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## MINORITY DEATH MATCH

Jews, Blacks, and the “Post-Racial” Presidency

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# MINORITY DEATH MATCH

Jews, blacks, and the “post-racial” presidency

By Naomi Klein

When I arrived at the grand offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the Palais Wilson, looking out at a drizzly Lake Geneva, Navanethem Pillay was hunched over the shoulder of her deputy, Kyung-wha Kang, dictating a press release. “I am shocked and deeply disappointed,” I heard her say, pointing at the screen while Kang typed. It was 3:00 p.m., and Pillay was having a very bad day.

“Done,” she finally declared, plopping down at her conference table. The press release was a response to some disappointing news. The previous night, the United States, under the leadership of its first African-American president, had announced that it would boycott the United Nations Durban Review Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, citing its alleged anti-Israel bias. The conference was to start the following day, April 20, 2009, with Pillay presiding. Known by critics as

*Naomi Klein's last article for Harper's Magazine, "Disaster Capitalism," appeared in the October 2007 issue.*

“Durban II,” this was the only United Nations gathering specifically focused on pushing governments to combat racism inside their borders, a task that



had become increasingly urgent as financial crises continued to stoke ethnic tensions around the world.

Despite Pillay's official claims of being “shocked and deeply disappointed,” the U.S. boycott had long been expected. The nasty surprise was that, on the eve of the conference, it had triggered an exodus of other countries. As we met, the press was reporting that Australia, Germany, and New Zealand had joined the boycott. After all, if Barack Obama—a global symbol of the victory against racism—wasn't com-

ing, why should they? And it could get worse, Pillay told me. “The E.U. states are meeting at 6:00 p.m. tonight, and the Netherlands and Italy are likely to pull out.” She and U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had been on the phone with foreign ministers all day, trying to prevent the entire European Union from walking out. Canada and Israel had pulled out months before.

As Pillay was tallying up the damage, an aide popped her head in the door: “The dancers are here.” The high commissioner, a South African judge with a slightly imperious air, was suddenly pleased: “We should go and look!” The dancers, who were chatting and stretching in the Palais's marble atrium, were members of Surialanga, a much-celebrated South African troupe that combines three unlikely forms of dance: Zulu tribal, Indian traditional, and “gumboot,” a protest dance born in South Africa's mines. Pillay had invited them to perform at the conference in the hope that their cross-cultural fusions would inspire delegates to greater cooperation.

She would need all the help she could get. The attempt to stage a follow-up to the World Conference on Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, had led to one of the most fractious negotiations in the history of the United Nations, with organizers attempting to satisfy a shifting array of demands from the United States—most in direct conflict with pressure from Muslim countries—while a phalanx of pro-Israel pressure groups did their best to sink the gathering. Through it all Pillay remained relentlessly positive, always insisting that important progress was being made. But on this Sunday afternoon, dressed in a casual tangerine-colored sari rather than in her usual more formal garb, the high commissioner allowed herself a brief undiplomatic moment. “It’s like being stabbed each time when I hear somebody’s withdrawing.”

It was a little surprising to witness Pillay so frustrated. This is a woman who as a young lawyer won better prison conditions for anti-apartheid activists locked away on Robben Island, then went on to become the first non-white woman on the South African High Court, then was named president of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Compared with tackling the apartheid justice system and genocide trials, organizing a racism conference should have been a breeze.

And the diplomacy in some important respects had gone rather well, with Pillay and her team often discovering compromises where none seemed possible. But what Pillay was wholly unprepared for was the Swift Boat-style attack campaign that had set its sights on the conference and on her personally, an information war waged with deep pockets and an utter indifference to truth. She had encountered misinformation before, Pillay said, “but not a deliberate campaign.” What she eventually discovered was that the things she thought mattered—the actual text of documents, the agreements negotiated between states—mattered little. It was the battle over perceptions that would shape history.

Every U.N. conference—wheth-

er on women or refugees or biological weapons—aims to produce a “final declaration” that represents the gathering’s agreed-upon consensus. Most of the work is done at the preparatory conferences (“prepcoms,” in U.N. lingo), and the final wording is hammered out at the event itself. The Durban Review Conference was different. There was such a fervent desire to bring Obama’s government to the table that virtually every member state in the United Nations agreed on the text of the final declaration before the conference even opened. The hope was that, with the negotiations completed, Obama could be

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### FOR THE U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, THE BOYCOTT WAS OBAMA’S MOST EXPLICIT BETRAYAL SINCE TAKING OFFICE

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assured of no nasty surprises and would send a delegation to the conference. The declaration to which all these countries—including Iran and Syria—agreed did not cross any of what the State Department had described as its “red lines.” It contained no references at all to Israel or to Palestinians. It was scrubbed of all mention of “defamation of religion” (a concession from Muslim states that had been trying to bar “blasphemous” portrayals of Islam). And all references to the transatlantic slave trade being “a crime” deserving of reparations had been removed, also under U.S. pressure.

