who would dominate national politics for the better part of the next four decades. Indeed, the new right was first to embrace the strategy of rearticulation.

The strategy of rearticulation occurred not only in Washington but also in Hollywood. In fact, in his essay “Film, Politics, and Ideology,” noted theorist Douglas Kellner suggests that film functioned as a harbinger of the new right dominance to come in the 1980s: “[R]eading Hollywood films [of the 1970s] politically allowed one to anticipate the coming of Reagan and the New Right to power by demonstrating that conservative yearnings were ever more popular within the culture and that film and popular culture were helping to form an ideological matrix more hospitable to Reagan and conservatives than to embattled liberals” (9). In the early 1970s, according to Kellner, gritty law and order films such as *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *The French Connection* (1971) indicate that Hollywood was as much of a “contested terrain” as was Washington and that films “can be interpreted as a struggle over representation of how to construct a social world and everyday life” (9). In *Camera Politica*, Kellner and Michael Ryan position these films as “conservative counterattacks against the liberalism... blamed for the crisis in domestic order brought about by the sixties” (42). Both films feature detectives maligned by liberal policies that seemingly gave more rights to criminals—particularly in the form of Miranda laws—than to those seeking to uphold the law. These films’ interest in law and order are consistent with the new right’s embrace of the same, which Omi and Winant suggests emerged out of the success of “‘coded’ antiblack campaign rhetoric” that emphasized law and order (124).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Omi and Winant point to political analyst Kevin Phillips’s study *The Emerging Republican Majority* as evidence of the Republican Party embracing a coded racial politics, one that embraced “the use of ‘coded’ antiblack campaign rhetoric (e.g., law and order)” (124).

*The Man* attempts to rearticulate what the hindrances are to a colorblind, egalitarian society by first suggesting a declining significance of whiteness and racism. This declining significance becomes apparent when one considers the ways in which the film's most prominent white characters—Senator Watson, Secretary of State Arthur Eaton, and White House Chief of Staff Jim Talley—are portrayed. While there are major distinctions between the three, the commonality is that, despite their initial or persistent skepticism and dread, they cannot hinder Douglass Dilman from becoming an effective interim president and later a viable presidential candidate.

Of the three most prominent white characters, Senator Watson proves the most adversarial to Dilman's presidency. While few details are revealed about Watson, he apparently is a senator from an unnamed Southern state and seems to be the film's nod to segregationist Alabama governor and later independent presidential candidate George Wallace.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case may be, it becomes clear within the first few minutes of the film that Watson is an overt racist, for as the newly-appointed black president drives away, he laments, "[T]he White House doesn't seem near white enough for me tonight."

Watson serves the purpose of making overt racism appear both archaic and abhorrent, as he is the only primary character whose racism is prominent throughout the film. Portrayed by venerable Hollywood stalwart Burgess Meredith, Watson is an elder statesman, making his views seem limited not only to a Southerner but an elderly one at that. As his conversation with the South African ambassador reveals, one of his greatest laments is that the pronounced segregation that would have made Dilman's appointment as president impossible is relegated to

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<sup>5</sup> For example, after the Cabinet first briefs Dilman on his duties as president, Watson candidly tells Eaton, "I know about six states of these United States that might consider seceding from the Union by tomorrow at lunch." These "six states" likely are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, each of which essentially cast a vote in favor of segregation by voting for Wallace in the 1968 presidential election. Wallace won each of these states outright save for Tennessee, where he was narrowly defeated by eventual president-elect Richard Nixon.



“twenty-five years ago.” Furthermore, Watson proves to be a loathsome, deceitful senator, one who is willing to conspire against Dilman. After all, in order to “strike a very damaging blow on behalf of white supremacy,” Watson engages in a series of underhanded tactics, particularly writing a bill that would limit Dilman’s ability to form his own Cabinet and providing the Justice Department with the film of the Wheeler attack without first notifying Dilman. As such, overt racism in *The Man* is only enacted by the duplicitous and thus made undesirable.

Perhaps most importantly, it is primarily Watson who enables the narrative to position racism as contrary to American egalitarianism. The only other character willing to match Watson’s segregationist views is the South African ambassador. For example, it is only after the ambassador remarks, “Your views on segregation are not unlike our own. Of course, in my country, we’d never have a black man as the executive of government” that Watson is able to fondly reminisce about the American apartheid of “twenty-five years ago.” While Watson is not wholly repentant for his segregationist views, even he has reached a point in which he advances a racist agenda with a “sick reluctance.” In short, not even the film’s most visible American racist can easily stomach segregation or any other tactic to openly oppress black people; that form of unrepentant racism supposedly now only existing elsewhere, in this case South Africa.

The film’s other primary white characters, Secretary of State Arthur Eaton and White House Chief of Staff Jim Talley, also highlight the declining significance of racism and whiteness. However, unlike Watson, they do not do so as loathsome, ineffectual racists but as variations of “good white” men, to borrow a term from film scholar Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. Their function in the narrative is to reify the notion that white racism is no longer the norm and that whites—even if begrudgingly so—are willing to accept a black president, as long as the

black president is acceptable. Moreover, they serve as a means through which new right rearticulation occurs in *The Man*.

In fact, Eaton can be viewed as the odd-man-out: though he is the only remaining able-bodied member of President Fenton's Cabinet and seemingly the rightful successor to the presidency, he is unable to fill the role himself. Upon Vice-President Calvin's refusal to serve as president due to severe illness and the Cabinet turns towards him, Eaton must admit, "I'm not the man... I'm the Secretary of State, but I'm not the successor." However, he—or perhaps another white man—would be if not for the Succession Act of 1947, which placed the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore of the Senate ahead of the Secretary of State in the line of succession. This circumstance is exacerbated not only by the fact that "the man" turns out to be Douglass Dilman, but also by the fact Dilman is the president pro tempore only as a "well-dressed rebuttal to the militants," according to Senator Watson. In short, Eaton—or perhaps another deserving white man—is constrained both by law and a form of affirmative action, both of which are often targets in new right rearticulation.

Furthermore, Eaton is often emasculated throughout the film. Of course, the first emasculation occurs when he has to admit that he is not the rightful successor to the presidency. The second occurs shortly thereafter when he returns to his home—a palatial estate complete with a black butler—only to be chided by his wife Kay (Barbara Rush), whose desires for him to assume the presidency are greater than his. As the two bicker about his lack of ambition and her "overpowering ambition," she reminds him that he would not be Secretary of State without her ambition or strong Washington ties.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, after Eaton jokes that Kay could be president if she were a man, she replies, "The pity is that I'm married to a man whose principal

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<sup>6</sup> Later in the film, viewers learn that Kay Eaton's family has been involved in national politics for several generations.

accomplishment to date is to be kingmaker to a juggaboo. And as to my not having been born a man, that apparently is a misfortune that we both share.” Kay’s harsh comments underscore one of the film’s more persistent themes that white power and influence have been nullified, for Eaton cannot supplant a black man nor take credit for his own status.

However, the third instance in which Eaton is emasculated is undoubtedly the most important, for it comes from Dilman. Though he is not officially appointed to the role, Eaton initially assumes much of the responsibility of the presidency. He largely positions Fenton’s death and Dilman’s appointment as matters from which America must “survive.” To ensure survival, Eaton attempts to mitigate the “catastrophe” not only by going above and beyond his duties as Secretary of State but also by blocking Dilman’s ability to govern and by downplaying any issues involving race. However, after Dilman goes off script and deftly handles questions regarding the Wheeler incident at his first press conference, it becomes clear that Eaton’s ability to contain him is waning. A montage scene that follows shortly after the press conference shows Dilman wresting away Eaton’s authority. Whereas Dilman went unheard and unheeded in the earlier moments of the film, the same fate befalls Eaton during the latter half of the film. As they both begin considering a run for their party’s presidential nomination, it is clear that the momentum is with Dilman. Furthermore, although Eaton does pursue the nomination, he seemingly concedes authority to the interim president, for he is absent in the latter half of the film. Eaton’s pronounced absence—coupled with Dilman’s newfound assertiveness—suggests that Eaton’s paternalistic hold on the reins of government has been wrested away and the nomination is now Dilman’s to lose.

To the degree that Senator Watson represents racism’s declining influence and Eaton represents the emasculated white male, Jim Talley represents the redeemable white man. Talley

exhibits qualities that make him appear hardworking, upstanding and honest. For instance, on Dilman's first day as president, Talley actually makes it to the office before him. As the rest of President Fenton's staff, particularly matronly secretary Ma Blore (Anne Seymour), openly mourn his death, a stalwart Talley simply states, "New day... Let's get back to work." Of all of the main characters in *The Man*, Talley is the most resilient and steady in the face of a crisis.

However, it is Talley's willingness to work alongside Dilman that makes him most worthy of distinction. Though initially as skeptical of Dilman as the rest of President Fenton's staff, Talley becomes conciliatory as he interacts with Dilman and as Dilman effectively governs. In fact, he is the first person to challenge Eaton for usurping the duties of the interim president.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he is also the first person to encourage Dilman to consider running for the party's presidential nomination—albeit while also suggesting that Dilman should occasionally "side step" tough issues.

Though Talley epitomizes the "good white" man, he is not the only one in the film. Indeed, *The Man* is replete with "good white" men and women. For example, when protesters are shown protesting against Wheeler's possible extradition, the crowd is equally as white as it is black. While viewers are told that the nation is "split" over Wheeler's possible extradition, they only witness whites protesting in support of Wheeler—which, of course, turns to be unwarranted support given that Wheeler is guilty. Furthermore, viewers later learn that, though Eaton is winning over conservatives, Dilman discovers that he has a great deal of support from voters and delegates, including all twenty of the black ones and "five times" as many whites. Noticeably absent are the threats of assassination that would plague prominent black candidates for president

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<sup>7</sup> As Talley informs Eaton of an emergency Cabinet meeting, Eaton replies, "I do not want [Dilman] handling a Cabinet meeting now. And when he does, I want to be right at his elbow holding a gag." Talley snidely replies, "Absolutely, Mr. President." Eaton asks, "Haven't you ever heard of the 'power behind the throne'?" Talley responds, "How far behind?"

such as Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama or any other form of public demonstration of anger over a black presidency. As such, that whites presumably are willing to vote for Dilman—even in spite of his incorrect stance on Wheeler—speaks volumes about the degree to which white racism and whiteness itself are no longer barriers to a black presidency in *The Man*.

### Black Militancy as Barrier to Racial Harmony

That *The Man* would present black militancy as the primary obstacle to a colorblind nation is of no surprise: As the film was being produced, the country was in the midst of recovering from nearly a decade of black social unrest that had wreaked havoc on major cities from Los Angeles to Philadelphia. As the 1970s began, racial unrest continued, marked by incidents such as Jackson State University shootings in early May 1970.<sup>8</sup> These instances were compounded by the continued presence of black militant groups such as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which famed FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (Harris 169). As Omi and Winant note, origins of the new right’s racial politics can be found in the opposition to black civil unrest and militant movements such as the Black Panthers by law-and-order politicians such as the aforementioned George Wallace (124).

Furthermore, just as a form of new right rearticulation occurred in 1970s films, so was a form of black militancy making it on to the silver screen. The success and proliferation of films such as Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) set off the blaxploitation film genre. Donald Bogle characterizes the earlier blaxploitation films as “a period

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<sup>8</sup> On May 4, 1970, just ten days after the historic clash between protestors and police at Kent State University, another occurred at predominantly black Jackson State University. While protesting over an incident in which a white motorist struck a black female student, protestors engaged in an altercation with police that subsequently led to the deaths of a Jackson State student and a local high school student and several wounded.

of aggressive, pistol-packing, sexually-charged urban cowboys set off on a heady rampage, out to topple the system and to right past wrongs” (232). Blaxploitation films such as *Sweetback* advanced narratives of revenge against the system, including the enactors of tough justice. In short, blaxploitation films and new right films served as counternarratives of each other, for as the new right offered films in which the hero was the hardboiled detective who took the law into his own hands, blaxploitation films offered the “pimp/outlaw/rebel” who did the same (Bogle 236).

There is little indication that the intent of the producers of *The Man* was to present a counternarrative to these blaxploitation films or to counteract black militancy itself, but the film does function as such by creating an equivalency between white racism and black militancy.<sup>9</sup> If Senator Watson is a nod to segregationist George Wallace, then one can certainly read the film’s black militant, Robert Wheeler, as a nod to Stokely Carmichael, former militant head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), former Black Panther member, and coiner of the phrase “Black Power.” Like Carmichael, Wheeler is a politically-engaged college student with strong radical tendencies. Upon first meeting Dilman, Wheeler appears to be a humble, rather mild-mannered student. In fact, it is seemingly his pleasant attitude—coupled with confirmed “proof” that he was in Burundi at the time of the assassination attempt—that leads Dilman to initially refuse to extradite Wheeler and proclaim his innocence.

However, Wheeler’s good nature does not last for long, especially as the truth of the events emerges. The next scene in which viewers see Wheeler, he is in the midst of the film’s

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<sup>9</sup> The screen adaptation of *The Man* was written by famed *Twilight Zone* creator, Rod Serling, who also directed the film. Though little has been written of Serling’s political leanings, what is known is that he was a strong, vocal opponent of the Vietnam War and participated in Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy’s 1968 presidential campaign (Doll). McCarthy, who also a staunch anti-war politician, was a particularly liberal senator, noted as “a leader of the so-called liberal block of Democratic senators” during both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson’s presidencies (Pugmire).

sole act of violence: tossing a grenade into the South African defense minister's limousine. Immediately following Senator Watson's presentation of the film, Wheeler sheds his façade, and viewers see him for the angry militant that he really is. His anger and openly rebellious behavior become clear during his trial in front of the Senate Internal Security Committee, presided over by none other than Senator Watson. As they argue, Wheeler proves the more volatile by losing his temper and even challenging Watson to a fight before being restrained by bailiffs. As such, Wheeler's hostility and black militancy seem more active and threatening than Watson's passive aggressiveness and muted racism.

However, though Wheeler's militancy is poised as more threatening than Watson's racism, Wheeler proves to be equally as duplicitous as Watson, if not more so. After all, it is Wheeler's lies that provide Watson an opportunity—albeit one that proves unfruitful—to derail Dilman's interim presidency and hopes for the party's nomination. Viewers not only witness Wheeler actually attempting to assassinate the South African defense minister but also learn during the trial scene that Watson has an affidavit from the consulate of Burundi stating that the person who identified himself as Wheeler did so with forged documents. Just as Watson uses “devious politics”—lying by omission—to advance a white supremacist agenda, Wheeler uses outright deceit and violence to advance a black militant agenda. To make matters worse, Watson at least recognizes the distasteful and antiquated nature of white supremacy; however, Wheeler does not. Instead, Wheeler views his actions as just; in his final meeting with Dilman, he remarks, “I killed a butcher, a lyncher, and I did it because he didn't deserve to live.” He even confesses to having assassinated the defense minister with “pride” and “passion,” both of which he finds lacking in Dilman.

It is also worth noting that Wheeler is not the film's only prominent militant. In an obvious nod to famed black activist and scholar Angela Davis, Wanda Dilman (Janet MacLachlan) also appears to be somewhat militant herself. During the time in which *The Man* was filmed, Angela Davis, who then was most noted for her possible involvement in the kidnapping and murder of a California judge, was also a philosophy professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. During the dinner scene at the Eaton's home, viewers learn that Wanda Dilman is a philosophy major at Oberlin College, which has long been a center for liberalism. In exchanges with both her father and Kay Eaton, Wanda proves to be rather fiery and outspoken. Whether chastising her father for his timid nature or chastising Kay Eaton for touting her family's political legacy, Wanda angers rather easily. Therefore, the film's most prominent black militants prove rather volatile towards everyone, thus suggesting that they are irrational.

Though the film does show that she has a softer side in some of her moments with her father, it also suggests that there is a connection between Wanda and Wheeler. In the scene in which Dilman confronts Wheeler, as Wheeler leaves, he and Wanda share a lengthy glance. After Dilman reveals that he is considering extraditing Wheeler, Wanda angrily scolds him, "Where on earth did I ever get the idea that you were honorable? You really must have conned me with your soft voice and your metaphors. Not honorable, scared. A privileged black man paying off for not having to live in the ghetto... How in the hell do you get out of the First Family? Do you resign or what?" Her chastisement of her father mirrors Wheeler's referring to him as a "house nigger"; both claim his newfound position of privilege has come at the cost of abandoning his ties to the black community.

In fact, it is through Wanda—and not Wheeler—that Erica R. Edwards sees part of the film's central tensions played out. Edwards suggests that Dilman "is caught between the



demands of the presidency as bedrock of fraternal whiteness and the not-yet-post-civil rights, black nationalist leanings that Wanda represents” (40). As she does throughout her essay on black presidential films, “The Black President Hokum,” Edwards argues that black women have to be marginalized as part of an “aggressive heterosexual patriotism... that conjures the black president to maintain the image of the United States as beneficent multicultural democracy and free market Eden” (35). Edwards’ contention certainly is valid, for as she notes, Wanda—as both woman and militant—eventually is nullified by film’s end. Indeed, after her father officially announces that he will extradite Wheeler and gives a rather rousing speech regarding violence, she begins crying as she is driven away from the White House. However, her tears are not from sadness or frustration but from being moved by her father’s compelling speech. Wanda’s crying scene is juxtaposed with the scene of cheering conventioners welcoming Dilman, which further indicates that black militancy—and, in effect, black womanhood—finally have been repudiated or, at the very least, silenced, which Edwards rightly argues is an essential part of black presidential films.

#### Douglas Dilman: “A Well-Dressed Rebuttal to the Militants”

While Omi and Winant note that the goal of the new right was to limit the sociopolitical gains of racial minorities, they also note that the burgeoning new right recognized that support of the most overt forms of racism—e.g. legal segregation—was no longer viable (123). As a result, part of the strategy of rearticulation involved not only capitalizing off the populist appeal of segregationists such as George Wallace but also contending with the successes of the civil rights movement. What emerged is a form of conservative egalitarianism, which the authors describe as “simultaneously coopting *both* Wallace and suitably moderate blacks (and other minorities) by espousing *both* law and order and a negative income tax, neighborhood schools *and* black

capitalism” (124). As such, conservative egalitarianism can be interpreted as a conciliatory ideology “that revolved around ‘equal opportunity’ rather than ‘equal outcomes’” (Reuter 259).

