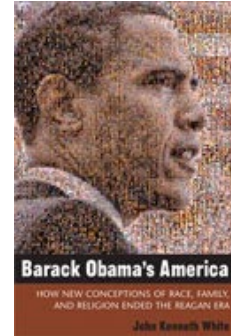


Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era
John Kenneth White

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17422>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

Q&A with John Kenneth White, author of *Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era*



The election of Barack Obama to the presidency marks a conclusive end to the Reagan era, writes John Kenneth White in *Barack Obama's America*. Reagan symbolized a 1950s and 1960s America, largely white and suburban, with married couples and kids at home, who attended church more often than not. The demographics, however, have shifted: Marriage is at an all-time low. Cohabitation has increased from a half-million couples in 1960 to more than 5 million in 2000 to even more this year. Gay marriages and civil unions are redefining what it means to be a family. And organized religions are suffering, even as Americans continue to think of themselves as a religious people.

Here to talk with us about his new book *Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era* is John Kenneth White. White is Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

University of Michigan Press: Was Barack Obama's election a reflection of change in American attitudes, or more a change in the type of people who make up the country?

John Kenneth White: It was both. Thirty years ago, the U.S. could best be described as a nation that was "un-young, un-poor, and un-black." In other words, we were white, middle-aged, middle-income. We also went to church once a week and a majority of Americans lived in the suburbs. That world was captured in such 1950s and 1960s iconic television programs like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and later during the Reagan years (with an African-American family) in *The Cosby Show*.

The America of the 1950s through the 1980s has come to an end. Whites will be a minority of all Americans by the middle of the twenty-first century. Hispanics will be nearly a third of the population by 2030. The face of America is turning from white into some form of beige or bronze. Even how we define race is an open question. For much of American history, race was categorized into two categories: black or white. Mixed race was frowned upon and degrading terms such as "quadroon" were invented. Now there are more mixed racial marriages than ever before and the children from those marriages are not easily categorized.

The American family has also undergone a transformation. From the 1950s through the 1980s, families could be best described as having a Mom, Dad, and two kids. That depiction of family is now a minority of the American electorate. Divorce remains high. But we have more cohabitation between couples (both straight and gay). We have more children born out of wedlock, and marriage is no longer an economic compact but a profession of love at a given moment.

Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era

John Kenneth White

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17422>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

Barack Obama's personal story highlights the above trends. Transforming politicians, like Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama, reflect the stories of their time. Reagan was divorced, as many Americans were by 1980, but his second marriage was a stable one, and his two children from it were reflective of the era (even if they did not always get along with their parents). Barack Obama's mixed race, his being brought up by a single mother and grandparents, is also reflective of our time.

The 2008 election also reflected a change in our attitudes. This is important and doesn't happen in most elections. For example, while Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968, beginning a period of Republican dominance in the White House, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal remained a powerful force. Americans had not concluded that government was too big and too powerful. They changed their minds in 1980, and agreed with Reagan when he said that "government is not the solution to the country's problems; government is the problem."

In 2008, Americans wanted a government that worked. But there is a lessening of the cultural divide that marked the Clinton and George W. Bush eras. Co-habitation is no longer frowned upon; divorce has lost any stigma; gays have achieved enormous gains in social acceptance and much greater tolerance; and Americans have not lost their religious bearings, but are finding new means of expressing their religious faiths. Most notably, religious doctrine is out; finding acceptance in new church gatherings (especially mega-churches) is in.

UMP: What would you consider to be the most important demographic trends in this country, as reflected by the election?

JKW: There is no question that the browning of America is the most important trend taking place. In 2008, only 74% of the electorate was white—the lowest percentage since we began taking exit polls. African-American participation rose to levels equivalent to whites, especially among younger African-Americans. Hispanics constituted 1% of the electorate in 1980 and 9% in 2008. Obama lost the white vote (43% Obama; 55% McCain), but easily won the presidency with 53% of the vote and 365 electoral votes to John McCain's 173.

Put another way, that un-young, un-poor, and un-black America gave George W. Bush just 48% of the total popular vote in 2000; 51% in 2004 (thanks to September 11); and just 46% of the popular vote in 2008. More quickly than people realize, Ronald Reagan's America is quickly becoming Barack Obama's America.

UMP: What types of religious changes are we seeing, and what kind of an impact did that have?