Sweetening the deal further, the conference would not include an NGO Forum. Such parallel “civil society” meetings are standard at major U.N. gatherings, from the Rio Earth Summit to the Beijing Women’s Conference. In Durban in 2001, however, the NGO Forum had generated no end of controversy. With more than 8,000 participants, the U.N. had not even tried to exert control. It turned into a free-for-all, with the Arab Lawyers Union passing out a booklet that contained *Der Stürmer*-style cartoons of hook-nosed Jews with bloody fangs, among other

incidents. Meanwhile, the drafting of an NGO manifesto had been a bitter process, ending in language equating Zionism with racism and a decision by Pillay’s predecessor, former Irish president Mary Robinson, to publicly condemn the document.

These were genuine failings, but many conference observers felt that the U.N., by eliminating the NGO Forum and by taking some of the most pressing race-related crises off the table, had gone much too far to appease the United States. Worse, the strategy hadn’t worked: after succeeding in dramatically weakening the document, the U.S. chose to boycott anyway, taking many of its allies with it. For the U.S. civil rights movement, which had regarded the first Durban conference as an historic turning point, the boycott was Obama’s most explicit betrayal since taking office (even if most black leaders offered only timid criticism of the President publicly).

The official explanation supplied by the State Department was that the new declaration, though “significantly improved,” still “reaffirms *in toto* the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) from 2001.” This was apparently another “red line.”

A few hours after I left Pillay’s office, the BBC World Service ran a revealing segment on that original Durban Declaration. The host was Julian Marshall, and one of his guests was Yigal Palmor, spokesman for Israel’s Foreign Ministry. Marshall began by asking what all the fuss was about: “Why exactly is Israel staying away from the U.N. racism conference?” Palmor replied that it was “because it isn’t a U.N. racism conference, it is a conference about Israel-bashing, just like its predecessor.” He told Marshall that “in the previous conference, Israel was singled out as the most racist state on earth, probably almost the only racist state” and that these claims were not made in a few inflammatory speeches but in the conference’s official final declaration.

At this point Marshall stopped Palmor, saying that he had been reading that much-maligned sixty-



rich owe the poor. It is a story with which Western governments have never been comfortable, but there is perhaps no administration to which it represents a greater threat than the one headed by Barack Obama. Because the story that was told in Durban is a frontal challenge to the fairy tale Americans have been telling one another of late—the one about having entered a “post-racial” era, with their dashing president cast in the leading role.

### DURBAN AND THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

Holding the 2001 World Conference on Racism in what was still being called “the New South Africa” seemed like a terrific idea. What better place to celebrate all the things the U.N. likes to celebrate: multiculturalism, non-violence, multilateralism, and civil society. In the previous decade, these forces had joined with the people of South Africa to defeat apartheid. Now they would join together once again, in a feel-good triumph-over-tragedy setting, to defeat the world’s few remaining vestiges of discrimina-

tion—things like police violence, unequal access to certain jobs, lack of adequate health care for minorities, and intolerance toward immigrants. Appropriate disapproval would be expressed for such failures of equality, and a well-meaning document pledging change would be signed to much fanfare. That, at least, is what Western governments expected to happen.

They were mistaken. Seven years after the historic elections that brought the African National Congress to power, South Africans were beginning to confront a harsh new reality. Through the decades of struggle against apartheid, the ANC had pledged that liberation would not only mean the right of blacks and “coloreds” to vote and move freely. It would also mean that the wealth of the country that had been hoarded by its white elite would finally be shared, bringing water, electricity, good schools, and decent homes to the townships, and arable land to black farmers in the countryside. This massive development project was to be funded, according to the ANC’s founding document—the Freedom Charter—

by nationalizing the crown jewels of the apartheid economy: the banks and the mines.

But, like so many other governments in the early 1990s, when the ANC came to power, it underwent a dramatic ideological conversion. Rather than fund the development it had promised through nationalizations, or by demanding reparations from apartheid’s wealthy winners, the ANC decided to attract new money through foreign investment. By 2001, the results of South Africa’s free-market experiments were already evident: more people were living in abject poverty than during the apartheid years. To make the utility companies attractive to private buyers, the government was dramatically increasing rates on water and electricity, as well as rents. Jobs were moving offshore thanks to new free-trade rules, and land was still concentrated in the hands of the white minority.

When the World Conference on Racism arrived in Durban, many delegates were shocked by the mood in the streets: tens of thousands of residents joined protests outside the conference center, holding signs that said

LANDLESSNESS = RACISM and NEW APARTHEID: RICH AND POOR. South Africa’s disillusionment, though particularly striking given its recent democratic victory, was part of a much broader global trend, one that would define the conference, both in the streets and in the assembly halls. Around the world, developing countries were increasingly identifying the so-called Washington Consensus economic policies as little more than a clever rebranding effort, a way for former northern colonial powers to continue to drain the southern countries of their wealth without being inconvenienced by the heavy lifting of colonialism. Roughly two years



before Durban, a coalition of developing countries had refused to further liberalize their economies, leading to the collapse of World Trade Organization talks in Seattle. A few months later, a newly militant movement calling for a debt jubilee disrupted the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington. Durban was a continuation of this mounting southern rebellion, but it added something else to the mix: a new accounting.