As Omi and Winant note, this new right conservative egalitarianism did have some appeal amongst black moderates, particularly in its advocacy of black capitalism. Cecilia Conrad points out that African Americans who backed these black capitalism initiatives—such as those advanced by Richard Nixon, for instance—did so with the assumption that these initiatives would create a larger black middle class, increase black political power, improve black community infrastructure, reduce dependence on whites, and increase black employment (242). This movement towards black capitalism and black economic self-sufficiency was coupled with a movement away from militancy. As Ryan and Kellner indicate, nowhere was this new anti-militant, pro-capitalist stance more evident than in several black-helmed movies that emerged in the mid- to late-1970s. The authors write, “Eventually black films come to be dominated by the quest for dignity, and the attacks against racism disappear... In many of these films, structural racism is no longer blamed for the condition of blacks. Some even lay the blame at the feet of blacks themselves” (Ryan and Kellner 124). Ryan and Kellner point to films such as *Claudine* (1974)—which also starred James Earl Jones—and *Car Wash* (1975), both of which feature black militant characters who are positioned as either wrongheaded or disdainful.

Ryan and Kellner easily could have included *The Man* in that number, for through the character of Douglas Dilman, the film not only embraces a conservative egalitarianism but also repudiates black militancy. Viewers learn early in the film that, before he becomes interim president, Dilman was both a senator from New Hampshire and the president pro tempore of the Senate. Though there is no evidence to confirm or deny Watson’s claims that Dilman was chosen as president pro tempore as a means to appease militant African Americans, Dilman is

nonetheless democratically elected by the people of New Hampshire, a state that even today boasts a black population of only 1 percent.<sup>10</sup> As such, it appears that even before he is instated as the interim president or campaigns to fill the office for a full term, Dilman had been granted the equal opportunity that is seemingly the hallmark of conservative egalitarianism.

Intentionally or not, Dilman is every bit the “well dressed rebuttal to the militants” that Senator Watson suggests he is. Throughout the film, even in his most passionate moments—such as his strong rebuke of Wheeler’s actions—he is a rather solemn, humble figure. On a radio broadcast shortly after he is formally sworn in as president, Dilman is described as an “erudite former professor. A warm, often witty man.” Indeed, it is this humility that draws the ire of the film’s black militants and is challenged by the film’s white racists. Nonetheless, despite these fervent chidings and challenges, he remains stoic and even-tempered. In short, Dilman is the “black gentleman of most dignified aspect” that T.T. had imagined in “A Dream” and of whom many moviegoers wished to see more.

To the film’s credit, it makes a valiant attempt to show the struggles which the first black president likely would have to face. It is the challenge to remain even-keeled in the face of attacks from racists, establishment politicians, and radicals that serves as the film’s primary source of conflict. Dilman’s even-handed nature does not preclude him from making rather strong indictments towards racists. For instance, in his first press conference, he unequivocally denounces South African apartheid by stating that there was little likelihood of Wheeler receiving a fair trial and that Wheeler would likely be “prejudged and officially lynched.” He then turns his attention to Webson and states, “Let me admit to you that in the short time allotted to me as president, I may never learn the subtleties of foreign relations, but like you, several

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<sup>10</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2005-2009 American Community Survey, New Hampshire’s black population is currently 1.1 percent.

hundred years of history have made me an expert on lynchings.” Of course, this denouncing of racism is somewhat easy to make, especially since the narrative leads one to believe that racism virtually is nullified in America. Nonetheless, though racists such as Senator Watson would rather him remain silent on matters of race, he does not do so.

Furthermore, Dilman’s humble nature does not keep him from also asserting himself into the position in which he has been appointed. After all, part of the film is devoted towards Dilman’s quest for dignity, a quest that involves actually proving himself capable of governing. Though he is initially hesitant to and prevented from taking on his duties as interim president, he eventually does assert himself. His decision came about as a result of a revelation reached during a conversation with newfound ally Jim Talley: “There comes a moment when you reach the bottom of the pit and you say to yourself, ‘Climb.’ It falls under the heading of belated pride... We are all midgets trying to reach the shelf.” This epiphany provides Dilman with the fortitude to take command of the Oval Office and to unseat establishment politicians such as Arthur Eaton. As was the case with his ability to denounce racism, Dilman’s newfound confidence is made admirable.

However, as has been argued here, the attacks from the racists and establishment are mitigated by the declining significance of whiteness within the logic of the text. All that white America seemingly requires from Dilman to nominate and elect him as president is that he distances himself from militants and proves fair. Therefore, his greatest fears are not in regards to any negative response from whites but are in failing to be a “black Messiah” or being viewed as an “Uncle Tom” by black Americans, particularly vocal militants such as Robert Wheeler. Indeed, it is his ties to Wheeler—more so than the actions of any racist or establishment politician—that threatens to undermine his legitimacy.

Since he cannot be a “black Messiah,” does not wish to be viewed as an “Uncle Tom,” nor wants to alienate himself from a predominantly white electorate—even one that is ready to accept him, Dilman takes an apparently colorblind stance on issues, particularly in the two public addresses he gives during his interim presidency. For example, in his first press conference, though he denounces racism, he ultimately couches his defense of Robert Wheeler in terms of colorblind justice. When pressed by Webson, a reporter for Negro Press International, to explain his stance on the Wheeler incident, Dilman responds, “The respective colors of the victim and his alleged assailant are a matter of indifference to me. I can assure you that if the intended victim had been a Nigerian ambassador, three shades blacker than I am, and his assailant the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, I would still direct the Justice Department to examine all the facts before we arbitrarily throw an American citizen into jeopardy.” His commitment to colorblind justice is what draws the most concern from Senator Watson and Eaton for they see it as presidential. In fact, after the press conference, Watson laments to Eaton, “I tell you what disturbs me about his performance: It’s not that he suddenly played it being the president, but he played at it so damn well.”

As his press conference remarks indicate, Dilman is the means through which the film draws a moral equivalence between the actions of white racists and black militants. It is no coincidence, for example, that he mentions the “Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan,” for under the auspices of colorblind justice, the efforts of racists such as Ku Klux Klan are apparently as morally reprehensible as those of college radicals. Indeed, in his rather heated exchange with Wheeler after he has discovered Wheeler has lied, he draws a direct connection between Wheeler’s actions and those of racists during the Civil Rights era: “Black men don’t burn crosses. They don’t plant a bomb at a church and kill four children. They don’t geld innocent

little sharecroppers. They don't hunt down a Martin Luther King and shoot him with a telescopic sight. That is cool stuff, Mr. Wheeler. That is bloodless. That is a master plan that comes out of a convocation of lizards." Therefore, Dilman equates black militancy with Klan radicalism while he posits nonviolence as the morally acceptable black approach.

However, if not altogether false, Dilman's moral equivalence is at least troubled and problematic. It relies upon a false assumption that what was often state- or nation-sanctioned lynching and murders by white racists occurred at the same level and as frequently as the reactionary methods of black militants. While there is indeed a history of violence by black militants such as the Black Panthers, much of it was directed towards the police. While this does not assuage or excuse the level of violence enacted by these militants, it does suggest that their targets were not innocent schoolchildren, sharecroppers, or nonviolent ministers but rather those who were often the enactors of state- and nation-sanctioned violence. Moreover, lynchings and other forms of oft-sanctioned murder numbered in the thousands whereas militant groups such as the Black Panthers tallied single digit police deaths at the height of their activity.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, it ignores the very circumstances of this violence, which in many cases was not premeditated but a result of conflicts with the police, such as during police raids of militant strongholds. The Black Panthers and other black militants' intent, no matter how ill-conceived or practiced, was often self-defense; white racists were acting in order to maintain power and privilege that relied on black disempowerment. All of this is particularly true within the context of the film's own narrative: Though he concedes that Wheeler likely will not receive a fair trial in a white supremacist South Africa, Dilman still chooses to extradite Wheeler for a retaliatory attack against the brutal enforcers of the harsh system of apartheid.

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<sup>11</sup> In the *Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, noted journalist and Huey P. Newton biographer Hugh Pearson attributed 9 police deaths and 56 wounded officers over a three-year period of confrontations (206).

Of course, there is little room for subtlety or nuance in a 90-minute film originally intended for television. As such, the veracity of Wheeler's claims that the South African public defense minister had targeted and killed innocent protesters are never substantiated or given room to problematize the notion of racial violence. For Dilman and the makers of *The Man*, the conclusion is simple: Murder is murder. He suggests as much in his final press conference before attending the national convention by stating, "We cannot murder the tyranny by murdering the tyrant, and we cannot murder the dream by murdering the dreamer. And if we justify the taking of any life in the name of our morality, we've done nothing but murder our morality." Through Dilman, *The Man* easily and unproblematically equates the assassination of a racist South African official to those of presidents and famed civil rights advocates, all under the pretense of colorblind justice. Nonetheless, it is simply pretense, for as Erica R. Edwards suggests, what occurs in *The Man* is not really colorblind justice but an advanced form of marginalization that "not only permits but *requires that* blackness police blackness" (50). However, this pretense appears to be sufficient enough to give Dilman a fighting chance at the party's nomination and the nation's favor. Were the film questioning this pretense, it would perhaps be less troubling; instead, the film proffers this pretense as a key part of racial reconciliation.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENTS IN CRISIS

The title of this study, “‘Well, It Is Because He’s Black’” is actually dialogue from the first episode of the first season of the FOX television series *24*. In the opening moments of the first episode, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), lead agent for the Los Angeles-based Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU), learns of a plot to assassinate Senator David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert), the leading presidential candidate who is campaigning in Los Angeles. Upon arriving at CTU headquarters, Bauer immediately commands fellow agent Tony Almeida (Carlos Bernard) to gather information on Palmer. Almeida balks and replies, “If it leaks out that we’re screening Senator Palmer, people might think it’s because he’s black.” Jack responds, “Well, it is because he’s black. It makes him the most likely target.”

However, as the season unfolds, viewers learn that Bauer’s initial assumptions are incorrect: the assassination plot, which also involved the kidnapping of Bauer’s wife and daughter, has nothing to do with Palmer’s being black. Instead, the plot is being carried out by Victor Drazen, a chief operative of Slobadon Mivlošević who seeks revenge against Palmer and Bauer for their involvement in a failed attempt to assassinate him that resulted in the accidental deaths of Drazen’s wife and daughter. As Ina Rae Hark notes, “[W]hen Jack and Palmer meet for the first time and compare notes, Palmer exclaims, ‘What’s incredible to me is that none of this has anything to do with me running for president, it has nothing to do with the primary, it has nothing to do with my being black’... Indeed, there is no attempt to portray the Palmer bid for the presidency with any knowledge of racial realpolitik” (132). In fact, throughout the four seasons of *24* in which David Palmer and, later, his brother Wayne Palmer (D.B. Woodside)



serve as president, race—at least in regards to the blackness of the presidents—does not play a significant factor in any of the storylines and is not a factor in either of their eventual assassinations.<sup>1</sup>

That *24* and the films and television series featuring a black president that follow *The Man* (1972) rarely (if ever) mention race is not surprising, for these films largely are not about the black president. While the black president is often an important character, more often than not, he is not the central protagonist. In most cases, the black president acts as a foil to the always white central protagonist. Granted, the relationship between the black president and the central protagonist of these later films is not necessarily adversarial or even very contentious. Nonetheless, the black president frequently serves as one of the more glaring indicators of the central protagonist's displacement, for in most of the films featuring a black president, the white male central protagonist is often a fallen or forsaken figure who seeks redemption and/or validation. This redemption and/or validation always requires the central protagonist to complete heroic feats—often against the black president's plans or wishes—to save mankind and oftentimes follows the sacrifice of the black president himself.

Not only does the black president act as a foil to these white protagonists, but also he frequently is involved in narratives that put no less than the very world at stake. In what has been a relatively prolific appearance of black presidents, 1997 to the present, he has presided in office while the world faces disasters ranging from a giant comet hurtling towards earth to the reign of the Antichrist to the fulfillment of the ancient Mayan prophecies of the earth's destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Palmer's fate is uncertain. After an assassination attempt leaves him in critical condition, he spends part of the sixth season comatose. However, he is brought out from his coma against doctor's orders. By the conclusion of the season, Wayne Palmer suffers a brain hemorrhage and slips back into a coma, one from which his doctor suggests he will not awaken.

Therefore, this chapter hopes to further interrogate this continued linkage between the black president, impending doom, and white heroic redemption and/or validation in film and television through an analysis of those films and television series in which a black president has been featured. Although this chapter will reference all of the disaster/science fiction genre films and series featuring a black president, the emphasis will be on *Deep Impact* (1998) and *2012* (2009), as they serve as exemplary bookends of this relatively prolific period of black cinematic presidents. The argument here is that, though the codes and messages have changed over time, the end result remains that a black presidency is indicted in film as a direct and indirect threat to national and racial sanctity, a threat only nullified by white (and particularly male) intervention and resurgence.

#### Fear of a Black President: The Birth of a Nation as Precursor

Any suggestion that some degree of similarity exists between D.W. Griffith's controversial epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Roland Emmerich's recent blockbuster disaster film *2012* (2009), at the very least, seems hyperbolic and erroneous. Indeed, on many grounds, a direct comparison between a film based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and a paint-by-numbers, special effects driven disaster movie is quite facetious. However, that said, both films do share a commonality: Both—the former explicitly and the latter implicitly—suggest that black political leadership is a harbinger of doom for the nation and for whiteness.

Often considered one of the greatest films in cinematic history (according to several lists, including the American Film Institute's *100 Years... 100 Movies*), *The Birth of a Nation* has received more than its fair share of analysis of and criticism for its problematic depictions of black people. Of particular interest to scholars has been the character Gus (played in blackface

by white actor Walter Long), a rogue black Union soldier who attempts to rape the innocent white Southern belle Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh). In fact, Donald Bogle, in his oft-cited *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (first published in 1973), uses Gus to describe the buck stereotype, one of the most prominent and enduring black stereotypes in film.<sup>2</sup>

However, *Birth of a Nation* is also responsible for the first cinematic linking of black leadership to impending doom. The second part of the film, which chronicles the pains of Reconstruction for white Southerners, goes to great lengths to imply that black political power—even under the auspices of white Northern carpetbaggers—was indeed the greatest threat to nationhood and whiteness. Using direct quotes from Woodrow Wilson’s series *History of the American People* as evidence of the segment’s alleged historical authenticity, the film suggests that Congress’s decision to enfranchise black voters is responsible for “a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South... in their determination to ‘put the white South under the heel of the black South’” (underlining Griffith’s). Besides its strong indictment of the black popular vote, particularly at the apparent disenfranchisement of genteel white voters, the film points to two key figures as cause for the South’s steep decline before its eventual salvation by the Ku Klux Klan: a raucous, predominantly black South Carolina legislature and Silas Lynch (George Siegmann), the biracial aide to abolitionist Congressman Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis), who, as the film notes, arrives “to aid the carpetbaggers in organizing and wielding the power of the negro vote.”

In fact, Lynch—who one of the film’s placards describes as “a traitor to his white patron and a greater traitor to his own people, whom he plans to lead by an evil way to build himself a

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<sup>2</sup> Of the buck, Bogle writes, “Bucks are always big, baadddd [sic] niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13). Indeed, as Bogle suggests, most of the black men—particularly Gus and the other black Union soldiers—in *The Birth of a Nation* easily can be classified as bucks given their base, impulsive behavior.

throne of vaulting power”—is the film’s true villain. Indeed, Lynch’s villainy is so significant that it merits him first ranking on *Time*’s Top 25 Greatest Villains in movie history (even above noted cinematic heels such as *The Wizard of Oz*’s Wicked Witch of the West and *The Silence of the Lamb*’s Hannibal Lecter!) (Corliss). As the lead orchestrator of the black takeover of the South, Lynch utilizes the black Northern troops to attain his true goals: the formation of a “Black Empire” and a “forced marriage” to the naïve, white Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish). Lynch’s demise—led by the film’s hero, Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall), a Confederate war veteran who founds the Klan—is the first (and arguably most important) strike in the Klan’s successful campaign to retake the South.<sup>3</sup> The suppression of the black vote and the reunification of families torn apart by war complete the restoration of order and revalidation of whiteness.

Perhaps unbeknownst to Griffith, *The Birth of the Nation*’s linkage of black leadership to national and racial ruin would set forth a cinematic trend that would be followed (though certainly not to the letter) nearly a century later. Seemingly, setting a trend was not Griffith’s intent: after all, a placard introducing the second act of the film reads, “This is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today.” Griffith would maintain this argument in the face of NAACP-led boycotts and protests against the film and would even go as far as to use his next film *Intolerance* (1916) as an “epic refutation of *Birth*’s detractors” (Simmon 11). In fact, by most accounts, Griffith was apolitical: *Slate* film reviewer Bryan Curtis writes in “D.W. Griffith in Black and White,” “[C]asting Griffith as a fire-breathing racist and pro-South pamphleteer perhaps gives him too

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<sup>3</sup> The aforementioned “overthrow” first emerges in the form of an empowered black legislature creating laws that ensure black equality. As the large congregation of black lawmakers carouse and defile the South Carolina State House (in the once aptly named Master’s Hall), they pass laws that require whites to salute black soldiers and, perhaps more ominous, laws that permit interracial marriage. No sooner than these laws are passed, the entire legislature gazes upwards at the balcony, where the hapless “white visitors in the gallery”—a gentleman and his two daughters—shirk away in fear as the black constituency celebrates. In the midst of the celebration, the camera closes in on Silas Lynch, whose campaign for power is responsible for a predominantly black legislature.

much credit. Outside of a vague Southern populism, the director had no personal politics to speak of.” Prefaces and the apparent absence of a political ideology aside, however, Griffith—through Hollywood’s first blockbuster film—set a precedent to be followed nearly a century later in films such as the recent *2012*.