JKW: It's often said that Americans today are not particularly religious. That's not true: overwhelming majorities believe in God; believe in the power of prayer; and believe there is a Heaven and Hell. What has changed is both the location and expression of religion. Americans used to locate their religiosity in church buildings and institutions—e.g., Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. Today, the expression and religion is interior—e.g., I consider myself to be a religious person—and does not necessarily involve going to church. In fact, a majority of Americans do not attend church weekly, and the number who say they

Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era
John Kenneth White

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17422>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

seldom go to a church, or don't go to church at all is on the rise. Again, Obama's pause in church attendance at the beginning of his term, and his careful searching for a church (finally finding one at Camp David), is very typical.

Religious beliefs in this country today place a heavy reliance on tolerance. Condemnation is out; acceptance is in. I very much like David Brook's line that instead of a Last Judgment, Americans would prefer to have a Last Discussion with the Almighty. Those religions that say "You must. . . ." are having a hard time today. Instead, there is a greater burden on religious leaders to convince Americans that joining their church will result in all kinds of personal benefits. Those who make an argument along the lines that "You must join; you must attend on Sundays. . . ." are losing their audiences. It's not surprising, therefore, that 10% of all Americans describe themselves to be *former Catholics*—even though the Hispanic portion of the American Roman Catholic Church is on the increase.

Even as religion becomes more interior, what has grown are mega-churches. Pastors such as Rick Warren understand how to make their pitches to today's religious consumer—e.g., be more tolerant, develop entire one-stop-shopping communities, and so forth. Before Reverend Warren even founded his very successful church, he surveyed residents in his community to find out what they liked and disliked about their religions, what their needs were, whether they were being met by their church, whether they attended church at all, and if not, why not? The answers guided him in the formation of Saddleback Community Church in California.

UMP: What type of research sources did you use for the book?

JKW: Everything. This is the fifth book I have done—the others being *The Fractured Electorate* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England 1983); *The New Politics of Old Values* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England 1988 and 1990); *Still Seeing Red: How The Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997 and 1998); and *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2002).

What made this book different is that, in parts, it is somewhat autobiographical. My wife and I have a twelve-year-old daughter. We were both born in the 1950s, and lived through the period when America that was "un-young, un-poor, and un-black," and Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were in the White House. Part of the book describes life in my household when I was growing up; the types of families that lived in our neighborhood; and how that is very different for our daughter who has friends of different races and has attended schools where she is a racial minority.

I used many books and newspaper articles as well as U.S. Census data. There is an extensive [bibliography on line](#).

UMP: What do these changes mean for politicians going forward?

JKW: These changed demographics bode well for the Democratic party. There is an old saying that goes, "Demography is destiny." A nation that is minority white, has all types of different families and religious

Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era
John Kenneth White

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17422>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

practices, is tolerant and accepting of gays is one in which the Democratic party could prosper in ways they had difficulty doing when the New Deal ended, Americans moved to the suburbs and thought of themselves as taxpayers rather than recipients of government services, and the Democratic party became associated with the word "minority."

This new demography helps Democrats. It also gives President Obama to become the kind of transformational president that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan were during their times in office. But while the environment favors Democrats, results matter. President Obama must convince Americans in 2012 that they are better off than they were in 2008.

The real challenge is one that Republicans face. And how they respond will say much about the nation's future. Thus far, Republicans are reluctant to acknowledge how the demographic realities have shifted. A majority of Republican U.S. Senators (31 of 40) voted against Sonya Sotomayor, the first Hispanic to become a Supreme Court justice. While Michael Steele has become the first African-American to chair the Republican National Committee, his outreach to minorities has been awkward (to put it charitably).

The Reagan era is over. This is something Republicans find hard to acknowledge; just as Democrats found it hard to admit the New Deal had come to an end. Ronald Reagan is now an historical figure having left office twenty years ago. Ideologically speaking, the Reagan philosophy of less government and less taxation has also come to an end. Americans want effective government and a muscular government.

Republicans are also beset by the fresh memories of President George W. Bush. Americans came to associate Bush with failure, and political parties suffer when their presidents are severe disappointments—think of the Democrats with James Buchanan and Jimmy Carter, and the Republicans in the wake of Herbert Hoover (and now Bush).

While Republicans can make short-term gains—thanks to unpopular Democratic candidates and overreaching by the Democrats—their long-term future will depend on how they come to accept and adapt to Barack Obama's America.

To read more about *Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era* by John Kenneth White, visit the University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17422>.

For more University of Michigan Press podcasts, visit www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/