

Barack Obama On Racism

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, March 25, 2008

National Lawyer's Guild 25 March 2008

Region: [USA](#)

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NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD WELCOMES DISCUSSION OF RACISM OCCASIONED BY SENATOR BARACK OBAMA'S HISTORIC SPEECH

For Immediate Release, March 24, 2008

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In response to highly-publicized sound-bites from sermons by Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Sen. Barack Obama delivered an historic speech on racism, titled "A More Perfect Union."

Rev. Wright had strongly criticized the U.S. government for putting Indians on reservations, Japanese in internment camps, and Africans into slavery. He said, "We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant. Because the stuff we have done overseas has now brought right back into our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost." Rev. Wright did not justify the 9/11 attacks; he explained they were blowback for a vicious U.S. foreign policy.

Rev. Wright's words were not unlike those uttered by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. about the Vietnam War in 1968: "God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war. . . . And we are criminals in that war. We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I'm going to continue to say it. And we won't stop it because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation. But God has a way of even putting nations in their place."

In his speech, Sen. Obama credited the civil rights movement for the progress we have made in overcoming racism. "But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now," he said, citing segregated, inferior schools that continue to exist 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education.

Yet last term, the Supreme Court, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, limited the ability of public school districts to address segregation by prohibiting the use of race-conscious measures as a tool to promote integration. Chief Justice John Roberts based his plurality opinion on the myth of "colorblindness," equating the exclusion and segregation of children by race with the inclusion of different races in the same schools. He ignored the decades of racial discrimination caused in part by segregated schools. Roberts ended his opinion with the flip comment, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race."

Vast disparities with respect to race continue to pervade every aspect of American life. Latinos and African Americans are disproportionately concentrated in poor residential areas with sub-standard housing conditions, limited employment opportunities, inadequate access to health care, under-resourced schools and high exposure to crime and violence.

Racial profiling from the initial police stop to the charging process and trial through the sentencing procedure has been widely documented. Mandatory sentences of life imprisonment are imposed disproportionately on minority defendants. Non-whites are much more likely than whites to be charged with and sentenced to death for substantially similar crimes.

In his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote, "Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."

Sen. Barack Obama has injected this critical discussion into the national discourse as a means of tackling the problems of inferior schools, health care, jobs and economic opportunities for all races. He said, "It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper."

The National Lawyers Guild welcomes this long overdue opportunity for a national dialogue on the pernicious racism and class oppression that the U.S. government continues to perpetuate.

Founded in 1937 as an alternative to the American Bar Association, which did not admit people of color, the National Lawyers Guild is the oldest and largest public interest/human rights bar organization in the United States. Its headquarters are in New York and it has chapters in every state.

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