The assertion here is not that *2012* evokes the same overtly racist imagery and messages as *The Birth of a Nation*. Whereas *The Birth of a Nation* primarily presents black men as either treacherous bucks and villains or as faithful servants who recognize their place, *2012* portrays black characters in a rather positive albeit one-dimensional manner. *2012*’s President Thomas Wilson (Danny Glover), by no means, is Silas Lynch. Though he presides over the Oval Office as the fulfillment of the ancient Mayan prophecies draws nigh, he is not implicated in the world’s demise. At worst, as he tries to maintain some semblance of order in the face of an all-consuming natural disaster, he is guilty of hiding imminent doom from the world. Throughout the film, Wilson is a level-headed, articulate, and conscientious commander-in-chief. In fact, that Wilson is an uncontested president of the United States can be seen as rather progressive considering the relatively few instances in which a black president has appeared on screen. Nonetheless, despite seating a black man in the highest office of the land, *2012* maintains some of *The Birth of a Nation*’s trappings: the threat of national and inherently racial disaster as a direct or indirect result of black leadership; the fall and rise of a downtrodden white hero; the salvation and reunification of the disjointed white family; and the restoration of order through the white hero’s efforts.

One might be inclined to see these similarities as mere coincidences or inherent conventions of the disaster genre. Indeed, there is some credibility in that line of thought. After all, insert a white president and *2012* is virtually no different than Emmerich’s other natural

disaster film *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004). In fact, *2012*'s President Wilson is a far more attentive, competent, and commanding leader than *The Day after Tomorrow*'s President Blake (Perry King), whom Emmerich admittedly based on former president George W. Bush as a means to criticize the Bush administration's stance on global warming and its allegiances to corporate interests (Bowles 2004). That notwithstanding, there are a few reasons why one should not dismiss these shared traits.

First, as mentioned earlier, there are relatively few Hollywood films that feature a black president (or black person of significant influence and power). Those that do, particularly those featuring a black president such as the aforementioned *2012*, *Deep Impact* (1998) *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Left Behind: World at War* (2005), and the television series *24* (2001-2010) and *The Event* (2010-present), present narratives in which the world as we know it faces or is in the midst of complete destruction or ruin.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a correlation—one that essentially links a black presidency to destruction and chaos—can be made between the relatively infrequent appearance of the black president in film and the consistent disaster and disruption narratives of those films.

Second, these films' depictions of the black president do not exist in isolation. In fact, they are preceded by and coexist with several sci-fi and political novels that evoke the same themes. As early as 1926, when Brazilian author Monteiro Lobato's *O Presidente Negro* was published, novelists have presented a nation and a race that would be torn apart by a black president. Lobato's novel traces black politician James Roy Wilde's rise to the American presidency, a move that ultimately sets off a race war, Wilde's assassination, and a cruel eugenics experiment that results in the forced sterilization and extinction of black Americans. Decades later, noted sci-fi author Philip K. Dick's *The Crack in Space* (1966) emerged with

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<sup>4</sup> *The Event* will be discussed in more detail in the Epilogue.

similar themes. Black politician Jim Briskin campaigns to become president as the country faces its greatest crisis: deciding what to do with a growing mass of cryogenically frozen minorities (mostly African Americans and Latinos) in an overpopulated United States. Even more recent novels, such as Jack McDevitt's *Moonfall* (1998) (which contains an incredibly similar plot to the film *Deep Impact*) and Jan Coffey's *The Deadliest Strain* (2008), place a black man in the Oval Office as the world faces certain disaster (a large chunk of shattered moon debris hurtling towards Earth in the former and a flesh-eating disease pandemic in the latter).

However, most importantly, race—even if unintentionally—often signifies danger or inadequacy in film. Certainly, race does not signify the same meaning from film to film nor does race maintain the same meaning over time. For example, as Vincent F. Rocchio writes of *The Birth of a Nation*, “The codes that governed certain meanings within *The Birth of a Nation* have thus been abandoned, making it easy for current viewers to see the artificiality of what was once taken for truth” (31). However, Rocchio later qualifies those remarks: “In this respect, the film can function as an object lesson precisely because, although the abandoned codes of the past may seem obvious and artificial today, their reemergence into other forms, or their transformation into other codes are far less visible and meet with far less resistance” (31). Therefore, while it might prove foolhardy to offer a direct comparison between Silas Lynch in *The Birth of a Nation* and black cinematic presidents in films such as *2012*, it is not so to suggest that there likely has been some reemergence of or transformation of *The Birth of a Nation*'s codes in these latter films.

#### From *Deep Impact* to *2012*: The Black President in Crisis

To say that Silas Lynch is not the direct model for today's black cinematic president is an understatement. In fact, today's black cinematic president represents a dramatic shift from the

negative, stereotypical representation of an empowered black man in *The Birth of a Nation*. Like Douglass Dilman of *The Man*, most of the black cinematic presidents are honorable men who, for all intents and purposes, are well suited for the presidency. Indeed, the threat is no longer a malevolent black politician with plans for black dominion over the South. Instead, the nature of the threat has shifted to a black president who is incapable of managing a crisis, thus necessitating white male intervention.

While white cinematic presidents of the late 1990s to the present mostly have suffered from either Clintonian scandals or the comical ineptitude inspired by George W. Bush, black cinematic presidents faced nothing short of the possible destruction of the world. Upon the end of his near three decade long hiatus, the black cinematic president returned to theaters in *The Fifth Element* in 1997 only to face a moon-sized entity known as the Great Evil hurtling towards earth. A year later, in *Deep Impact*, the black cinematic president faced the threat of a 7-mile wide comet striking earth and inflicting cataclysmic damage. Given that *Deep Impact* is the first film after *The Man* in which the black cinematic president—though he is not the lead protagonist—plays a significant role in the film’s narrative, it serves as an important film for establishing how sustained the narratives involving and the portrayal of black cinematic presidents have been in this period of relative proliferation.

In *Deep Impact*, President Tom Beck (Morgan Freeman) presides in office as a gigantic comet speeds towards earth. The comet—dubbed *Wolf-Biedermann* after its co-discoverers—had been discovered in 1998; however, after the accidental death of Dr. Marcus Wolf (Charles Martin Smith), the professional astronomer who shares credit for the comet’s discovery and projected its course towards earth, the Beck administration chooses to keep the discovery secret. A year later, intrepid television news reporter Jenny Lerner (Téa Leoni) accidentally uncovers



the secret during her investigation of Treasury Secretary Alan Rittenhouse's (James Crowell) surprise resignation. When Beck discovers that Lerner knows that the comet has been classified as an Extinction Level Event (ELE), he immediately has her brought in by the FBI. In exchange for her silence, Beck agrees to let the fledgling reporter ask the first set of questions during the presidential address in which he will announce his plans for destroying the comet. The president's plans involve launching a space shuttle—appropriately named *Messiah*, for it proves to be earth's last chance at salvation—with an expert crew of astronauts to land on the comet's surface, where they will drill and then plant several nuclear bombs to destroy it.

However, Beck's plans go awry. Over a year later, *Messiah* embarks on its mission, and though the crew successfully detonates the bombs on the comet's surface, the bombs do not destroy it. Instead, it splits into two, and both pieces still race towards earth. After getting word of the mission's failure, Beck announces both the mission's failure and the country's fallback plan, which involves launching a coordinated missile strike once the comet is in range. Furthermore, he reveals that, should the missile attack plan fail, the government will house a million American citizens—200,000 of whom are important government officials, scientists, teachers, and other important figures with the remaining 800,000 to be randomly selected by lottery—inside a shelter inside the limestone hills of Missouri until they can return to the surface in two years. He assures the American public that the shelter is a cautionary step to ensure the American way of life will continue.

Nonetheless, Beck's secondary measures also fail: the missiles do not destroy the smaller comet fragment, and the larger one still trails behind. Once again, Beck tells the public that his efforts have failed and that the lives of hundreds of millions of Americans will end. He informs everyone that the smaller fragment will destroy the Eastern seaboard, and the larger fragment

will be nothing short of the ELE that scientists have predicted. His efforts exhausted, Beck has no hope left to offer to Americans, and as a result, can only warn them to get away from the coasts and wish them luck as he reluctantly heads towards the Missouri shelter. The first comet strikes off the coast of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, causing a tremendous tidal wave that crashes hundreds of miles inland. Viewers watch as the Statue of Liberty and much of Manhattan—frequent victims in disaster films—are wiped away as are the cluttered highways of people fleeing from the waves. Only the heroic, last-minute sacrifice of the crew of *Messiah* keeps the body count from reaching billions in number.

Indeed, whenever he appears in disaster/sci-fi genre films, the black cinematic president is particularly impotent in the face of a crisis. Though he has more significant screen time, *Deep Impact*'s President Beck proves no more capable of ensuring the planet's salvation than his immediate predecessor, President Lindberg (Tiny Lister, Jr.) of *The Fifth Element* (1997). Even with minimal screen time, Lindberg—the first black cinematic president to appear after *The Man*—charts the course for the black cinematic presidents to follow. As a moon-sized entity known as the Great Evil rushes towards earth, President Lindberg—despite having vast futuristic armed forces at his disposal—is powerless to stop it. Of the few brief moments in which Lindberg appears, most show him as forlorn, particularly as his plans to stop the Great Evil fail and the film's true hero, Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis), acts on his own accord and with the help of a small band of misfits saves earth from destruction. In fact, Lindberg's incompetence is so significant that, in the film's final piece of dialogue, he is berated over the phone by Dallas's shrewish mother, who calls him “an idiot.” Though Dallas's mother's nagging behavior is a running joke throughout the film, there is little to disprove that her judgment of the president is

incorrect. In the face of adversity, he fails to effectively manage his resources and cannot take any credit for stopping the Great Evil.

In *The Fifth Element*, catastrophe ultimately is averted. However, in the ensuing years, under the reign of the black cinematic president, the threats become greater; massive death and destruction actually occur; and the black cinematic president shifts from being incompetent to being ineffective to being sacrificial. In the disaster/sci-fi movies and series that follow *The Fifth Element* and *Deep Impact*, the black president is either assassinated or must sacrifice himself for some past transgression and ultimately for the greater good of mankind.

The film *2012*, which as of this writing is the latest disaster film featuring a black president, best exemplifies this prevailing trend. The film begins in 2009 with intrepid geologist Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) venturing off to India where he meets with fellow astrophysicist Dr. Satnam Tsurutani (Jimi Mistry), who informs him that neutrinos from the sun are heating the earth's core, which will bring about a series of catastrophes. Helmsley rushes back to the United States to inform White House Chief of Staff Carl Anheuser (Oliver Platt) of his research. The scene shifts to the 2010 G8 Summit, where President Wilson (Danny Glover) informs the various heads of state, "The world as we know it will soon come to an end." The G8 leaders secretly authorize the construction of several vessels—dubbed *arks*—in the nether regions of Tibet. To fund the construction of these arks, seats are sold to the highest bidders, with the opening price set at €1 billion euros. However, Helmsley's projections prove erroneous, and the timetable for the earth's destruction accelerates. As a result, there is only time to complete and board four arks and save roughly 400,000 people. Without informing the general populace, President Wilson urges the heads of state to begin evacuating those who have purchased seats on the four completed arks.

Soon, a series of destructive events ensues: a massive 10.9 earthquake wipes out the California coastline; Yellowstone National Park is destroyed by underground volcanic eruptions; the Christ the Redeemer statue overlooking Rio de Janeiro crumbles into pieces; and so on. As Washington, DC, and the rest of the world crumbles, Wilson remains behind, delivering a presidential address from the Oval Office. He is interrupted by a large scale blackout as he leads viewers through *The Lord's Prayer*. The next time viewers see President Wilson, he is covered in dirt in a devastated Washington, DC. As he exits the White House, he walks through a lawn full of ambulances and other emergency services as ash from nearby volcanic eruptions descends. He looks on in horror as, in the distance, a massive earthquake forces the Washington Monument to break in half and to topple down upon a large crowd. Moments later, Wilson comes to terms with his imminent death as he stares at a large tsunami rushing as it sends the *USS John Kennedy* naval aircraft supercarrier crashing down upon the White House.

Beyond their highlighting of the black cinematic president's inability to stop or even curtail catastrophe, *Deep Impact* and *2012* share two important commonalities that largely will factor into those disaster/sci-fi films and series that have emerged in recent years. The first is the notion that not everyone can be saved. Both films make it clear that a limited few will survive to continue humanity. The decision on who lives and who dies is largely determined by a black-helmed bureaucracy that, while not to blame for the disasters that ensue, largely has failed. To make matters worse, the processes to determine who is saved proves to be either flawed or unfair.

In *Deep Impact*, the process is seemingly practical: the chosen are government officials, scientists, teachers, and others—most of whom will have to be under age 55—who are essential to maintaining the American way of life. However, it goes wrong in its implementation. Teenage

astronomer Leo Beiderman (Elijah Wood) and his family are granted entrance to the Missouri shelter. In order to assure that his girlfriend Sarah (Leelee Sobieski) and her family can come along, Leo marries her days before the evacuation order is given. However, when government officials arrive to escort the family to the shelter, there is no record of Sarah's family on the register; as a result, Leo must leave Sarah and her family behind. In *2012*, however, capitalism rules: no matter how unhealthy or how evil they may be, only the leaders of the wealthiest nations and the wealthy themselves get to board the arks. As was the case with *Deep Impact*, viewers witness hordes of innocent victims being killed in the wake of destruction, including Dr. Satnam Tsurutani, the Indian astrophysicist who first discovered the cause of the destruction, and his family. In short, though clearly without ill intent, the decisions of black cinematic presidents rends families, particularly those most worthy of salvation.

However, the second distinctive commonality is more important and perhaps the key reason as to why black cinematic presidents are portrayed in the manner in which they are: they are incomplete men. With one exception on the small screen, Christina Martinez (Lisa Vidal) of *The Event*, the black cinematic president is never seen with a First Lady.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the black president either is too young to be married (*Rufus Jones for President*); is a widower (*2012*, *Left Behind: World at War*, *The Man*); is a divorcee (David Palmer of *24*); has an ambiguous, unmentioned marital status (*Deep Impact*, *The Fifth Element*); or is single (*Head of State*, *Idiocracy*).<sup>6</sup> For most of the black cinematic presidents, the family unit is permanently broken and cannot continue, thus making him expendable. For instance in *2012*, with the end of the

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<sup>5</sup> The second black president in *24*, Wayne Palmer, is married, but his wife never makes an appearance during the sixth season.

<sup>6</sup> In *24*, Palmer is married to Sherry Palmer (Penny Johnson Jerald) when he is campaigning as a senator; however, they divorce before he is sworn in as president.

world assured for billions of people, there quite simply is no reason for President Wilson, a widower, to go on, which is why he eventually comes to terms with death.

Indeed, the black cinematic president has many attributes of the “ebony saint,” whom film historian Ed Guerrero describes as a “sterile paragon of virtue completely devoid of mature characterization or of any political or social reality” (72). Guerrero attributes the origins of the “ebony saint” persona to actors such as Sidney Poitier who, in his most successful films such as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *To Sir, With Love* (1967) played honorable yet emasculated men—a police detective in the former and a schoolteacher in the latter, both loveless. Wendy Sung suggests:

[C]ertain ideological tenets within these films underscored the fact that Hollywood tightly controlled what black images were suitable for audiences... Indeed, these nonthreatening characters typified largely white, middle-class codes of acceptable behavior. The personas of both Poitier and a subsequent figure such as Bill Cosby would come to represent a noble, desexualized, nonthreatening figure—the Civil Rights era’s notion of what is commonly known as the “race man.” (251)<sup>7</sup>

As Guerrero and Sung conclude, what made Poitier’s persona and characters so appealing is that they were nonthreatening, and much of what made Poitier and his characters nonthreatening is that they were desexualized. While Sung acknowledges that Poitier’s characters and personas were meant to refute the stereotypes of decades past, she concludes that the unfortunate response

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Anthony Neal describes the “race man” as “a term from the beginning of the 20th century that describes black men of stature and integrity who represented the best that African Americans had to offer in the face of Jim Crow segregation... Race men inspire pride; their work, their actions and their speech represent excellence instead of evoking shame and embarrassment” (“Does Denzel Always Have to Represent?”).

to these stereotypes was “a tightly controlled, limited representation that restricted potentially diverse images” (251).

Along those lines, Roopali Mukherjee notes, the ebony saint was a critical component of 1960s “problem film” genre, or those “dramatizations of dilemmas confronting beleaguered whites who would ultimately be persuaded to racial integration by ethical claims” (89). Mukherjee goes on to indicate how problem films eventually transformed into “affirmative action films,” those 1990s films “that offered dramatic critiques of bureaucratic improprieties and structural injustices occasioned by what were perceived as stagnating and burdensome inheritances from the civil rights era” (87). She suggests these films maintain all the trappings of the problem film genre, including the “[s]moothing over [of] historical and cultural antagonisms between men of different races.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, as films such as *The Birth of a Nation* indicate, a source of these antagonisms historically has been women. Thus, minimizing black male access to and desires for women—particularly white women—has been a key aspect of both the problem and affirmative action film genres.

Moreover, the actors who portray black presidents in the disaster/sci-fi genre films and television series primarily are actors who have followed in Poitier’s footsteps and who have had success in affirmative action films: Morgan Freeman, Danny Glover, Louis Gossett, Jr., Dennis Haysbert, and Blair Underwood.<sup>9</sup> Most of these actors—especially Freeman, Glover, and Gossett—have earned critical acclaim for their frequent roles in a host of “buddy films,” which Donald Bogle describes as those films in which “more often than not, the black performer

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<sup>8</sup> In these affirmative action films, Mukherjee also notes the presence of “a white hero not as he was during the eighties, bashing through doors and plate-glass windows to bring wayward villains to justice... but instead as lost and frustrated in an alien landscape overrun by outsiders” (90).

