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## Obama's Great Mistake, The "San Francisco Democrat"

By **David Paul Kuhn**

It's difficult to underestimate the enduring impact of Barack Obama's "bitter" remark. The day after John Kerry blurted that he "actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it" Vice President Dick Cheney ripped into the Democratic nominee and GOP strategists were already envisioning a new ad featuring the gaffe, intent on undercutting Kerry's character as a flip-flopper.

That week, four years ago, there were no banner headlines in major American newspapers declaring a turning point in the presidential race. Soon after the remark Kerry took a break from the campaign and skied at a resort in Idaho, a trip that added the air of elitism to Kerry's already sundered grit.

The Bush campaign had effectively won the campaign. It was only mid March.

In time we will know the gravity of Obama's recent comment that many Americans in the small towns across the Midwest "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment" because they are "bitter" over economic anxiety.

Since the remarks came forward, Obama's opponents have pounced. Hillary Clinton told plant workers that the comments were "elitist and out of touch." John McCain agreed. The Republican National Committee sent out more than 10 emails to political reporters in the 24 hours after the comments were made public, pushing the storyline that Obama is, you guessed it, an elitist. The Democratic National Committee's press shop was silent.

Manufactured disgust, all too prevalent in our politics today, should not be mistaken for the legitimate disgust. Obama has caused some legitimate disgust. And he should heed that disgust, and heed it fast.

But so far he is not. Instead Obama stays true to character, tepidly combative and totally cool. Obama has stood by the remark. He has said that he could have been more rhetorically tactful -- a defense reminiscent of Kerry's explanation.

Political attacks work when they reinforce real perceptions. They become narratives when built on enough anecdotes. And those attacks can become critical when they seem to confirm long-held partisan stereotypes.

Obama has just provided what may prove to be the keystone in the arc of Republican attacks. Obama expounded Saturday on his remark. "Everybody knows" that his comment "is true," Obama stated. There are "a whole bunch of folks in small towns" who "feel like they have been left behind."

That is true. But that's not the issue now haunting his bid for the presidency.

Obama inferred that rural Americans stance on religion, guns, or immigration is an outcome of economic determinism. The line of thought: Middle American Joe struggles to make his bills, Democrats don't offer economic answers, Republicans con Joe to care more about cultural issues than answers, and GOP dominates the White House for four decades.

### **What's The Matter With Obama's Words, Not Kansas**

"They don't vote on economic issues because they don't expect anybody's going to help them," Obama said, in an attempt to contextualize his remark. "So people end up, you know, voting on issues like guns" or "gay marriage" or "take refuge in their faith."

To many liberals this all makes perfect sense. Indeed Obama's perspective is the prevailing viewpoint in Democratic circles. And this is what's the matter with a party that has accepted "What's the Matter with Kansas" as gospel.

No book has more influenced Democratic thought in recent years. The premise is that because Democrats stopped representing working and middle class voters' economic concerns, "dropping the class language that once distinguished them sharply from Republicans they have left themselves vulnerable to wedge issues."

Obama has merely reiterated the lesson Democrats have taken from Republican victories in seven of the last ten presidential elections. The crux of the argument is that American liberals should become more like European liberals in order to win back America. The book was a case for Democrats to convince voters to think more in terms of cash than culture. Frank argued Democrats should emulate the economic populism that failed to win any of William Jennings Bryan's three bids for the presidency.

But that's merely poor tactics. What is always so offensive to regular Americans is the

presumption that if she is offered better tax policies she won't care any longer about abortion. And the viewpoint holds from one issue to the next: offer rural white men rhetoric that reminds them that they are working class and he'll accept that the Second Amendment only referred to militias.

Then there is the exhibited ignorance. Families who struggle financially care more about moral values because they are more likely to experience the breakdown of the family. In other words, cultural issues are not a substitute for economic concerns, as Obama argues, but inseparable from folks economic struggle.

All of this is exactly the sort of mistake Democrats have been making for decades. How many times can some leading liberals live up to the culturally elitist charge without considering that perhaps there is some electricity behind the charge?

#### **What Dogmatic Liberals Miss, and Realist Liberals Get**

Liberals certainly, when compared to conservatives, concern themselves more with the economic anxieties of the working and middle class, tax policy is a prime example. But Republicans concern themselves more with their cultural anxieties, from "cultural pollution" to guns to abortion.

Many liberals get rural America so wrong because, as The Pew Research Center for People and the Press found, not only do "most Liberals live in a world apart from Disadvantaged Democrats and Conservative Democrats," but also rural voters. Pew's 2005 typology study found that liberals are the least religious group, more than one-third are never married, they are the most urban, and the least likely to have a gun in the home or attend bible study or a prayer group. About all they have in common with rural voters is their race, more than eight in ten liberals are white.

