

Elijah Watson

The “Black Agenda”: In the Hands of the President or Our Community?

Throughout history African Americans have been adamant towards gaining the rights of their people: Frederick Douglass fighting for the abolishing of slavery; Sojourner Truth speaking on behalf of African Americans and women during her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech; Martin Luther King Jr. preaching of a day when “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood” upon the steps of Lincoln Memorial; and, most recently, President Barack Obama leading the fight against issues with not only the United States, but issues dealing with African Americans. The issue of President Obama assisting his African American people has led to a division where, as Don Terry states, “there are those who believe Obama is doing his best under tough circumstances, while there are those who feel let down by a perceived lack of action by Mr. Obama on behalf of black Americans.” This faction has led to two leaders, Reverend Al Sharpton and Tavis Smiley, to have opposing views on whether the president should have a “black agenda” or not.

In listening to the debate between Sharpton and Smiley, I was inclined to side with Smiley; calm, relaxed and speaking when it was his turn, I preferred his presentation over the rambunctious, anger-driven Sharpton. After gaining some more background on their positions in regards to the “black agenda,” I realized that Sharpton’s side seems much more sensible. Where Smiley believes that Mr. Obama should have a “black agenda,” Sharpton believes a “black agenda” is necessary, but that it should be the responsibility of our black communities and leaders, not Mr. Obama. I believe, as an African American, it is the responsibility of our community and our black leaders to take care of issues that involve our race. It is a logical

viewpoint that is justified through not only the civil rights movement, but movements for women suffrage, for the Chicano movement and other movements. However, in all of these movements the main components were not the president, but the people who spearheaded those movements. This is what I believe Al Sharpton is echoing by saying that the president is smart not to “ballyhoo a black agenda.” For one, it would lead to an even larger faction not only between African Americans, but other ethnicities as well who would strongly oppose Mr. Obama. Not only that, but to demand a black agenda from Mr. Obama when other, much more important issues are occurring, is not just an act of selfishness, but lack of rationality as well. As Mr. Obama simply put it, “I can’t pass laws that say I’m just helping black folks. What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need. That in turn is going to lift up the African American community.” To create laws that would benefit only one ethnicity would parallel with that of the laws of slave owners during the 1800s. How slave codes were beneficial to only one group, this “black agenda” would work in a similar function, working for one group, and one group only.

Many of those who support the “black agenda” and declare that Mr. Obama should be in charge of it are people of significance in the black community. Cornel West, Louis Farrakhan and Tavis Smiley are people of credibility who believe that Mr. Obama needs to be doing more for the black community. I can understand their passions, but logically the idea just is not sensible. To demand a black president to assist the black community specifically over any other minority is just not right. If the president seems more inclined towards a certain race, he is seen as either racist, or not supporting his “homeboys,” as Mark Allen states. This is unfortunate, considering that Mr. Obama has other issues to worry about. Dr. Dorothy Height, the chairwoman of the National Council of Negro Women, has expressed her feelings about the

issue, stating that Obama needs to be “left alone.” She added that “I am not one to think that he should do more for his people than for other people. I want him to be free to be himself.” This is where the issue of black leadership comes into play.

History has often shown this division of how African Americans have disagreed in attaining something: where Martin Luther King used peaceful alternatives to gain the rights of African Americans, Malcolm X used much more radical means in an attempt to gain the same result. There always seems to be opposing views for many issues, and the “black agenda” is becoming a similar victim. In this disconnect between Sharpton and Smiley we see tension build in the fact that both sides have significant contributors, and both want to receive benefits for African Americans but in a different manner. If this faction continues, tension will build upon an already busy Mr. Obama, pulling him into solving problems that should be taken care of by our black community and black leaders. Why have President Obama come under allegations of supporting only one ethnicity? If we want improvement so bad, like our past African American figures we should be leading the crusade, not depending on our president to do so. We preach about how Obama has changed history, but yet we’re not allowing him to do his job: being our president.

Putting this unnecessary responsibility on Mr. Obama is unjustifiable. As Elijah E. Cummings expressed, “I think he can do more, and he will do more.” President Obama has an abundance of issues on his plate; if we want to improve our African American communities, I believe we need to have the epiphany that only we can lead to that change, for a collective effort from ourselves will lead to not only our own improvement, but a gradual improvement for everyone else.