<sup>9</sup> Tiny Lister, Jr. is the one exception to this rule. The nearly seven foot-tall, 300-plus pound actor is mostly noted for his roles as the professional “heel” (bad guy) wrestler Zeus in the World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment) in the late 1980s-early 1990s and as the menacing neighborhood bully Deebo in the comedy *Friday* (1995).

functioned as a sidekick or, as in past films, he blesses his white friend with a tender loyalty and imparts comforting spiritual insight” (272). As B. Lee Artz notes, two of the primary characteristics of these buddy films are that white authority is sacrosanct even in the face of black authority figures and that the black buddies are desexed and isolated from their communities (75).<sup>10</sup> These buddy films serve as a precursor to the black presidential films and as a likely explanation as to why the black actors in those films make such an easy transition into portraying black presidents. After all, the aforementioned actors typically are well-received by mainstream audiences and film critics when they fulfill the role of the buddy.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, as the deaths of the black cinematic president in *24*, *2012*, and *Left Behind: World at War* make clear, he is a disposable figure, a necessary sacrifice in atonement for the loss of or for the continuance of life. The necessity of his sacrifice becomes even clearer when one considers that, in this genre of film and television, the black president is never the lead protagonist. Instead, as suggested earlier, he acts as a foil to the film’s lead protagonist. In short, the black cinematic president heralds the triumphant resurgence of the deposed white hero.

#### Modern Day Ben Camerons: White Heroes in Black Presidential Films

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison refutes the notion that blackness had no impact on American literature. Quite the contrary, Morrison argues throughout the book, stating “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way [American literature] writers peopled

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<sup>10</sup> Erica R. Edwards implies this tendency towards isolation in black presidential films such as *Deep Impact* when she writes, “Indeed, black women are all but locked out of *Deep Impact*’s pageant of the normative” (50).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Morgan Freeman’s sole Oscar win (though he has been nominated several times) for Best Supporting Actor is for his role in Clint Eastwood’s *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) as Eddie “Scrap-Iron” Dupris, a former boxer who encourages white female boxer Maggie Fitzgerald (Hillary Swank) alongside her trainer Frankie Dunn (Eastwood). Prior to Freeman’s win, Louis Gossett, Jr. won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) as Sergeant Emil Foley, a drill sergeant who trains raw Navy recruit Zack Mayo (Richard Gere) to be a top-notch naval officer.



their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (6). The literary use of blackness, which she calls “American Africanism,” suits multiple purposes, all of which largely justify and/or reify the primacy of whiteness.<sup>12</sup> In particular, she sees this American Africanism at play in what she isolates as the major themes of American literature—autonomy, authority, newness and difference, and absolute power. Of these four themes, Morrison writes, “Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered ‘individualism’; newness translates into ‘innocence’; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering ‘heroism,’ virility, and the problematic of wielding absolute power over the lives of others” (44-45). While Morrison’s focus is on how American Africanism helps to delimit these themes in American literature, her theory certainly can be applied to these black cinematic presidential films, for as shall be argued here, the black cinematic president is every bit the “potent and ego-reinforcing presence” needed to establish the heroism of the white protagonists.

It is helpful here to once again look to *The Birth of a Nation*, for it is in Hollywood’s first blockbuster that, according to noted scholars John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, the American monomythic hero in the face of the Other begins to “crystallize” (27). Lawrence and Jewett’s text point out the degree to which the triumphant rise of the film’s hero, wounded Civil War veteran Ben Cameron, is highly dependent on the disruption of an idyllic South by the presence of interlopers that are or can be read as black—the aforementioned Silas Lynch, newly freed black soldier Gus, and white abolitionist Austin Stoneman (28). In short, “the monomythic

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<sup>12</sup> Morrison writes, “Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (7).

scheme of a restoration of paradise by selfless violence” that occurs in *The Birth of a Nation* by the hands of Ben Cameron and the Ku Klux Klan involves the deaths of those black(ened) men who placed paradise in peril in the first place (Lawrence and Jewett 29). Lawrence and Jewett’s conclusions regarding *The Birth of a Nation* align well with Toni Morrison’s suggestion that all of the themes of American literature are made by possible through “absolute power called forth and played against and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a ‘raw, half-savage world’” (45).

As stated earlier, the contention here is not that the black presidential films exactly replicate the narrative and codes of *The Birth of a Nation*, but there is indeed some negotiation with them in these recent black presidential films. This becomes clear when one looks at the protagonists of these films, most of whom are white men who are indeed modern day Ben Camerons: devalued white men who must reclaim their value and create or re-unify their families. Just as Ben Cameron must undertake bold action to avenge his sister Flora (who leapt to her death rather than be raped by Gus), restore peace and tranquility to the South, and bring about family unity, so must the protagonists of the black presidential films, only on a larger scale. Once again, an examination of *Deep Impact* and *2012* is apropos for proving that such is the case.

Interestingly enough, both *Deep Impact* and *2012* actually have multiple protagonists; however, the primary concern in both films is in regards to the beleaguered white male capable of procreation. In *Deep Impact*, for example, the film’s protagonists are student astronomer Leo Biederman, television reporter Jenny Lerner, and expert astronaut Spurgeon “Fish” Tanner (Robert Duvall, who receives top billing). While each plays a significant role in the film, ultimately, the sole survivor and the focus of the film is Leo Biederman, the only one capable of

forming a family unit. Nonetheless, throughout most of the film, the three share a commonality: their value is not recognized by those around them, and their fates are tied to decisions made by President Beck.

Tanner enters the film when President Beck announces the crew of the *Messiah* mission. The crew is young and highly intelligent, but none have any actual experience on a manned space flight save for Tanner, who is the last American astronaut to conduct a lunar landing. However, his age and experience not only distinguishes him from his fellow crewmembers, but also they make him an object of their ridicule, particularly from young flight commander Oren Monash (Ron Eldard). In the scene that establishes the tension between Tanner and Monash, the crew gathers at a local bar shortly after the press conference. As the rest of the crew discusses the mission, Tanner stands alone at the bar. He finally approaches the crew in an attempt to break the ice, but Monash immediately rebuffs him by stating, “We respect you... But you’re here... because the powers-that-be think we need a familiar face on this trip. You’re here for public relations.” Monash and the technically savvy crew pay little heed to Tanner, who tries to inform them that landing on the comet’s surface will prove far more complicated than their flight simulators suggest.

In the end, Tanner’s wisdom and experience proves more useful than the crew’s intelligence and technical know-how. As the mission quickly goes awry, including the death of crew member Gus Partenza (Jon Favreau) and Monash being blinded by solar rays, Tanner takes the leadership position that clearly should have been his from the start. As the larger *Wolf* comet threatens to strike, it is Tanner who thinks of the last ditch effort—crashing and exploding the *Messiah* in a small fissure within the comet—to stop it. Though the ploy results in the deaths of the remaining crew members, it does break up the *Wolf* comet so that its fragments burn up

harmlessly in earth's atmosphere. While the *Messiah* crew's heroic sacrifice is tragic, it does fit the pattern in which only those white men who are capable of reproduction or reuniting families are of consequence in these black presidential films. A widower with two grown children, Tanner—not unlike the black cinematic presidents that follow *Deep Impact*'s President Beck—is expendable as he is no longer capable of reproducing or unifying his family.

The same applies to Jenny Lerner, the hotshot MSNBC reporter who uncovers the secret of the *Wolf-Biederman* comet. When the film begins, Lerner is a talented, junior reporter purposely being held back by her managing editor, Beth Stanley (Laura Innes). After successfully reporting on the Treasury Secretary's surprise resignation, Lerner seeks an opportunity to try out for a Saturday anchor shift at the network, even if only temporarily. However, Stanley brushes her off and suggests that, despite her brilliance, Lerner go through the tedious process of getting to the anchor's seat like everyone else seemingly has. In fact, when Lerner frankly asks, "Are you protecting me or holding me back?" Stanley replies with an equally blunt "Yes."

Of course, Lerner's exceptional investigative skills pay off: not only does she talk her way into being the first reporter to address President Beck in regards to the comet but also she becomes the leading anchor as the comet approaches. However, despite her overcoming Stanley's purposeful stagnating of her career, Lerner cannot rectify the other major issue in her life, which is her fractured family. Throughout the film, just as Lerner attempts to uncover the news of the Treasury Secretary's resignation, she also wrestles with the fact her father Jason Lerner (Maximillian Schell) has left her cancer-stricken mother Robin Lerner (Vanessa Redgrave) to marry Andrea (Mary McCormack), a woman her age. Her father attempts to make

amends throughout the film, but she grows more obstinate, particularly after her mother dies and the threat of the comet landing grows more dire.

The push-pull relationship between Jenny and Jason Lerner leads noted psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek to conclude, “[T]he film is effectively a drama about this unresolved proto-incestuous father-daughter relationship: the threatening comet obviously gives body to the self-destructive rage of the heroine, without a boyfriend, with an obvious traumatic fixation on her father, flabbergasted by her father’s remarriage, unable to come to terms with the fact that he has abandoned her for her peer” (165).<sup>13</sup> To the degree that this is true, however, the fate of the Lerner suggests that this “proto-incestuous” relationship is unfavorable. Jenny Lerner, who has been granted a place in the Missouri shelter, eventually forsakes her place to reunite with her father, who has been abandoned by his young new wife. The two meet at the beach where the family used to vacation, and as the tsunami that will wreak havoc on the East Coast looms, the two finally reconcile before being crushed by the waves. Because it is an incomplete union, Jenny Lerner’s fate essentially was sealed from the beginning.

As a result, the only lead protagonist who survives the impact of the *Biederman* comet is the teenager for whom it is named. While Leo Biederman does not face the same level of initial hardship as either Sturgeon Tanner or Jenny Lerner, he eventually must react after Sarah and her family are left behind.<sup>14</sup> After he and his family are transported to the Missouri shelter, Biederman decides that he wants to go back to save Sarah. With his parents blessing, he breaks away from the shelter guards and hitchhikes back home only to find that Sarah and her family—like many others—have evacuated for higher ground. Taking Sarah’s father’s dirtbike, he races

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<sup>13</sup> In his essay, “The Thing from Inner Space: *Titanic* and *Deep Impact*,” Žižek asserts that disaster films, read from a Freudian perspective, are “the reification of some disturbance in sexual relationships” (165).

<sup>14</sup> Until President Beck publically reveals the existence of *Wolf-Biederman*, Leo Biederman is presumed by all to have been killed in the same car crash with Dr. Marcus Wolf.

off to find them. As he maneuvers the dirt bike through miles of stalled traffic, he eventually finds Sarah and her family. Her parents insist that he takes both Sarah and their infant daughter along with him. As the tsunami crashes inland, the three race away up a mountainside to safety. Thus, the film concludes with the reunification of a white nuclear family and the rebirth of a nation as the rebuilding process begins.

However, as has been suggested throughout this chapter, in the more recent black presidential films, the stakes are higher, and the heroes must overcome greater obstacles. In *2012*, the greater travails faced by the film's lead protagonist, Jackson Curtis (John Cusack), exemplify this. Unlike Adrian Helmsley, the film's secondary protagonist, Curtis does not come from a privileged position; he is a struggling yet visionary science fiction author working as a chauffeur for bullish Russian billionaire Yuri Karpov (Zlatko Buric). His limited ability to provide for his family has split them apart, causing his ex-wife Kate (Amanda Peet) and children Noah (Liam James) and Lilly (Morgan Lily) to leave him for Gordon Silberman (Thomas McCarthy), a well-to-do plastic surgeon. At the beginning of the film, Curtis attempts to repair his broken relationship with his children by taking them on a camping trip to Yellowstone National Park. However, his son's resentment for him is strong and his lack of familiarity with his daughter is glaring. Before he is able to do much in the way of bonding with them, the first major earthquake hits Los Angeles, and Kate forces him to bring the children back home. To make matters worse, no sooner than he leaves Noah and Lilly with his ex-wife, Curtis must rush to pick up Karpov's spoiled twin sons to take them to the airport so that they can prepare for their journey to the arks.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> While in Yellowstone, the family encounters Charlie Frost (Woody Harrelson), a conspiracy theorist residing in Yellowstone. Though Curtis does not believe him at the time, Frost informs him of pending disasters and the arks being built in Tibet. It is when Curtis takes Karpov's twins to the airport and they off-handedly suggest that they have boarding passes for the arks that he realizes that Frost was correct.

Despite his struggles, Curtis turns out to be the most resourceful character in the entire film. He proves to be quite resilient, and it is his practical skills as a chauffeur that saves his family on a few occasions. For example, as the massive earthquake that ultimately destroys the California coastline begins, Curtis returns to his ex-wife's new home to save them. In one of the more spectacular scenes, Curtis rescues his family by daringly driving his limousine through Los Angeles as it literally bursts apart in front of him. A few scenes later, he drives a recreational vehicle through Yellowstone as earthquakes and volcanoes decimate the historic park.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, however, it is Curtis who is able to swim through the labyrinth-like inner chambers of the flooded ark to remove the riveter lodged in the gears that open and close the ark's drawbridge.<sup>17</sup> In short, despite the numerous obstacles against him, Curtis is instrumental in his and his family's salvation and eventual reunion. The film concludes with a reunited Curtis family staring out from the deck of their ark at the continent of Africa, the only remaining land mass on Earth.

*Deep Impact* and *2012* present us narratives in which disjointed families are reunified. However, when such is not the case, as in *The Fifth Element* and *Left Behind: World at War*, the prospect for new families is created. *The Fifth Element*, for example, concludes with Korben Dallas and Leeloo (Milla Jovovich) consummating their relationship inside the very chamber in

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<sup>16</sup> The vehicle belongs to Charlie Frost and contains a map indicating the location of the arks. The rather eccentric Frost has chosen to remain behind to watch the destruction.

<sup>17</sup> After recovering the map of the location of the arks, Curtis and his family along with Gordon Silberman, who happens to be able to pilot small planes, escape Yellowstone and land in another airfield. They encounter Karpov, his girlfriend Tamara (Beatrice Rosen), and his sons, who are stranded at the airfield because Karpov's pilot Sasha (Johann Urb) cannot fly Karpov's jumbo jet on his own. Curtis volunteers Silberman to help fly, and eventually, they head towards Tibet. However, along the way, their plane runs out of gas, and they are forced to crash-land (killing Sasha in the process). Chinese military helicopters spot them and land to rescue them. However, the military only takes Karpov and his sons because they are the only ones with boarding passes. The rest trek on and encounter a Buddhist monk, Nima (Osric Chau) and his grandmother (Lisa Lu), who are going to rendezvous with Nima's brother Tinzin (Chin Han), a laborer who helped construct the arks. Tinzin has planned a way for his family to sneak aboard one of the arks by navigating through the lower tiers. While sneaking aboard, however, the ark gates begin to close as a tsunami approaches. As everyone rushes aboard, Tinzin drops his riveter into the rotating gears and Silberman falls into them and is crushed to death. Moments later, Tamara is killed in a flooded chamber.

which Leeloo was constructed.<sup>18</sup> In *Left Behind: World at War*, the leading members of the Tribulation Force—Buck Williams and Chloe Steele (Janaya Stephens), Rayford Steele (Brad Johnson) and Amanda White (Laura Catalano)—are wedded in a double ceremony. In fact, the only black presidential film or series that does not end with the creation or reunification of the family is *24*. However, as Ina Rae Hark writes of the first season of *24*, the reunification of Jack Bauer's family has been instrumental in the series since the first episode: "Beneath the international spy games and domestic power brokering that is its subject matter, *24* is the story of three fathers whose government work has interfered with the well-being and happiness of their respective families" (130). Hark is correct, for throughout the first season, Bauer not only is a maligned CTU agent but also wrestles with a separation from his wife Teri (Leslie Hope) and animosity from his daughter Kim (Elisha Cuthbert). Much of the first season has Bauer literally trying to reconnect his family as both Kim and Teri are kidnapped on two separate occasions. Though the family unit is irrevocably broken for Bauer (as well as President Palmer and Victor Drazen), he spends the entire series trying to reconnect with his estranged daughter Kim.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, however, is the fact that, of the three main characters of that first season, Bauer is the only one who survives until the series' end.

As Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark*, the matter of absolute power in American narratives are matters of "over whom is this power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed" (45). As a result, it is of little surprise that when absolute power is perceived as

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<sup>18</sup> Leeloo is the Fifth Element, the living vessel which empowers sacred stones representing the classic four elements—earth, fire, wind, and water—that are the only means in which to defeat the Great Evil. At the beginning of the film, scientists uncover DNA material and reconstruct the Fifth Element as a human woman. Frightened by her new form, Leeloo escapes the laboratory and is rescued by Korben Dallas. Later in the film, in order to defeat the Great Evil, Leeloo must be given a reason in which to save the human race from destruction, and the reason is love. As Korben Dallas professes his love for her, it enables her to activate the power of the stones and send a beam of light from her body that turns the Great Evil into stone.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Bauer's wife Teri is killed during the first season of *24* by Nina Myers (Sarah Clarke), a CTU agent who secretly works for Bauer's nemesis Victor Drazen.



being withheld from or threatened to be taken from those who typically have wielded it, namely white men, the result in American literature and cinema has been narratives that reaffirm the centrality of whiteness.

Moreover, as Morrison also suggests, blackness and chaos afford white men a means of “self-definition” (45). She states that these concerns about absolute power are made through the “potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population” (45). Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a more “potent and ego-reinforcing presence” than a black president, particularly one whose very presence and whose choices in the face of crisis place the world and whiteness in danger. As has been the case since *The Birth of a Nation* to 2012, a black man wielding absolute power long has been an effective means of staging difference and privilege, particularly in terms of what can happen if the Other is granted privilege. In short, these narratives serve as frequent affirmations of not only the primacy of whiteness but also the potential disruption that can ensue should our social dynamics be altered.

## CHAPTER IV

### THIS COUNTRY IS UPSIDE DOWN! THE ABSURD BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENT

While he was neither the first black presidential party nominee nor the first viable black candidate for the presidency, comedian and social activist Dick Gregory arguably was the first black presidential candidate who drew a modicum of serious media and voter inquiry. Running as a candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party, Gregory boldly declared in campaign advertisements in those states in which his name appeared on the ballot, “This Country Is Upside Down! Dick GREGORY Can Set It RIGHT!”<sup>1</sup> Though Gregory only would receive just over 47,000 votes nationwide, he earned the endorsements and votes of several prominent figures, ranging from black local and state Congressmen and noted civil rights advocates Julian Bond and John Conyers to famed journalist Hunter S. Thompson.

