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## Politics and Markets

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### John Sununu and the Bitch Goddess

When **John Sununu** told us that **Colin Powell's** recent endorsement of **Barack Obama** for a second term was all about racial solidarity, many were amazed. They were amazed partly because of the brazenness of the comment, but also because of Sununu's suggestion that a decorated military General, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and former Secretary of State would endorse someone for the presidency simply because of melanin. Sununu's comments were a slur on Colin Powell, as they were designed to strip him of all of his achievements as a public servant. Those comments, as well, betrayed a simplistic and maladroit grasp of the nature of group solidarity in general, and of the history of African American people in particular.

It is true that millions of blacks were delighted to see Barack Obama elected to the presidency in 2008. I was one of them. But the delight evident in Grant Park on the night of the election was not indicative of obtuse or crass group solidarity – such as one finds among fans of home-city sports teams, or in the mouth of Archie Bunker. It was not merely because of his race that those who flooded Grant Park felt such delight. Indeed, this delight was shared by millions of Asian-Americans, whites, Latinos and many other ethnic groups, all of whom knew that the election of Mr. Obama was indicative of the country's pitch forward through moral and political space. And, after all, Mr. Obama's "specialness" was not the invention of blacks, it was the invention of whites. It was whites who, for hundreds of years, spun a story about black aptitude, intelligence, and capacities for leadership, innovation, and power that created a sense of wonder whenever a black man or woman achieved something noteworthy. The delight in Mr. Obama's ascent to the presidency was more about the country and what it had lived through, than about Mr. Obama. Mr. Obama, himself, would have been a fool to think otherwise.

What blacks and millions of other Americans felt in 2008 was that a corner had been turned in the country's history. For blacks, it was affirmation that, despite all of the historical obstacles, one of their own could reach the highest heights. For all Americans, it was affirmation that the steady and sometimes painful and perilous pursuit of the ideals explicated in America's founding documents can eventually be realized. And that means that we can push forward with hope that the next obstacles to our living-out what President Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" will eventually fall or be overcome.

One week after Barack Obama's inauguration, I recall very clearly telling a colleague who served with me on the board of a civil rights organization, "Now that all of *that* is over, I intend to keep my foot up Mr. Obama's backside." I was expressing my view that, while I was aware that the country had turned a corner that it needed to turn, it would now be all about *policy*, not conviviality, not shared racial ties.



The country was in a mess, young Americans were dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the savings and investments of millions of people had been cut to a fraction of what they had been. What to do?

As with Colin Powell, the one thing that mattered to me was what Mr. Obama would do with the office he had been given by the American people – black people and white people, Asians and Hispanics, gays and straights. I, like Mr. Powell, believe that Mr. Obama has done just fine, although neither Mr. Powell nor I agree with Mr. Obama on everything, or believe that there have not been failures. To suggest that Mr. Powell's or my support for Mr. Obama is based upon some thin and obtuse racial solidarity, and that we can conveniently tuck away our disagreements in the name of racial solidarity, is highly offensive. We think what we think based upon policy considerations, not melanin.

But Mr. Sununu's suggestion that racial solidarity is afoot in Mr. Powell's endorsement plays well in the political space in which Mr. Sununu operates, for it spins the narrative concerning why it is that **Mr. Romney** has so little support in the black community, and takes the sting out of losing an endorsement from one of the country's national giants. Mr. Sununu's narrative goes like this – "What do you expect; you know they all stick together." Do we? We all stick together like we have stuck with **Justice Clarence Thomas, Ward Connerly, Herman Cain, and Condoleezza Rice**? Of course, the fact that blacks, generally, have rejected these persons as either inimical or unsympathetic to blacks' interests and history seems lost on Mr. Sununu in his "they all stick together" fantasy.

But, alas, can't it be that Mr. Powell is worried that Mr. Romney is morally mercurial, crassly pragmatist, and dangerously close with the very same neo-conservatives that led the country into two sustained wars of choice, which in turn has led to the deaths of thousands of Americans, tens of thousands of dead Iraqis and Afghans, and millions of displaced persons who had to flee Iraq for neighboring countries? Can't it be that Mr. Powell is dubious about Mr. Romney's sketchy fiscal plan? Can't it be that Mr. Powell is worried that Mr. Romney wants some two trillion dollars more than even the Joint Chiefs of Staff is asking for defense spending, which is no more than a transparent effort to "look tough" at the expense of the American taxpayer? Couldn't it be that what Mr. Powell is hearing in Mr. Romney's stump speeches is something eerily reminiscent of what he lived through as Secretary of State, when he was battling regularly with **Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and John Bolton** – men who seem to have never seen a military campaign that they didn't like, and who believe that "American Exceptionalism" must always mean American hegemony? And mightn't it be that Mr. Powell is aware that the trillions of dollars of debt that the nation is now carrying has largely to do with **George W. Bush's** unfunded prescription drug program, off-budget wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, trillion dollar tax cuts for the wealthy, and light-touch regulation of some of the most risky and least understood corners of the financial services industry?

Practitioners of *Realpolitik*, like Mr. Sununu, do not mind say-anything political rhetoric or tactics. They seek only to succeed, to attain the power they crave in order to ply their agendas. They have always employed it and always will. But the rest of us, those of us who think there is a place for decency in political discourse, who think that there is life after a political campaign, must be ready to push back against the *Realpolitik* beast or, as William James once called it, "the bitch-goddess, Success." Beware



the bitch-goddess, the win-at-all-costs sensibility that can rend a nation, and make political gains no more than Pyrrhic victories.

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