Obama's base among white voters is disproportionately from liberals and those who have at least a college education. His Ivy League biography, even his professional manner, personifies his largest bloc of white support.

On the campaign trail one sometimes can tell. Last year he responded to an Iowa farmers concerns about crop prices by asking if "anybody gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula?" There are no Whole Foods in Iowa. Recently Obama tried to bowl in Pennsylvania and looked like the sort of Democrat who thinks of Whole Foods when discussing crop prices. Now Obama talks about what drives rural voters' cultural concerns and ends up looking like the kind of Democrat who bowls a 37 in seven frames. Soon there is a storyline. The silly is now serious.

It seems that every time Obama makes a mistake he brings it up again, offers context, laughs about it, and then defends it. No matter, the bowling and arugula mistakes were still small time. But the bitter remark was a game changer.

What must be disheartening to some Democrats is that on other occasions Obama has shown pinpoint insight into the voters Democrats lost in recent decades. In his seminal race speech, written by Obama, he said that "most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience -- as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch."

No other major Democrat has uttered such words in recent memory. It was a beginning. That beginning is now deeply undercut.

To boot, Obama already had problems with small town voters. In the Appalachia region of Ohio, Clinton won over 65 percent of the vote. Obama has put out advertising in Pennsylvania to emphasize that his values are the same as regular folks' values. But then this comes out. It appears Obama misunderstands how regular Americans arrive at their values.

#### **History Does Not Repeat, But Liberals Ensure it Rhymes**

That Obama's bitter remark occurred before a crowd of wealthy San Francisco Democrats made his gaffe all the more sophomoric. The progressive party never seems to look back enough.

It was not the first time Obama lived up to Jeane Kirkpatrick's branding of "San Francisco Democrats." Reminiscent of Michael Dukakis and the pledge of allegiance, Obama stopped wearing a flag on his lapel because it "became a substitute for" what is "true patriotism." Michelle Obama's aside about her newfound pride as an American, watching this race, didn't help matters. Neither did the video of Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

The patriotism mistakes will matter. He is not doing much to refute Kirkpatrick's other zinger from that same 1984 speech: that Democrats are supposedly the "blame America first" party. But I'm not sure any of those mistakes, even Wright, will matter as much as the bitter remark. After all, it came from Obama.

At some point Democratic intellectuals need to come to the consensus that they did not get defeated in recent decades simply because Republicans "framed" issues better, or appealed

better to voters emotions, or because Democrats have not found their inner Bryan. Every cycle there is an "it theory" popular within the Democratic chattering class.

Now there is some truth to each thesis. But not the great truth: Democrats lost their majority because they lost touch with that "silent majority." Richard Nixon may have been paranoid but paranoids are not always dumb. Some of this "silent majority's" concerns were not sexist, or racist, but wholly real and as Obama himself has said, based in authentic distress.

"So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time," Obama said in his race speech.

Indeed, Obama was explaining that sometimes Democrats mistake the color of the issue for the issue. We are a nation defined by our original sin of slavery and therefore, slaves to that racial worldview. We so often see race where class exists. Similarly, many liberals misperceive values politics. They so often see cultural stances for their worst manifestations while ignoring their best.

Guns become tools for murder rather than occasions for fathers and sons to hunt. Abortion is always about limiting a woman's autonomy rather than differing views on life. Concerns over illegal immigration are based in xenophobia rather than, at least sometimes, a valid desire to expect future immigrants to abide by the same rules as those immigrants from the century before.

Now there was some truth to Obama's argument. A recent Democratic administration did not sufficiently stand up "for those who work hard and play by the rules." NAFTA ended up making life much worse for so many of those hard workers, the bulk of which were the white working class men that Democrats needed to win back -- Bruce Springsteen voters.

It is also true that people struggling economically care more about the competition born of labor-class immigration, just as the Irish were concerned about the competition from freed slaves following Reconstruction. It is why today many blacks are equally concerned about competition from Hispanic immigrants.

Those who are struggling know the brutality of the bottom, as John Updike describes it, and therefore they will take almost any stance and most any step to keep one step ahead of that bottom.

But that does not mean that there are not valid law and order concerns over illegal immigration, or that it is not advantageous to emphasize English immersion for cultural cohesion and to empower immigrants to rise up the economic ladder.

Where Obama and many Democrats go wrong is describing cultural stances as outcomes of hard times, rather than principled, joyful, well-intentioned, or long treasured family traditions. Reality lingers in both theories. But Democrats too often mention the worst and forget the best, as Obama did. In Obama's defense, he spoke of family traditions on Saturday. But context is always hard after the gaffe. Just ask McCain and Republicans about their struggle since early January to contextualize his 100-year remark on Iraq.

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