However, in the end, Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther Party mainstay who defeated Gregory for the Peace and Freedom Party’s presidential nomination, perhaps best appraises Gregory’s chances of victory: “He’s a comedian. I think that’s his bag” (Dunne 29). In short, Gregory’s presidential aspirations were laughable. John Gregory Dunne, who reported on the Peace and Freedom Party’s convention for the *Saturday Evening Post*, also characterized Gregory’s campaign in comedic terms: “[T]he Gregory caucus was a Rowan and Martin Laugh-In... [T]here were jokes that if Dick Gregory were elected, he would paint the White House black and put Eartha Kitt in charge of invitations” (29). Even those who admired Gregory for his activism believed his efforts were foolhardy. For instance, Conrad Lynn, a veteran civil rights lawyer, stated, “The big trouble is that whites still have not learned to take the black man

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory initially ran for the presidential nomination of the fledgling California-based Peace and Freedom Party; however, he lost at the Party’s convention to eventual nominee Eldridge Cleaver. Subsequently, Gregory ran as a nominee of the New York-based Freedom and Peace Party. Gregory’s presidential campaign largely was based on encouraging voters to write-in his name on the ballot.

seriously—and Gregory’s comic image, in spite of all the earnestness and dedication of his efforts, only helps to twist the race crisis into some sort of ‘Camp’” (Asinof 51).

Lynn’s fears that whites would not “take the black man seriously” as a presidential candidate certainly were not unfounded. Though the nation was warming up to the notion of a black president in the late 1960s, no black candidate from any party—particularly the Communist, Freedom and Peace, and Peace and Freedom Parties, all of which had nominated black candidates—had come anywhere close to contending. Whether Gregory’s career as a comedian had any effect on black men—or, in the case of Communist Party nominee Charlene Mitchell, black women—being taken seriously is a moot point, for none of the other black candidates were taken seriously either. As Chapter I indicates, the first “serious” black candidate for the presidency, Jesse Jackson, was still nearly two decades away.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the absurdity of a black presidency has been the other theme that has prevailed in those few films featuring a black president. The black cinematic president makes his debut in 1933 in the short film *Rufus Jones for President*, starring a then-seven year old Sammy Davis, Jr., as the title character. The film includes all of the requisite buffoonery one would expect from a film in which an adolescent is elected president and from a period in which the roles for black actors and actresses were limited to those of coons, mammies, and toms. Over seven decades later, in director Mike Judge’s political satire *Idiocracy* (2006), an equally absurd black cinematic president, former porn star and professional wrestler President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho (Terry Crews), presides over a dystopic United States 500 years in the future.

More interesting, however, is the fact that comedy has been the one genre in which black auteurs have presented their visions of a black presidency. Just as Dick Gregory utilized his

comedy and his presidential campaign to publicly decry poverty, racism, and the Vietnam War, those comedians who followed would use their roles as president as forms of social commentary. As Bambi Haggins suggests, these post-civil rights era comedians “have interrogated myriad social and political maladies, including issues of race, and have spoken to multiple articulations of blackness” (12). Whether it is Richard Pryor poking fun at formality and political discourse as “The 40th President” or Dave Chappelle parodying President George W. Bush in “Black Bush” or Chris Rock campaigning with hip-hop populism as a presidential nominee in *Head of State*, each comedian is offering sharp social critique.

The goal of this chapter is point out the ways in which Chappelle, Pryor and Rock have used their portrayals of fictional black presidents to engage in what Haggins deems a “contentious conversation with the sociopolitical milieu of contemporary American society” (13). This “contentious conversation” acts primarily as a rebuff of the idea that a black president is either a flight of fancy or the realization of all of our social woes—as is the case with *Rufus Jones for President* and *Idiocracy*, respectively. As opposed to presenting base stereotypes, these comedians carve out spaces in which an absurd black president functions as a means for social commentary more so than as reaffirmation of these stereotypes and white primacy.

#### Not Exactly Ideal Presidents: *Rufus Jones for President* and *Idiocracy*

*Gabriel over the White House*, the first film to feature a fictional American president, debuted in 1932, a year in which the American electorate had grown disenchanted with their elected officials, particularly then-president Herbert Hoover. As Michael Krukones notes, “*Gabriel over the White House* was a movie that clearly revealed the yearning of the nation for a strong president during difficult times. Its popularity with audiences in 1933 indicated that it touched a nerve by putting on film what many in the nation fantasized the president and

government should do” (153). The film’s protagonist, the once corrupt President Judson Hammond (Walter Huston), receives divine intervention in the form of the Archangel Gabriel after being in a near-fatal car accident. Afterwards, Hammond becomes Benito Mussolini incarnate: a messianic leader who enacts fascist policies that solve all of the nation’s problems.

So if Judson Hammond epitomizes the hopes of the American electorate for strong leadership, one must ask what does Rufus Jones, Hollywood’s first black president and second fictional president, epitomize? In the virtual vacuum of black political power in the 1930s, it is difficult to say with any certainty that *Rufus Jones for President* is somehow a reaction to the threat of black political power. However, it is worth noting that the 1930s would see the seeds of the Civil Rights Movement planted, particularly in the wake of the Scottsboro Boys case.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the 1930s also would see the first black vice-presidential nominee, James Ford of the Communist Party, to be part of a ticket to receive thousands of popular votes.

While *Rufus Jones for President* likely may not be a direct refutation of burgeoning black political power, nonetheless, its narrative equates the possibility of a black presidency to nothing more than a fanciful dream. The musical comedy begins with seven-year-old Rufus Jones running to the arms of his mother (Ethel Waters) after neighborhood bully Sinbad Johnson hits him in the face with a piece of cake.<sup>3</sup> As she rocks Rufus to sleep in her porch rocking chair, she assures him that Sinbad Johnson eventually will regret his mistreatment because Rufus could be the next president. After his mother sings Cliff Hess’s “Lullaby,” they both drift off to sleep.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Scottsboro Boys case involved nine young black men who were arrested for assault after fighting with white hoboes while all were riding on a Southern Railroad freight train. Charges of rape were tacked on after two white female passengers claimed that they also had been attacked. Swift guilty verdicts are rendered against all of the nine involved, prompting collective action from several progressive organizations, including the Communist Party and the NAACP.

<sup>3</sup> The actor who portrays Sinbad Johnson is not credited and does not appear on screen. Viewers only hear him bullying Rufus.

<sup>4</sup> Though Rufus and his mother drift off to sleep nearly at the same time, the dream sequence that follows is the mother’s, for the dream is disrupted by a loud noise that wakens her but not Rufus.

The scene shifts to a dreamscape in which a black electorate parades in the streets, carrying campaign signs—placards that read “Vote First And Last For Rufus Jones” and “Down With The Reds And Put In The Blacks”—and singing “Rufus Jones for President.” The procession arrives in front of the Jones home, where an unnamed delegate (Hamtree Harrington) informs Rufus and his mother that the people want him to be president. Moments later, at the voting house (where a sign above the door reads “Vote Here For Rufus Jones Two Pork Chops Every Time You Vote”), his mother and the delegate pass out fried chicken and pork chops as the electorate fills the ballot box. After he officially is declared as the president, instead of a conventional victory speech, Rufus sings “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead You Rascal You” over the radio.<sup>5</sup>

Not only does Rufus Jones not give a standard victory speech, but also he does not take a standard oath. In another song number, Rufus takes the presidential oath—on a telephone book and not a Bible—and vows to make pork chops free, to rebuke taxes on razors, to remove the locks on chicken coops, to make “The Memphis Blues” the national anthem, to make watermelon vines public property, and to avoid being nice to those who use loaded dice. The scene shifts to a Senate meeting, one prefaced by senators shooting craps in the hallway and another checking his razor with an attendant. During the meeting, Rufus’s mother nominates herself as “the Presidentess” and addresses matters of “inconspicuous importance,” including the creation of a Commissioner of Poultry position and the planting of watermelons away from the fences for easier access for thieves. After a senator questions the Presidentess’s newfound power,

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<sup>5</sup> “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead You Rascal You” is a jazz tune originally performed by Louis Armstrong in a 1932 Betty Boop cartoon of the same title. In the film, Armstrong voices an angry savage who pursues Betty Boop’s friends Koko the Clown and Bimbo. During the scene, the cartoonish face of the savage actually morphs into Armstrong’s face. In *Rufus Jones for President*, young Sammy Davis, Jr. does a rather admirable imitation of Armstrong’s version of the song while also tap dancing.

Rufus asks her if she is feeling blue; in response, she sings a medley of “Am I Blue” and “Underneath Our Harlem Moon.”

After the Presidentess concludes her medley, the delegate raises the most pressing issue of the day: “the matter of dice.” The delegate addresses “Senator Bones,” whose expertise with dice gets him named as “the Dice President.” After another senator objects and questions why President Jones does not do anything, Rufus performs a brief tap dance. Afterwards, the delegate informs President Jones that an entourage of ambassadors awaits him. A group of scantily-clad dancers (the Will Vodery Girls) begin dancing and singing “Puttin’ It On” as the senators grin and look on lustfully. The dream ends when a loud bang awakens and Rufus’s mother smells her pork chops burning. The film concludes with Rufus’s mother once again singing “Lullaby.”

Because the film is replete with racial stereotypes and jokes, one might be tempted to read *Rufus Jones for President* as a purely derisive text. However, pure derision does not seem to be director Roy Mack’s intent. Indeed, there are moments in the film that are consistent with Mack’s other musical comedy shorts, most of which involve ordinary Americans seeking escape from the desperate conditions of the Great Depression.<sup>6</sup> After all, the dream that encompasses the majority of the narrative is based on Rufus’s mother’s assertion that he will one day be a “great man” who could even be the president. When Rufus questions the truth of her statement, she responds, “They has kings your age. I don’t see no reason why they can’t have presidents. Besides, the book says anybody born here can be a president.” Though her logic is marred by poor grammar and ignorance (referring to the Constitution as “the book” while also being unaware of the qualifications for the presidency), nonetheless, Rufus’s mother’s hopes for her son seemingly are high and embody the American dream of upward mobility.

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<sup>6</sup> Mack was a rather prolific filmmaker, having made nearly 170 short musical films over the course of his career.

Another key moment in the film suggests that Mack's sole intention may not have been to ridicule: Ethel Waters' performance of "Underneath Our Harlem Moon." The song, originally titled "Underneath the Harlem Moon" and most notably performed by Don Redman and His Orchestra, was altered for the film.<sup>7</sup> The original, written by legendary songwriting duo Mack Gordon and Harry Revel, has often been considered as demeaning given its references to "darkies" and its insistence that black folks are impervious to unhappiness; however, Waters rescues the song from whatever ill intent there may have been by making a few alterations.<sup>8</sup> First, the article *a* is exchanged for the personal pronoun *our* in the song's chorus "Underneath our Harlem moon." Along those lines, Waters changes the original's use of the third person plural pronoun *they* (e.g., "Oh, they shout 'Hallelujah' every time they're feeling low") to the second person plural pronoun *we*. Perhaps as a rebuttal to the song's Jewish American writer Mack Gordon, the line "Ain't no sin to laugh and grin/That's why darkies were born" is changed to "Ain't no sin to laugh and grin/That's why we schwarzes were born."<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, two additional verses are added that are not in the original:

Once we wore bandanas, now we wear Parisian hats  
 Once we were barefoot now we wear shoes and spats  
 Once we were Republican but now we're Democrats  
 Underneath our Harlem moon  
 We don't pick no cotton, pickin' cotton is taboo  
 All we pick is numbers, and that includes you white folks, too

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<sup>7</sup> Arguably, the most popular version "Underneath the Harlem Moon" is performed by Randy Newman on his 1970 album, *12 Songs*.

<sup>8</sup> The lyrics of the original version of "Underneath the Harlem Moon" (as performed by Fletcher Henderson) can be found here: <http://www.cmt.com/lyrics/fletcher-henderson/underneath-the-harlem-moon/3585705/lyrics.jhtml>.

<sup>9</sup> The German-Yiddish term *schwarz* actually means "dirty or swarthy" but has come to be a derogatory term for *black*.



‘Cause if we hit, we pay our rent on any avenue

Underneath our Harlem moon.

In short, *Rufus Jones for President* allowed Ethel Waters to make the song her own and allowed her to preserve a modicum of dignity amidst the wealth of chicken, dice, and watermelon jokes.

Nonetheless, despite these moments and perhaps the filmmaker’s good intentions, *Rufus Jones for President* remains a rather troubling film. Beyond the wealth of stereotypes that already mar the film, the narrative features an infantilized president whose idea of governance is ushering in a wave of hedonism. Moreover, like its predecessor *The Birth of a Nation*, *Rufus Jones for President* presents hedonism—as opposed to the strong (albeit fascist) leadership of Judson Hammond in *Gabriel over the White House*—as the black ideal.

The film’s greatest irony is that, though Rufus’s mother tells him that he one day will be a “great man” who could be president, in her dreams of his presidency, Rufus remains a child. Moreover, he is not just a child but a veritable pickaninny. Noted black film historian Donald Bogle describes the pickaninny as “a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (7). For the most part, this is a fitting description of Rufus, whose role in the film is limited primarily to dancing and singing when called upon. Indeed, one might look at Rufus as a coon-in-training, particularly when he emulates Louis Armstrong’s exaggerated facial expressions and mannerisms in his performance of “I’ll Be Glad When You’re Dead You Rascal You.”<sup>10</sup> For

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<sup>10</sup> In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Donald Bogle calls Armstrong “the third of the important [Stepin] Fetchit imitators” (75). Bogle describes Stepin Fetchit, the first major black film star, as a “lanky, slow-witted, simple-minded, obtuse, synthetic, confused humbug [who] would take an entire nation and an era by storm” (39). Bogle labels both Armstrong and Fetchit as coons, which he describes as an “amusement object and black buffoon” (7). However, others, like dance studies scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, suggest that calling Armstrong a coon is problematic. For instance, she notes that the term was unfairly ascribed to Armstrong and others because they were dark-skinned while other performers such as Cab Calloway escaped being labeled as coons because they were light-skinned. Furthermore, Dixon-Gottschild writes, “[Being labeled a coon] was not Armstrong’s fault; it was the heavy duty paid for the legacy of slavery, minstrelsy,

much of the film, Rufus either is silent or asleep—even in his mother’s dream. When chided by a senator for not doing anything, rather than pass any meaningful legislation, Rufus responds with a tap dance number that seems to satisfy the irate senator’s concerns.

It is not difficult to read Rufus Jones as a parody of 31st President Herbert Hoover. Hoover, who was elected just months before the beginning of the Great Depression, largely was characterized as a “do-nothing” president, particularly by famed Democratic publicist Charles Michelson who often is credited with coining the phrase. In “Herbert Hoover’s Bad Press,” Hoover historian George H. Nash notes the strength of Michelson’s labeling Hoover as a “do-nothing” president continues in the present: “Nearly forty years after his death and more than seventy years after his presidency, [Hoover] remains a historical punching bag, a symbol of hard times, ineptitude, and indifference.”<sup>11</sup> Rufus certainly seems to follow in Hoover’s stead, only exchanging Hoover’s seemingly empty rhetoric for the occasional song and dance. Even Rufus’s plea for votes, “Vote Here For Rufus Jones Two Pork Chops Every Time You Vote,” is not unlike the 1928 Republican campaign promises of a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.<sup>12</sup>

Not only does the newly elected president not feel inclined to govern, but also the power to do so is wrested away from him by his mother. She then enacts a series of laws that ushers in what the narrative leaves viewers to believe is an idyllic black life. This pursuit of hedonism not

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and racism, all rolled into one and displayed in the performing body and laughing face of this great American musician” (192).

<sup>11</sup> While Nash and other historians suggest that the “do-nothing” label was an ill fit for Hoover, nonetheless, it was effective. Hoover was a one-term president who was defeated soundly by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1932 election.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library & Museum website, “The link between Hoover and the phrase ‘a chicken in every pot’ can be traced to a paid advertisement which apparently originated with the Republican National Committee, who inserted it into a number of newspapers during the 1928 campaign. The ad described in detail how the Republican administrations of Harding and Coolidge had ‘reduced hours and increased earning capacity, silenced discontent, put the proverbial ‘chicken in every pot.’ And a car in every backyard, to boot.’”

only runs contrary to the calls for strong leadership and order in films such as *Gabriel over the White House* but also emboldens the stereotype of the happy ducky, the black person able to find contentment or even joy in the grimmest occasions (e.g., slavery). Indeed, Rufus and his mother are not alone in this regard, for outside of the lone senator who raises the occasional grievance (only to be shouted down by his colleagues and to acquiesce eventually to the frivolity), the rest of the Senate is quite pleased with the “do-nothing” president.

However, and most significantly, Rufus’s presidency is merely a dream, one that is disrupted and one that even the mother seems to recognize is unattainable. Rufus’s mother awakens as she realizes a skillet full of pork chops is burning, concedes that the burnt food is unsalvageable, and then continues singing “Lullaby.” However, it is her continued singing of “Lullaby” that speaks volumes, for its refrain of “Stay on your own side of the fence/And no harm will come to you” reaffirms the absurdity of the dream. Indeed, the entire song seems to be, on the one hand, a call for Rufus to recognize his equality with “all God’s children” while, on the other hand, a reminder for him to recognize boundaries:

Stay on your own side of the fence

Don’t try to cross the line

Just like a cloud that’s dark and dense

You have a silver lining

All God’s children, they got wings

Honey, you is too

But you stay on your own side of the fence

And no harm will come to you

While one certainly could reason that the song is just a caution to avoid troublesome neighbors like Sinbad Johnson, one also cannot discount the fact that the song bookends the dream, thus serving as a reminder of the loftiness of her dream and a caution to her son to recognize his limitations.

While *Rufus Jones for President* is comprised mostly of a mother's lofty dreams about her son as the president, *Idiocracy* forecasts a rather grim future in which President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho presides over a dystopic, highly corporatized United States populated by a rather simpleminded citizenry. In 2505, the nation is plagued by frequent trash avalanches from mountain sized piles of waste, food shortages and dust storms caused by farms utilizing the sports drink Brawndo instead of water, and a highly corporate culture that has taken over nearly every aspect of society. As matters worsen and the citizens grow angry, President Camacho struggles to find solutions to all of the nation's problems.

Salvation comes in the form of Joe Bauer (Luke Wilson), a decidedly average Army corporal from the 21st Century. After being removed from his quiet, low profile librarian duties, he volunteers to participate in an Army experiment in which he and another volunteer, a prostitute named Rita (Maya Rudolph), are drugged into a state of hibernation for a year. However, after Lieutenant Colonel Collins (Michael McCafferty), the officer overseeing the experiment, is arrested for operating a prostitution ring with Rita's pimp Upgradedd (Brad "Scarface" Jordan), Joe and Rita are forgotten and left in their hibernation chambers after the base is demolished. The two are awoken separately in 2505 when their hibernation chambers are forced open during a massive garbage avalanche. After a series of unfortunate events, Joe finds himself imprisoned but not before being subjected to a rather simple intelligence test that reveals that he is the smartest man in the world. When President Camacho learns of Joe's intelligence, he

has Joe brought to him at the heavily dilapidated White House where he makes Joe the new Secretary of the Interior.

To the degree that Rufus Jones is an infantilized president, President Camacho is a hypermasculine one. In some regards, he fits the characteristics of the buck stereotype that Bogle outlines in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*. Bogle describes the buck as “always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13).<sup>13</sup> Played by former National Football League (NFL) defensive end Terry Crews, Camacho indeed is a character of raw physicality. Billed as a “five-time former Ultimate Smackdown champion and porn superstar” by the film’s omniscient narrator, Camacho frequently is quite aggressive. For example, during his State of the Union address, he enters the House of Representatives—now an arena-style venue deemed the House of Representin’—in the same fashion as professional wrestlers and boxers, chest-thumping and yelling over loud music. When interrupted by irate South Carolina representatives during his presidential address, Camacho fires a machine gun to silence them. Furthermore, as one might expect from a former “porn superstar,” Camacho also is hypersexual. Whenever he appears on screen, he usually is accompanied by a number of scantily-clad women. In other scenes, he frequently grabs his crotch. In fact, Camacho appears to embody nearly every black male stereotype imaginable, from hypermasculine black athlete to oversexed porn star to rhythmic black preacher to superficial hip-hop artist.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> While Bogle points to characters such as Gus in *The Birth of a Nation* as the origin of the buck stereotype, he suggests that the most prolific period for the buck stereotype was the early 1970s, a period which saw several black athletes—particularly former NFL great Jim Brown and American Football League great Fred Williamson—make a transition from the playing field to the silver screen.

<sup>14</sup> During his State of the Union address, Camacho begins using the rhythmic, “whooping” delivery usually attributed to black preachers in order to appeal to the crowd. Furthermore, Camacho and the rest of his Cabinet all wear large, hip-hop style gold medallions embellished with their respective ranks.

Like *Rufus Jones for President*, *Idiocracy* does not appear to have any derisive intent towards black people though the two share similar themes and downfalls. As Carrie McLaren and Jason Torchinsky correctly suggest in their book *Ad Nauseum*, *Idiocracy*, on its surface, is a “satirical jab at consumer culture” (99). Not only has the citizenry been reduced to minimal intelligence, but also their sole motivation seems to be pursuit of their base needs—entertainment, sex, sustenance, and violence. If *Rufus Jones for President* is a fanciful dream of legalized hedonism, then *Idiocracy* is the nightmarish realization of its results. For instance, the line between corporations and government is no longer blurred; it has been completely erased—particularly in terms of justice. Joe’s court hearing for not paying for his hospital treatment is a corporate-sponsored public spectacle with a live studio audience.<sup>15</sup> The death penalty—for which Joe later is sentenced for not solving all the nation’s problems in a week—is no longer rendered privately but in nationally broadcasted monster truck deathmatches. Indeed, President Camacho is the living embodiment of this union between entertainment and government. Of course, he has modern-day parallels, particularly in the forms of blockbuster action film star and former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and retired professional wrestler and former Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura (and, of course, film star Ronald Reagan beforehand).

However, as is the case with many of the dramatic disaster films, *Idiocracy* ensures that the black president’s removal and the white hero’s redemption and creation of a family are important parts of the film’s resolution. After being appointed Secretary of the Interior, Joe makes the simple proposition that farms start using water instead of Brawndo on crops to make them grow. Watering the crops does not produce the immediate results promised by President Camacho; in fact, it makes matters far worse because Brawndo, which employs half of the

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<sup>15</sup> After awakening in the future, Joe goes to St. God’s Memorial Hospital where he finally discovers that it is 2505. He panics, flees the hospital, and is eventually arrested not only for non-payment of services but also for not having a bar code tattoo on his arm like every other citizen has.

country, experiences a major stock plummet and is forced to make massive layoffs. After rioting ensues, President Camacho sentences Joe to Rehabilitation, a televised monster truck deathmatch. However, during the broadcast, Rita—who had been reunited with Joe earlier in the film—convinces a cameraman to venture out to a field of growing plants. She then broadcasts the cameraman’s footage to the crowd, which includes President Camacho, who immediately pardons Joe. Afterwards, Joe serves a brief stint as vice president before he is elected president. He and Rita marry and have three children, and while the narrator suggests that Joe does not fix all of the nation’s problems, the narrator notes that Joe sets the nation on the right path towards re-embracing intelligence. In the process of Joe becoming the president, Camacho is safely marginalized. The last shot of Camacho is of him sitting with his entourage in the balcony of the House of Representin’ as newly elected President Joe Bauers delivers the State of the Union. Viewers learn nothing of his fate save for the fact that he is no longer president and the nation has improved as a result.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, presidential satires have not been limited to fictional black cinematic presidents. Interestingly enough, however, the nation’s “first black president” Bill Clinton inspired a return to prominence for the political satire. As Ian Scott notes, “Hollywood in the Clinton era has been able to reincorporate a third sub-genre into its stable of political films: the satire... *Bob Roberts*... *Wag the Dog* and *Bulworth* have found a way to represent uncannily that which is both absurd but also frighteningly true to life about contemporary American politics and society” (157). Moreover, stereotypes—particularly that of the dim-witted, ineffectual

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<sup>16</sup> However, while the Camacho presidency has ended, the threat of blackness still lingers, for the film’s final scene is of Rita’s pimp Upgrayed waking from his own hibernation chamber in search of Rita. One of the film’s running jokes is in regards to Upgrayed’s relentless pursuit of his money. Despite being 500 years in the future, Rita still fears the possibility of Upgrayed coming to collect what she owes him. As a result, she agrees to help Joe find a rumored time machine—which turns out to be an amusement park ride called the Tyme Machine—so that she can get back to the past to keep Upgrayed from becoming angry.

politician—are often integral parts of the genre. Nonetheless, both *Rufus Jones for President* and *Idiocracy* not only rely on stereotypes of politicians in general but also rely on the most pernicious stereotypes of black men and women specifically.

“That Ain’t Right”: Black Cinematic Presidents and the Act of “Laughing Mad”

In a brief monologue on his controversial sketch show *Chappelle’s Show*, Dave Chappelle prefaces the sketch “Black Bush” with the following:

I’ve talked about a lot of things on the show. I’ve made fun of so many different people. And people say, “Dave, you talk about everybody except the President. Why don’t you do that?” Well, ‘cause he’s the President. Now I know my limits, ladies and gentlemen, and I wouldn’t want to cross them, but I will say this: If our president were black, we would not be at war [in Iraq] right now. Not because a black person wouldn’t have done something like that. It’s because America wouldn’t let a black person do something like that without asking them a million questions. You know, they always do polls like, ‘Minorities just don’t seem to trust the government.’ Because you don’t understand what it looks like for us. So let me help paint the picture.

The monologue effectively sets up the premise of “Black Bush,” a sketch in which Chappelle plays a fictionalized, hip-hop version of President George W. Bush simply named “Black Bush” in order to critique not only Bush’s pro-war rhetoric but also societal constraints on black men and women as authority figures. Throughout the skit, Chappelle uses hip-hop idioms, mannerisms, and style as Black Bush to parody Bush himself and to emphasize that a black president utilizing the same Bush wartime rhetoric would be scrutinized in a manner in which he believes Bush was not.



Chappelle's skit—as well as his own comedic persona and those of his black comedic forebears Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor and contemporary Chris Rock—can be viewed as an act of “laughing mad.”<sup>17</sup> Bambi Haggins defines *laughing mad* as “black humor’s potential power as an unabashed tool for social change, for the unfiltered venting of cultural and political anger, and for the annunciation of blackness” (4). Furthermore, she writes that this act “as conceived and received within the community, spoke to a deep cultural impulse, extending beyond articulating suffering in mute tones to howling against oppression and subjugation, as well as the victories in survival and amidst strife” (4). Thus, it stands to reason that tackling the highest office in the land would be part of the repertoire of those “laughing mad” black comedians who followed Gregory, who took on the presidency in a manner in which no other comedian—black or white—would. As Haggins attests, “Gregory’s comedy and the strength of his politicized character continues to reverberate through African American comedic discourse” (16). Certainly, such proves to be true of the political satires from the likes of Chappelle, Rock, and Pryor, all of who follow in Gregory’s wake.

What clearly distinguishes the political satires from these black comedians from the likes of *Rufus Jones for President* and *Idiocracy* is the authentic black comedic voice of their respective stars. Mel Watkins identifies one of the most important aspects of black comedy: “Black American humor is nearly as dependent on a delivery that incorporates black America’s generally more expressive and flamboyant style as it is on wit or verbal dexterity” (41). In their roles as black cinematic presidents, Chappelle, Pryor, and Rock extend their own comedic personas—each of which heavily relies upon the very expressiveness and verbal dexterity

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<sup>17</sup> Both Bambi Haggins and Mel Watkins, whose book *On the Real Side* is the definitive work on black humor, link comedians Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle to Dick Gregory, and for good reason. As Watkins rightly suggests, “Gregory’s more ‘real’ humor was not, of course, new to black Americans, but it was a revelation to its new white audience. By introducing it to the public, he opened the mainstream stage for many older black comedians as well as a new group of younger ones who waited anxiously in the wings” (503).

Watkins describes. In fact, one of the major commonalities between Chappelle and Pryor's skits and Rock's film is the code switching abilities of their protagonists. Indeed, their black cinematic presidents' facility with traditional and "black" English greatly distinguishes them from the virtually inarticulate black presidents of *Rufus Jones for President* and *Idiocracy*.

Pryor set the standard for Chappelle and Rock to follow in his skit "The 40th President" from the first episode of his short-lived NBC sketch comedy show, *The Richard Pryor Show* (1977). Pryor's skit establishes three conventions that Chappelle and Rock borrow nearly thirty years later. First, it establishes a black president capable of deftly switching between standard English and the black vernacular but who is particularly effective when he utilizes the latter to indicate the inadequacies or falsity of the former. Second, this shift elicits not only support from those who understand but also strong opposition from the white establishment. Lastly, despite whatever opposition may occur, the black president overcomes and/or outwits his oppressors.

In "The 40th President," Pryor plays an unnamed black president who arrives for a press conference in front of a somewhat hostile group of reporters. He answers the first sets of questions regarding Middle East peace talks, the use of atomic weaponry, and unemployment in a rather stoic monotone one might expect from a typical politician. However, as was the case in *The Man*, the 40th President becomes a bit more assertive upon being questioned by black reporter Arthur Williams (John Witherspoon), who asks about increasing the number of black astronauts. He responds—

I feel it's time black people went to space. White people have been going to space for years—and spacing out on us, as you might say. And I feel that with the projects we have in mind, we're going to send explorer ships to other galaxies. No longer will they have the same type of music—Beethoven, Brahms, and

Tchaikovsky. From now on, they'll have a little Miles Davis, some Charlie

Parker. We gonna have different types of things in there.

Here, the 40th President begins a gradual shift from formal political speak to the black vernacular, one that will grow more pronounced over the course of the sketch.

As the black reporters in the audience respond favorably, he begins to call on a few more. The next reporter, Roberta Davies (Marsha Warfield) from *Jet*, asks him if he is considering Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton for director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). He assures her that he is, noting that Newton is the most qualified man for the job given his history with the FBI. Next, Brother Bell (Tim Reid), an *Ebony* reporter clad in militant gear, greets the 40th President with the Islamic greeting "As-salaam alaikum" to which he easily gives the requisite response "Walaikum as-salaam." Brother Bell then demands, "I wanna know what you gonna do about having more black brothers as quarterbacks in the National Football Honky League." This leads the 40th President into a bit of a tirade: "I plan not only to have lots of black quarterbacks but we gonna have black coaches and black owners of teams. As long as there's gonna be football, there's gonna be some black in it somewhere. I'm doin' somethin' 'bout this. 'Cause I'm tired of this mess that's been goin' down. Ever since the Rams got rid of James Harris, my jaw been tight. We gonna get down on the case now."<sup>18</sup>

Inflamed by his exchange with Brother Bell, the 40th President takes on more white reporters. He calls upon Southern white reporter Mr. Bigby (Argus Hamilton), who, after announcing that he is from the *Mississippi Herald*, is commanded to sit down. The next reporter, conservative white female reporter Mrs. Fenton Carlton-Mackard (Allegra Allison) from

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<sup>18</sup> Harris was the first black quarterback in the National Football League (NFL) to actually begin and end a season as a team's starting quarterback, which he did for the then-Los Angeles Rams in 1974. In 1975, Harris was named Pro Bowl Most Valuable Player, but suffered through an injury marred 1976 season and was traded to the San Diego Chargers for the 1977 season after the Rams acquired Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath.

*Christian Women's News*, questions him about his frequent public appearances and dalliances with white women. The 40th President sheepishly looks away before she asks whether he plans to continue, to which he responds, "As long as I can keep it up." After being encouraged by positive reactions from the black male reporters, he then asks, "Why do you think they call it the White House?"

However, before the 40th President can get too indignant, another Southern white reporter (role uncredited) begins to ask him a question about his mother. The black reporters react angrily and a near riot ensues before the 40th President calms everyone and adds that the reporter has the right to ask a question. The reporter then asks, "Your mother was a maid in Atlanta. After your tenure, if your mother goes back to being a maid, right, will your momma do my house?" Insulted, the 40th President lunges after the reporter before a Secret Service agent whisks him away to safety, and an all-out brawl ensues between black and white reporters as the skit concludes.

Though "The 40th President" sets the standard, the strength of a code switching black president is best exemplified in Chris Rock's 2003 film *Head of State*. Rock plays Mays Gilliam, a hapless Washington, DC alderman who gains notoriety after he saves elderly, slightly senile Miss Pearl (Gammy Singer) when she rushes into her house—which is rigged with explosives for demolition—to save her cat. Gilliam's heroic act precedes the accidental deaths of presidential candidate Senator Sam Gaines and his running mate General Olson James just ten weeks before Election Day. Senator Bill Arnot (James Rebhorn), Gaines's party's leader, concedes that the party will lose the election but wants to present a lame duck candidate who will set the party up for victory in the 2008 election, which is when he plans to make a bid himself.<sup>19</sup> After watching Mays being interviewed, Senator Arnot decides that the party should run Mays

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<sup>19</sup> As is often the case in political films, the names of the parties are not disclosed.

for president. He dispatches campaign manager Debra Lassiter (Lynn Whitfield) and spin doctor Martin Geller (Dylan Baker) to convince Mays to run as a “man of the people” candidate.

After reluctantly agreeing, Mays tours the country, delivering scripted stump speeches which involve little more than telling large groups of white voters that they are the “backbone of this country.” However, he grows weary of giving the same speech and questions Debra and Martin about when they will let him give another speech. During a stopover in Chicago, he meets up with his brother Mitch (Bernie Mac), a bail bondsman. Mitch chastises him for speaking from a script and encourages him to take ownership of his campaign. In front of a large, racially diverse crowd, Mays heeds his brother’s advice and delivers a rousing speech:

They had a speech written for me. About what the people need. But you guys are the people. You know what you need. Better schools. Better jobs. Less crime. How many of you, right now, work two jobs just to have enough money to be broke? That ain't right. If you work two jobs, and at the end of the week, you got just enough money to get your broke ass home, let me hear you say, ‘That ain't right!’

In call-and-response fashion, the crowd responds “That ain’t right!” Debra looks on dejectedly while Martin stares in awe at the crowd’s response. As the crowd cheers loudly, Mays delivers a rousing speech that frequently utilizes the “That ain’t right!” refrain and effectively addresses the concerns of working class Americans. Thus, he makes clear that he is—and that Debra should be—aware of the limitations of formal speech and the power of the black vernacular in connecting with people.

Spurred by the support of the people, Mays steers his campaign into a new direction. He evolves his use of the black vernacular into a form of hip-hop populism. After his success in

Chicago, Mays exchanges his business suit for a Phat Farm jean ensemble, his predominantly white staff for a more diverse one, and portraits of George Washington and Ronald Reagan for ones of R&B singer Mary J. Blige and basketball star Allen Iverson, respectively. Borrowing heavily from the gaudy, low budget album covers of hip-hop artist Master P, he emblazons his tour bus with a photo of himself and the words “MAYS GILLIAM 4 PRESIDENT” and even adopts Master P’s frequent refrain of “Ya heard!” He debuts a series of hip-hop influenced campaign commercials in which he drives a Hummer and dances around with models. His new strategy is so effective that he gradually closes the large gap in the polls between him and his opponent Vice President Brian Lewis (Nick Searcy), who finally has to acknowledge that he may have some competition for the presidency.

In fact, Mays’s surge in the polls makes for strange bedfellows: the two establishment figures who have the most to lose from Mays winning, Senator Arnot and Vice President Lewis, eventually are forced to unite in their efforts to keep Mays from becoming president. Vice President Lewis’s initial efforts, including negative campaign advertisements featuring an imploding White House, largely fail to stop Mays’s momentum. After Mays outshines Vice President Lewis at their only debate and Election Day arrives, Senator Arnot arrives with a plan to finally sink Mays. With the race down to the California vote, he encourages Lewis’s team to falsely leak that Mays has won. The leak has two effects: Mays’s constituency stops voting, and white California voters—as suggested by a scene in which white residents of a pristine gated community rush out of their homes *en masse*—hurry to vote. The cooperative efforts of two estranged political parties, white California voters rushing to the polls to keep Mays out of office, and other cues such as the coded racist meanderings of popular radio show host Big Dave—an obvious parody of controversial conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh—all

suggest the limitations of the black vernacular and hip-hop populism.<sup>20</sup> In short, they are just as likely to elicit fear and opposition as they are to inspire hope and change.

This discursive limitations of the black vernacular is the basis of Dave Chappelle's skit "Black Bush" from the second season of *Chappelle's Show* (2004). As Black Bush, Chappelle uses an even more emphatic hip-hop vernacular than Chris Rock does in his role as Mays Gilliam but for an altogether different purpose—to expose the flaws in the Bush administration's rationale for invading Iraq by expressing that rationale in "real talk" as a black president. Sociolinguist H. Samy Alim describes "real talk" as "an idiomatic expression in the language of the Hip Hop Nation that builds upon what generations of Black Americans have referred to as 'straight talk' ... [It] is the Hip Hop generation's version of an evolving discourse on language and authenticity in the Black community" (220). As Haggins suggests, Chappelle's show was rife with "hip hop sensibility," and Chappelle frequently utilized—as well as critiqued—real talk during the three seasons in which *Chappelle's Show* aired (206).<sup>21</sup>

The premise becomes clear from the opening moments of the sketch, in which Black Bush tries to legitimize invading Iraq at a press conference. The opening scene—after a photo still of him mean mugging the camera—begins with Black Bush seated at a table with two unspecified Cabinet members, both of whom are dressed in street apparel. Black Bush, like his predecessor The 40th President, starts off formally enough before quickly switching to the

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<sup>20</sup> Throughout *Head of State*, Big Dave—who is never seen on camera—occasionally chimes in during transitions between scenes with disparaging remarks towards Mays. For example, following Vice President Lewis's negative advertisement, Big Dave remarks, "Bottom line: I don't think I want Gilliam and his homies to be in the White House... We're not talking about running a rib shack; we're talking about running a country."

<sup>21</sup> For instance, in a skit called "Real Movies," Chappelle parodies Morgan Freeman's role as President Beck in *Deep Impact*. The premise of sketch is that if the events of the film actually took place, President Beck would react quite differently. Rather than downplay the arrival of the giant comet, Chappelle's version of President Beck chastises a group of reporters for criticizing him, reveals a number of government secrets, and then teleports aboard an alien spacecraft with an alien named Bibble.

vernacular after an exchange with one of his Cabinet members (series regular Donnell Rawlings).

Black Bush: After carefully examining the region, me and my Cabinet agree that that area is definitely ripe for regime change.

Cabinet Member: Aiight.

Black Bush: But if I can be real about it...

Cabinet Member: Be real, son.

Black Bush: Real?

Cabinet Member: Be real real, son.

Black Bush: Tried to kill my father, man. I don't play that shit.

Cabinet Member: Say word they tried to kill your father, son?

Black Bush [grabbing boom microphone]: The nigga tried to kill my father!

Chappelle uses Black Bush here to highlight one of the “real” reasons the Bush administration pushed to invade Iraq: to retaliate against former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein for a 1993 assassination plot against former president George H.W. Bush.<sup>22</sup> This idea gained some cachet among anti-war proponents in late 2002 after George W. Bush remarked at a political fundraiser: “After all, this is a guy who tried to kill my dad at one time” (Isikoff).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> President Bill Clinton actually did retaliate against the Iraqi Intelligence Service by destroying its headquarters in June 1993. Writing in 1993, David Von Drehle and R. Jeffrey Smith of the *Washington Post* report, “U.S. Navy ships launched 23 Tomahawk missiles against the headquarters of the Iraqi Intelligence Service yesterday in what President Clinton said was a ‘firm and commensurate’ response to Iraq’s plan to assassinate former president George Bush in mid-April.”

<sup>23</sup> In 2003, the year in which “Black Bush” was filmed, Bush once again mentioned the assassination attempt in an interview—though he denied that he or his father had a personal vendetta with Hussein. Peter Baker reports in the *Washington Post*, “‘The fact that he tried to kill my father and my wife shows the nature of the man,’ Bush told interviewers in March 2003. ‘And he not only tried to kill my father and wife, he’s killed thousands of his own citizens.’ But he denied a vendetta. ‘Nah, no,’ he said. ‘I’m doing my job as the president, based upon the threats that face this country.’”



As Chappelle suggests in the skit's preface, this form of real talk from a black president would not go unquestioned, and the rest of the sketch consists of Black Bush addressing tough questions from the press. As is the case in his initial press conference, Black Bush's responses are based somewhat from George W. Bush's actual responses to similar questions. For example, later in the sketch, Black Bush mocks the Bush administration's contention that it had support from a "coalition of the willing," or several nations that had pledged varying degrees of support for a United States-led invasion of Iraq. Addressing United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's opposition to invasion, Black Bush—after thoroughly insulting Annan—states:

I got a coalition of the willing. I got forty nations ready to roll, son! [A reporter off-screen asks, "Like who?"] Who the fuck said that? Huh? Huh? Like who? England. Japan's sending Playstations. Stankonia said they're willing to drop bombs over Baghdad. Riggity-raw is coming! Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation. That means I am not doing this by myself, and I am not disrespecting the UN—even though they don't go no army. Go sell some medicine, bitches. I'm trying to get that oil. [Coughs to mask the word *oil*] Oh! Oh!<sup>24</sup>

Referencing several hip-hop icons serves the purpose of mocking the actual "coalition of the willing," which consisted primarily of smaller nations, American protectorates, and nations without armed forces. Furthermore, Chappelle also lampoons Bush's discord with Annan, who openly opposed the invasion and eventually declared that he felt it was illegal—at least according to the United Nations charter. Lastly, Black Bush once again hints at yet another "real" reason for invasion: the pursuit of Iraqi oil.

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<sup>24</sup> *Stankonia* is the fourth studio album by hip-hop artists Outkast. The album's lead single was "B.O.B. (Bombs Over Baghdad)." "Riggity-raw" is a reference to popular 1990s hip-hop group Das EFX, who were known for their stream-of-consciousness rhymes and heavy alliteration. Afrika Bambaataa was among the first successful mainstream hip-hop artists in the 1980s. Bambaataa also formed the Universal Zulu Nation, an international hip-hop awareness group.

While “Black Bush” borrows from Pryor’s “The 40th President” in regards to a code-switching black president who meets opposition, it distinguishes itself in two regards. First, and most obvious, is that Chappelle is engaging in parody while Pryor’s 40th President (and Chris Rock’s Mays Gilliam, for that matter) is an extension of his own comedic persona. In other words, as Bambi Haggins notes, “Pryor is playing presidential... and slides into blackness... while Chappelle, as a ‘thugged-out’ Bush whose posse supports his ‘keeping it real,’ gives the ‘straight-up’ motivations for his actions” (215). Subsequently, this leads to the second distinction, which is that “Black Bush” skirts closer to stereotype, for Black Bush’s blackness is tied not only to his name and skin color but also to the “thugged-out” behavior he exhibits. In that regard, he functions in a manner not wholly unlike President Camacho—the differences being not only Chappelle’s distinctive comedic voice but also his creation of a black-white dialectic in an effort to make whites understand why “[m]inorities just don’t seem to trust the government.”

As Mel Watkins notes, “[F]or every authentic African-American joke or humorous tale reflecting an acceptance of the downtrodden condition of the black community, there are numerous others that cleverly suggest transcending that condition. Black humor most often satirizes the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community life, or focuses on outwitting the oppressor—as it were, ‘getting over’” (29). In this regard, “Black Bush” reflects this black comedic trope with a black president who turns the tables on whiteness. In essence, the butt of the joke is not Black Bush himself, for he is merely a parody of his white namesake. Thus, the joke is on those who find Black Bush’s logic questionable yet fully support George W. Bush.

One only need look to “The 40th President” for the origins of a black president capable of “getting over.” Though the skit concludes with the 40th President seemingly upended by the white reporter who demeans his mother, the final victory is indeed the president’s. The 40th President not only disrupts the hostile environment by lashing out, he also manages to get in a few hits on the white reporter before being carried away to safety. Furthermore, he wins over and galvanizes the black reporters in the room, encouraging them to fight for him and, presumably, for themselves.

However, perhaps the best example of the transcendent black president is Mays Gilliam. Despite the fierce opposition to his presidency by the establishment, he wins the popular vote and is named President of the United States. In doing so, his hip-hop populism and message of “That ain’t right!” overcomes old guard Washington politics and Vice President Lewis’s trite refrain of “God bless America—and no place else” (itself a parody of George W. Bush’s frequent use of the phrase “God bless America”). As the film concludes, Mays celebrates with his constituents as an utterly dejected Vice President Lewis lines up and smacks each member of his staff. Even Senator Arnot is dealt a dose of poetic justice. When he arrives at Mays’s victory party, Senator Arnot does not mention his involvement in Vice President Lewis’s last ditch efforts and tries to secure a position in Mays’s Cabinet. However, in the last instance of a recurring sight gag, Mays yells, “Security!” and Senator Arnot is quickly and forcibly removed from the premises.

With the last vestiges of the establishment removed, Mays ends the film as all the heroes of the black presidential films do—uniting a family. Throughout the film, Mays develops a close relationship with Lisa Clark (Tamala Jones), a gas station attendant he met while he was still an alderman. At his celebration, the two wade through the crowd to each other, and despite the

brevity of their relationship, Mays proposes to her. When Lisa responds, “You can’t do that,” Mays—co-opting a phrase uttered by Senator and Vice President Lewis throughout the film—responds, “I’m the government; I can do anything.” The scene then shifts to Mays’s inauguration, where popular hip-hop DJ Funkmaster Flex introduces them as “the President of the United States of America Mays Gilliam and his future First Wifey Lisa Clark.” As Mays and Lisa dance to hip-hop singer Nate Dogg’s performance of the film’s title track, the scene dissolves to the Mount Rushmore National Monument, where a sculpture of Mays’s head—complete with glistening diamond earring—appears next to (and slightly atop of) George Washington’s sculpture.

In *From Box Office to the Ballot Box: The American Political Film*, M. Keith Booker suggests that films such as *Head of State* resonated with Americans who sought the form of political candor that Mays Gilliam could offer. Of *Head of State*, he writes, “That Gilliam ultimately wins the election does not suggest that Gilliam’s candor would actually work in a real election so much as it enacts a fantasy version of American politics in which it *could* work” (28-29). In short, Mays Gilliam, like Judson Hammond, is an embodiment of an ideal American president—particularly one who can connect with the working and middle classes in the manner in which Bill Clinton and George W. Bush did. However, more importantly, *Head of State* is the first—and only—film in which the prospects of a black presidency are not fraught with peril or the potential for disaster.

## EPILOGUE

### POLITICS AS USUAL: BLACK CINEMATIC PRESIDENTS IN THE OBAMA AGE

On July 27, 2004, then-Illinois Senate candidate Barack Obama delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. This address, with its powerful rhetoric of hope and change that would later serve as the basis of his 2008 presidential campaign, not only was a factor in Obama winning the Illinois Senate seat but also—and more importantly—introduced Americans to the man who would be president. As David Bernstein rightly suggests, “After the speech, observers from across the political world hailed the address as an instant classic, and Obama was drawing comparisons (deservedly or not) to Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy” (“The Speech”).

However, Obama’s keynote address not only introduced him to Americans outside of Illinois but also led to his introduction in American popular culture. In “Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle,” Douglas Kellner points to President-elect Matthew Santos (Jimmy Smits) in the critically acclaimed television series *The West Wing* (1999-2006) as Obama’s first incarnation in film and television. As Kellner notes, after Obama’s address, Obama advisor and political strategist David Axelrod and *The West Wing* writer Eli Attie had discussions regarding Obama in which Axelrod praised “Obama’s refusal to be defined by his race and his desire to bridge partisan and racial divides” (733). The similarities, as Kellner indicates, between Obama and Santos are obvious: “both were coalition-building newcomers who had not served long in Congress; both were liberal but sought a new brand of politics; both were very attractive and had very photogenic families; both were fans of Bob Dylan and, of course, both were candidates of color” (733). Jimmy Smits himself confirms, “Barack Obama was one of the people that I looked

to draw upon” and that he studied Obama’s convention speech in preparation for his role as Santos (Ballard).

Matthew Santos is significant for a number of reasons. As noted earlier, portrayals of the American presidency in recent years typically have been negative. With its positive and complex portrayal of the American presidency, *The West Wing* had been an exception to the rule. As Schlaben and Yenerall write of *The West Wing*, “It has been praised in many media circles for its prime-time family-friendliness, lauded by one cultural critic as ‘a magnificent episodic series that depicts the tension and backroom drama of presidential politics with an unusual mixture of maturity and humanity’” (115). Of course, the entirety of the series is based on the presidency of Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen)—who, as an amalgam of former Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Bill Clinton, represents the ideal Democratic president—but the election of Matthew Santos is not presented as a dramatic break from the ideal presidency.

Indeed, Santos, like Obama, is presented as the bright new face of the future. While Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles note that *The West Wing* “reifies the same romantic images that are predicated on the power of the white, male hero,” they also note, “As women and people of color are placed in positions of power, the drama works gradually to naturalize the diversification of power” (223-224). Interestingly enough, given that their essay was published in 2002, the authors were not speaking of Santos but of Josiah Bartlet’s multiethnic staff, which included black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Percy Fitzwallace (John Amos), National Security advisor Nancy McNally (Anna Deavere Smith), and personal aide Charlie Young (Dulé Hill). Nonetheless, their suggestion here easily applies to President-elect Santos.

However, though Santos is the small screen embodiment of Obama and is presented as the new iteration of the ideal Democratic president, it is important to note that he is not black;

Santos is actually film and television's first Chicano president. Thus, the first Obama-based president is not only non-white but also non-black. The irony here is that not only is actor Jimmy Smits not Chicano (American citizen of Mexican descent), but also Smits—who, according to his Latin Media & Entertainment Commission (for which he is the commissioner) profile—is of Puerto Rican and Surinamese descent, which means he very well may have some black ancestry.<sup>1</sup>

The decision to incorporate an Obamaesque Chicano president is evidence of the current trend of what media scholar Vincent Brook refers to as “convergent ethnicity.” According to Brook, convergent ethnicity is the increased use of multiracial, multigendered casts largely as a response to “global economic forces, sociocultural changes, and media monitoring pressures” (331). While Brook notes that this process has led to some measure of increased diversity in network convergence, he also calls attention to one of its consequences:

[C]onvergent ethnicity, at least in its present capitalist realist (or surrealist) form, can hardly be considered an unqualified boon for people of color, or for society as a whole. Color-blind casting may promise an end to “othering,” but this potential benefit is compromised by a damaging cost: the dissolution of difference. The multiethnic members of the neo-platoon shows may look different, but they tend to act the same. Historical and cultural distinctions, not to mention persistent ethno-racial inequities, are ignored for the most part, if not denied altogether.

While Reaganist color-blind ideology, and the “common sense” status it has achieved (further “confirmed” by Obama’s “postracial” presidency), is clearly at

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Central Intelligence Agency’s *World Factbook*, 41 percent of the small South American country Suriname’s population has some measure of African descent, primarily the biracial Creoles (31 percent) and Maroons (10 percent), the descendants of the African slaves who live in Suriname’s interior. Thus, the majority of Suriname’s population has some black ancestry. Hindustanis, the descendants of the Northern India migrant workers who arrived in the late 19th Century, comprise the country’s majority (37 percent).

work in television's soft-pedaling of race, the commercial constraints of the culture industry also play a part. (348)

In other words, in these recent “neo-platoon” shows—ensemble cast shows following in the stead of multiethnic military series and films—such as *The West Wing*, racial diversity is superficial. Though Santos is Chicano, there is little outside of his appearance that distinguishes him from the other white and non-white cast members. Furthermore, any measure of attention drawn towards racial differences is often diffused in these “neo-platoon” series. For instance, in an episode of *The West Wing* in which a campaign aide suggests that Santos hold a fundraiser in a predominantly Latino community, Santos angrily replies, “I don’t want to just be the brown candidate. I want to be the American candidate.”

Though Brook suggests that the intent of convergent ethnicity is to prevent “othering,” convergent ethnicity’s end result typically has been the creation of idealized Others. The idealized Other, according to Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma—“is a projection of the white subject. So when this subject identifies with and desires the Other it is a form of narcissism which sustains the stability and universality of white subjectivity” (“White Paranoia”). The idealized Other, particularly in an American context, has been the ethnic and racial immigrant. According to sociologist Robert Blauner, the assimilation of other racial and ethnic immigrants has fostered the belief that America’s most oppressed minorities—African Americans, Chicanos, and Native Americans—are able to assimilate:

[T]hose who hold this perspective are not pessimistic, despite the massive economic imbalances and social problems correlated with race. They assume that black, Chicano, and even Native Americans will eventually follow the path of acculturation and “Americanization” marked out by the white immigrants. Thus



the immigrant analogy serves to bolster a desperate need of many Americans to believe that our society can solve its internal problems; it is a contemporary version of the myth of progress and opportunity. (10)

Indeed, Chicanos certainly have not been spared from white supremacy; as sociology Tomás Almaguer suggests in *Racial Fault Lines*, Chicanos long have held the status of “half civilized,” particularly in California and throughout the American Southwest (8). However, given the growing Latino electorate, the emergence of prominent Latino political figures such as former New Mexico governor and congressman Bill Richardson (who was chair of the DNC in 2004), and the relative uncertainty of Obama’s presidential aspirations immediately following his 2004 DNC keynote address, it certainly is understandable why *The West Wing*’s writers would conceive of the first non-white president as brown—though one who exhibits some of what David Axelrod believed were Obama’s best qualities.

Indeed, the decision to cast a non-black, non-white actor as an Obama stand-in is also a likely result of Obama’s own use of the immigrant narrative in his keynote address. Obama begins his address by stating—

My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British. But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance, my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that's shown as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before him. (“Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama”)

Afterwards, Obama told of the life experiences of his maternal grandparents, noting that his grandfather was a World War II veteran and that his grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line while raising his mother. Furthermore, he addressed the foreign nature of his own first name and noted that his parents believed “that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success” (“Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama”). Absent was any connection between him and civil rights, slavery, or any other facet typically associated with the African American experience. This absence is compounded by his assertion “There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America” (“Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama”).

Obama’s familial background, his mitigation of race as a barrier to success, his time abroad, his Ivy League education and other factors led to persistent questions of “Is Obama black enough?” Indeed, shortly after announcing his intention to run for the presidency in February 2007, the question dominated the national political discourse, particularly in the wake of a CBS interview with Steve Kroft in which Kroft fervently questioned Obama as to why he considered himself black despite being biracial and being raised in a white household. These concerns were echoed by a number of black moderates and conservatives like *New York Daily News* cultural critic Stanley Crouch, who wrote in the provocatively titled “What Obama Isn’t: Black Like Me on Race” that Obama “has experienced some light versions of typical racial stereotypes, he cannot claim those problems as his own—nor has he ever lived the life of a black American.” Even amongst those who conceded that Obama was black, there were many who viewed him as exceptional. This notion is perhaps best exemplified by remarks made by current Vice President Joe Biden, who as a presidential candidate, stated, “[Y]ou got the first mainstream African-

American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy... I mean, that's a storybook, man" (Thai and Barrett).

Nonetheless, Obama would and could not avoid controversies regarding race. As Manning Marable notes, "The most damaging controversy involving race to erupt during Obama's quest for the Democratic presidential nomination involved the politics of faith" (6). Just as rumors that Obama had attended an Indonesian madrassa as a youth had been debunked, Obama had to address a controversial sermon given by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. In his sermon, which became noted primarily for Wright's utterance of "God damn America," Wright suggested not only that America's foreign policy was to blame for the September 11 attacks but also that America should be condemned for its treatment of black people. However, as Marable indicates, "[E]ven before the controversial videos of the Reverend Wright's speeches surfaced, some white conservatives had attempted to equate Trinity Church's theological teachings with the black separatism of the Nation of Islam" (6). To the address the controversy, Obama gave what has been dubbed the "A More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia, in which he distances himself from Wright while also critiquing America's racial history and calling for racial harmony.

Obviously, these controversies surrounding Obama's racial background did not prevent him from becoming president. Moreover, after Obama had received the overwhelming majority of the black vote and has maintained their support throughout a turbulent presidency, the question "Is Obama black enough?" has not re-entered the national discourse. Instead, in the wake of a "birther" movement that suggests that he actually was born in Kenya and his suggestion that Cambridge cops "acted stupidly" for arresting Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Obama perhaps has become "too black." For instance, during the imbroglio over Gates'

arrest, popular conservative radio and television talk show host Glenn Beck stated, “This president has exposed himself as a guy over and over and over again who has a deep-seeded hatred for white people or the white culture... This guy I believe is a racist” (Ariens). Beck’s sentiments have been echoed throughout conservative media, particularly in regards to issues such as his appointment of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, his opposition to Arizona’s SB 1070 immigration law, and even his push for healthcare reform—which has been framed by some as a form of reparations (Beck).

In the midst of these myriad of issues surrounding Obama’s campaign and presidency, the first—and, thus far, only—black cinematic president to emerge during the Obama presidency debuted during the Fall 2010 television season. In September 2010, NBC began airing *The Event*, a science fiction suspense series starring black actor Blair Underwood as Elias Martinez, who is Cuban American. According to Underwood, the decision to make Martinez black only came after he won the role: “[T]his character was written four years ago and was always envisioned to be a Latino... And [*The Event*’s producers] were like if you’re gonna play him we’ll make him Afro Cuban, which makes complete sense” (Reeves). Indeed, according to a Reuters story released after Underwood agreed to the role, “The president was originally envisioned as ‘a poised Hispanic JFK’ by writer Nick Wauters, before Barack Obama’s 2008 election” (Andreeva). However, while Underwood has argued against any suggestion that Elias Martinez is based on Obama, there are a number of similarities. Like Obama, Martinez is a popular Ivy League educated idealist who seeks bipartisanship.<sup>2</sup> In an apparent nod to the current

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<sup>2</sup> His biography on *The Event*’s website describes him in the following way: “Moral and idealistic. Hugely popular with the American people and around the world, President Martinez wants to be a new kind of President, working toward a new America. He’s committed to honesty and runs the first truly bipartisan administration in recent history, with Vice President Raymond Jarvis at his side. Two parties, one purpose... Born to Cuban refugees in Miami, Florida, President Martinez is very proud of his Afro-Cuban roots. He is a graduate of Yale University” (“Blair Underwood and Elias Martinez Character and Actor Profiles and Bios”).

administration, Martinez signs the Clinic Bill—the equivalent of the Obama administration’s healthcare reform bill—in the first episode.

More important, however, are the strong connections *The Event* has with the current sociopolitical climate and the narrative trends of black presidential films and television series. *The Event*’s plot thus far has been quite elaborate: Upon learning of its existence, President Martinez visits Mount Inostranka, an Alaskan prison facility housing 97 mysterious detainees. After spending a year developing a rapport with their leader Sophia Maguire (Laura Innes), Martinez orders the detainees’ release. However, on the day he plans to announce their release at a press conference in Miami, a plane nearly crashes into the site before mysteriously vanishing into a vortex. Afterwards, Martinez learns that Sophia and the other detainees are actually humanoid aliens who crash-landed in Alaska in 1944; furthermore, he learns that there are more of Sophia’s people who secretly have been living in the United States since their arrival, including Sophia’s son, Thomas (Clifton Collins Jr.), an ambitious technology developer who apparently wants the detainees released immediately.

Later, the wrecked airliner is discovered in Arizona’s Yuma Desert, where the bodies of the passengers are retrieved and shipped to a warehouse in Brazil in order to cover up the assassination attempt. However, in Brazil, the seemingly deceased passengers awaken; however, while in quarantine, they contract a mysterious illness that only Thomas knows how to cure. Thomas agrees to provide Martinez with the cure only if Martinez releases the 97 detainees immediately. Martinez agrees to release Sophia, who is secretly fed a tracking device and is followed by FBI agents. After Sophia meets with Thomas in a warehouse in Washington, D.C., Thomas utilizes the same technology that teleported the airliner to destroy the warehouse.

Clearly, aspects of the first few episodes obviously allude to the post-September 11 internment of foreign nationals—most of whom are Muslims—in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Guantánamo Bay, which once housed Cuban and Haitian refugees from the 1970s through the mid-1990s, now quite literally houses “enemy aliens,” for the federal government’s assertion is that each detainee has “remained in the service of the enemy [and] does not have... qualified access to our courts, for he neither has comparable claims upon our institutions nor could his use of them fail to be helpful to the enemy” (Fletcher 126-127). Though the aliens in *The Event*’s Mount Inostranka are extraterrestrial, their status is indeed not unlike those of the Guantánamo Bay detainees, for as Columbia law professor George P. Fletcher notes, the problem with classifying the Guantánamo Bay detainees as “enemy aliens” is that “None of them is an enemy alien, none a national of a country with which the United States has been at war or engaged in an armed conflict” (127). Like several of the Guantánamo Bay detainees, the Mount Inostranka detainees have not carried out any actual threat to the United States.

While the legal status of the Guantánamo Bay detainees is certainly a matter of great import, perhaps the foremost tension about them was expressed by Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, then the ranking Republican on and current chairman of the House Judiciary Committee: “No good purpose is served by allowing known terrorists, who trained at terrorist training camps, to come to the U.S. and live among us... Guantánamo Bay was never meant to be an Ellis Island” (Eviatar). Smith’s comments came after both houses of Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of keeping the detainees in Guantánamo Bay. Congress’s refusal to move the detainees to American prisons not only is a direct rebuff of President Obama’s campaign pledge to close Guantánamo Bay but also reflects the high anxieties surrounding national security. Representative Smith’s concerns about Guantánamo Bay are matched by his

outspoken opposition to immigration reform policies such as the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would have set provisions for otherwise deportable immigrants brought to the United States before the age of 16 to gain permanent residency status through service in the armed forces or enrollment in college.<sup>3</sup>

While Smith's concerns about national security are certainly valid and his opinions are not representative of the aggregate of Congress, it is no coincidence that those concerns are centered on the threat of aliens "among us." As Thomas Ross asserts, "We seem to be witnessing the emergence of a new form of nationalism that expresses both a civic and racial/religious national identity" (240). In "Whiteness After 9/11," Ross argues that this form of nationalism is endemic of a crisis of whiteness: The White man at the dawn of the twenty-first century faces all the commonly shared perils of his fellow citizens, the lingering horror of 9/11, the uncertain contours of the War on Terror, but also and uniquely, he faces the knowledge that an America that he has always thought of as essentially his seems to be slipping away in an increasingly multi-racial America" (243).

These new nationalistic concerns have coalesced in efforts to delegitimize Obama's presidency. Those who most vehemently oppose Obama's presidency have done so by constructing Obama as a "Manchurian candidate" whose beliefs are antithetical to the American ideal. For instance, in "Yes, Obama Really Is A Manchurian Candidate," *WorldNetDaily* managing editor David Kupelian writes—

Barack Obama was programmed for years by his atheist, Muslim father, by the  
communist sex pervert Frank Marshall Davis, by con man Tony Rezko, by

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<sup>3</sup> In comments that infuriated many Democrats and proponents of immigration reform, Smith stated that the DREAM Act would be an "American nightmare" (Martin). Martin also writes, "Smith's polarizing place in the U.S. immigration debate is not new. He was shepherd to controversial legislation in 1996 that streamlined procedures to deport illegal immigrants."

domestic terrorist Bill Ayers and others—most of all by black liberation theology screamer Jeremiah Wright. Obama’s resume is largely manufactured. There is a total blackout on his college years. His campaign obscures what he did as a ‘community organizer.’ All his radical associations are denied or minimized. His miserable legislative record (voting ‘present’ over 100 times to avoid taking a stand), his lack of achievement, his radical views and so on—all have been laundered through the magic of public relations into the near-sacred saga of ‘The One’ who has been sent to serve, and to save, America.

Kupelian’s musings here not only position Obama as a radical but also suggest that he is a false construct. In other words, Americans are unaware of who the “real” Obama is.

Kupelian’s writing here lends towards the equally dismissive notion that Obama is un-American, both in origin and ideology. While questions regarding Obama’s nationality have assuaged in recent months, it was a hot button issue even after—and especially when—Obama publically released his Hawaiian certificate of live birth in June 2008. However, even among those who concede that Obama is not foreign-born, there still remains the belief that he is un-American. As *Wall Street Journal* editor Dorothy Rabinowitz states succinctly in her article “The Alien in the White House,” “A great part of America now understands that this president's sense of identification lies elsewhere, and is in profound ways unlike theirs. He is hard put to sound convincingly like the leader of the nation, because he is, at heart and by instinct, the voice mainly of his ideological class. He is the alien in the White House.” As evidence, Rabinowitz—like many on the right—point to a host of factors, primarily Obama’s seemingly apologetic tone towards other nations, his apparent refusal to indict Islam for terrorism, and his apparent refusal to take a hardline stance on illegal immigration and Mexican border defense. To punctuate



Obama's outsider status, Rabinowitz's article features a video still of the "Little Barry," a statue of Obama as a boy in Jakarta, Indonesia, located outside of the school he attended there as a youth.

To some degree, *The Event's* President Martinez reflects Kupelian and Rabinowitz's characterizations of Obama. The son of Cuban refugees, Martinez is more Cuban Refugee Center, less Ellis Island.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Martinez's connections to Miami—much like Obama's connections to Hawaii and Indonesia—also establish his outsider status. For example, the first scene in which Martinez appears is at his presidential retreat in Miami. Miami, like Hawaii, is often viewed as foreign, particularly because of the large Cuban American population that has resulted in the city frequently being dubbed the "Latin capital of the United States." Moreover, as Marifeli Perez-Stable and Mirien Uriarte note, "Cuban attainments in Miami have undoubtedly most closely challenged the hegemony of non-Hispanic whites" (160). Undoubtedly, a black Cuban American president with ties to Miami, at least on the surface, could be perceived as a rather strong embodiment of this challenge.

More importantly, however, is the narrative's suggestion that Martinez is empathetic towards Sophia and the Mount Intronka detainees because of his parents' refugee experience. During his son's birthday party at his Miami retreat, presumably moments before he is scheduled to announce the release of the detainees, Martinez is pulled into an informal meeting with Vice President Jarvis Raymond (Bill Smitrovich), Director of National Intelligence Sterling Blake (Zeljko Ivanek), and General Whitman (Tony Todd). They try persuading Martinez into reconsidering releasing the detainees. After Martinez refuses to change his mind, Blake says, "I understand your family had it rough back in Cuba, but you can't let personal feelings affect your

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<sup>4</sup> The Cuban Refugee Center was located in Miami and was the site where Cubans fleeing during the Cuban missile crisis had to register upon arrival in America in the late 1950s-early 1960s. Given that Martinez has full citizenship, one can presume that his parents arrived during the first wave of refugees who arrived in the late 1950s.

decision, not when the safety of our citizens is at stake... We sacrifice the rights of the few for the safety of the many all the time.” Martinez’s response is quite Obamaesque: “It’s not just about protecting the rights of the few; this is about protecting human rights. Now these people may not be Americans, but we are. Look what we have done to them: We’ve abused them; we’ve detained them, illegally, after all this time. That’s not what this country is about. Not anymore.” His response reaffirms his desire to close Mount Inostranka but does not refute the possibility that his parents’ own detainment may have affected his decision. Either way, Martinez is presented as the sole advocate of freeing the detainees.

Of course, like the black presidents in the other disaster films and series, Martinez is honorable—Sophia refers to him as a “good man” and Blake calls him “noble”—but exercises what proves to be poor judgment. Part of the problem is that he is an outsider, particularly in terms of the orchestrations of government. Unlike Vice President Raymond and Director Blake, he initially is unaware that not only does the Mount Inostranka facility exist but also that the detainees are extraterrestrials. His lack of knowledge and his empathy also put himself, his family, and the nation in danger. Though Martinez attempts to correct his error in judgment by withholding his order to release the detainees and is firm in his negotiations with Thomas, he clearly is not in control. Thus, both the “alien in the White House” and the aliens “among us” are of equal threat, for the former cannot protect Americans from the latter.

President Martinez’s inability to protect the nation is exemplified by the exploits of *The Event*’s lead protagonists, Sean Walker (Jason Ritter) and Leila Buchanan (Sarah Roemer). Much of the series’ narrative thus far has focused on Sean’s attempts to rescue Leila, who was kidnapped during a Caribbean cruise during which Sean was going to propose to her. In his efforts to find Leila, Sean learns that her father, pilot Michael Buchanan (Scott Patterson), had

been forced to crash the airliner by the same people who have not only kidnapped Leila but also Michael's wife Val (Julia Campbell) and youngest daughter Samantha (Anna Clark). As such, *The Event's* use of white lead protagonists whose lives are in peril and who are seeking reunification is an invocation of tropes that, as suggested in Chapter III, are essential in those disaster films and series featuring a black president.

It is perhaps the acme of naiveté to assume that the election of a black president would have a demonstrable impact on how black presidents are portrayed in film and television, particularly since, as sociologist Roxanna Harlow affirms, America's social dynamics have not changed. Harlow suggests that an Obama presidency only will "provide a feel-good scenario that people the world over will embrace in order to maintain the illusion of a racially diverse, fair, free, and inclusive society" (166). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray are even more pessimistic, as they argue—

In a deep sense, Obamerica may bring us closer to an argument I have been articulating for a while—the idea that the racial structure of the United States is becoming Latin America-like... [W]e will continue on the road toward symbolic unity without enacting the social policies needed to make sure we truly are 'all Americans.' We may become like Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Belize, or Puerto Rico—nation-states that claim to be comprised of 'one people' but where various racial strata receive social goods in accordance to their proximity to 'whiteness'... Hence, like the pigs in Orwell's (1956) *Animal Farm*, we may proclaim 'We are all Americans!' but in Obamerica, whites will still be 'more American than others.' (181)

Whether Bonilla-Silva and Ray's pessimism is warranted is a matter for debate; what is more certain, however, is that black presidential films and television series already have presented this illusory America and demonstrated the falsity of it.

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## Filmography

### *Films*

*2012*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Danny Glover, John Cusack, Thandie Newton. Centropolis, 2009. DVD.

*The Birth of a Nation*. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Perf. Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall. Epoch, 1915. DVD.

*Deep Impact*. Dir. Mimi Leder. Perf. Tea Leoni, Robert Duvall, Morgan Freeman. Paramount, 1998. DVD.

*The Fifth Element*. Dir. Luc Besson. Perf. Bruce Willis, Milla Jovovich, Chris Tucker. Gaumont, 1997. DVD.

*Head of State*. Dir. Chris Rock. Perf. Chris Rock, Bernie Mac, Lynn Whitfield. Dreamworks SKG, 2003. DVD.

*Idiocracy*. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Luke Wilson, Maya Rudolph, Terry Crews. Twentieth Century Fox, 2006. DVD.

*Left Behind: World at War*. Dir. Craig Baxley. Perf. Louis Gossett, Jr., Kirk Cameron, Brad Johnson. Cloud Ten Pictures, 2005. DVD.

*The Man*. Dir. Joseph Sargent. Perf. James Earl Jones, Martin Balsam, Burgess Meredith. ABC Circle Films, 1972. Film.

*Rufus Jones for President*. Dir. Roy Mack. Perf. Sammy Davis, Jr., Ethel Waters, Hamtree Harrington. Vitaphone, 1933. Film.

### ***Television Series***

*24*. Perf. Kiefer Sutherland, Dennis Haysbert. FOX, 2002-present. DVD.

*Chappelle's Show*. Perf. Dave Chappelle, Donnell Rawlings, Charlie Murphy. Comedy Central, 2003-2006. DVD.

*The Event*. Perf. Jason Ritter, Blair Underwood. NBC, 2010-present. Television.

*The Richard Pryor Show*. Perf. Richard Pryor, Robin Williams, Paul Mooney. NBC, 1977. DVD.

*The West Wing*. Perf. Martin Sheen, Allison Janney, Jimmy Smits. NBC, 1999-2006. DVD.