Although it was true that southern countries owed debts to foreign banks and lending institutions, it was also true that in the colonial period—the first wave of globalization—the wealth of the North was built, in large part, on stolen indigenous land and the free labor provided by the slave trade. Many in Durban argued that when these two debts were included in the calculus, it was actually the poorest regions of the world—especially Africa and the Caribbean—that turned out to be the creditors and the rich world that owed a debt. All big U.N. conferences tend to coalesce around a theme, and in Durban the clear theme was the call for reparations. The gathering's overriding message was that even though the most visible signs of racism had largely disappeared—colonial rule, apartheid, Jim Crow-style segregation—profound racial divides will persist and even widen until the states and corporations that profited from centuries of state-sanctioned racism pay back some of what they owe.

African and Caribbean governments came to Durban with two key demands, hashed out at a series of preparatory meetings. The first was for an acknowledgment that slavery and even colonialism itself constituted “crimes against humanity” under international law. The second demand was for the countries that perpetrated and profited from these crimes to begin to repair the damage. Most everyone agreed that reparations should include a clear and unequivocal apology for slavery, as well as a commitment to returning stolen artifacts and to educating the public about the scale and impact of the slave trade. Above and beyond these more symbolic acts, there was a great deal of

debate. Dudley Thompson, former Jamaican foreign minister and a longtime leader in the Pan-African movement, was opposed to any attempt to assign a number to the debt: “It is impossible to put a figure to killing millions of people, our ancestors,” he said. The leading reparations voices instead spoke of a “moral debt” that could be used as leverage to reorder international relations in multiple ways, from canceling Africa’s foreign debts to launching a huge development program for Africa on a par with Europe’s Marshall Plan. What was emerging was a demand for a radical New Deal for the global South.

These ideas were not new, but they were advanced in Durban with a distinctly new attitude: African countries would not beg for charity any

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longer, nor would they ask for their debts to be “forgiven”; they would negotiate with the rich world as equals. Before 2001, Thompson, now ninety-two, told me, reparations were a mere “footnote.” But “Durban put it on the table once and for all.”

Of course there were plenty of African governments represented in Durban that had little moral prerogative to be making this demand. Robert Mugabe’s corrupt regime in Zimbabwe, for instance, exploited a just call for reparations by forcibly handing over land to his cronies, and some other African countries, like Sudan and Gabon, condemned the transatlantic slave trade even as they allowed a flourishing traffic in humans. Yet despite the inevitable hypocrisies, there was a genuine injustice being put on trial in Durban, one simply articulated by the African negotiating bloc: “Other groups which were subjected to other scourges and injustices have received repeated apologies from different countries, as well as ample reparations.” The transatlantic slave trade,

though widely acknowledged as a terrible wrong, had yet to be treated as a crime.

African and Caribbean countries had been holding high-level summits on reparations for a decade, with little effect. What prompted the Durban breakthrough was that a similar debate had taken off inside the United States. The facts are familiar, if commonly ignored. Even as overt expressions of racism recede, and as individual blacks break the color barrier in virtually every field, the correlation between race and poverty remains deeply entrenched. Blacks in the United States consistently have dramatically higher rates of infant mortality, incarceration, unemployment, and HIV infection, as well as lower salaries, life expectancy, and rates of home ownership. The biggest gap, however, is in net worth. By the end of the 1990s, the average black family had a net worth one eighth the national average.<sup>1</sup> Low net worth means less access to traditional credit (and, as we would later learn, more subprime mortgages).

It also means families have little besides debt to pass on from one generation to the next, preventing the wealth gap from closing on its own.

For a brief time, affirmative action was supposed to bridge the divide. But by the mid-Nineties, courts were increasingly ruling it discriminatory, and, in any case, it had only scratched the surface. Making matters worse, in 1996 the Clinton Administration launched “welfare reform,” a major assault on the few services available to poor black families. It was in this context that a growing number of African-American scholars began to argue that the only way to force the U.S. government to make badly needed investments in impoverished schools and neighborhoods was to frame these investments as reparations.

In 2000, Randall Robinson pub-

<sup>1</sup> *And the situation has only deteriorated since. According to the Federal Reserve, in 2007 for every dollar held by the typical white family the typical African-American family had only ten cents. In 2004, it had fourteen cents.*

lished *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, which argued that “white society . . . must own up to slavery and acknowledge its debt to slavery’s contemporary victims.” The book became a movement bible, and within months the call for reparations was starting to look like a new anti-apartheid struggle. Students demanded that universities disclose their historical ties to the slave trade, city councils began holding public hearings on reparations, and chapters of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) had sprung up across the country. Meanwhile, all of the major civil rights groups came out in favor of Democratic congressman John Conyers’s bill calling for the creation of a commission to study reparations, and Charles Ogletree, the celebrated Harvard Law professor (and one of Barack Obama’s closest mentors), put together a team of all-star lawyers to try to win reparations lawsuits in U.S. courts.

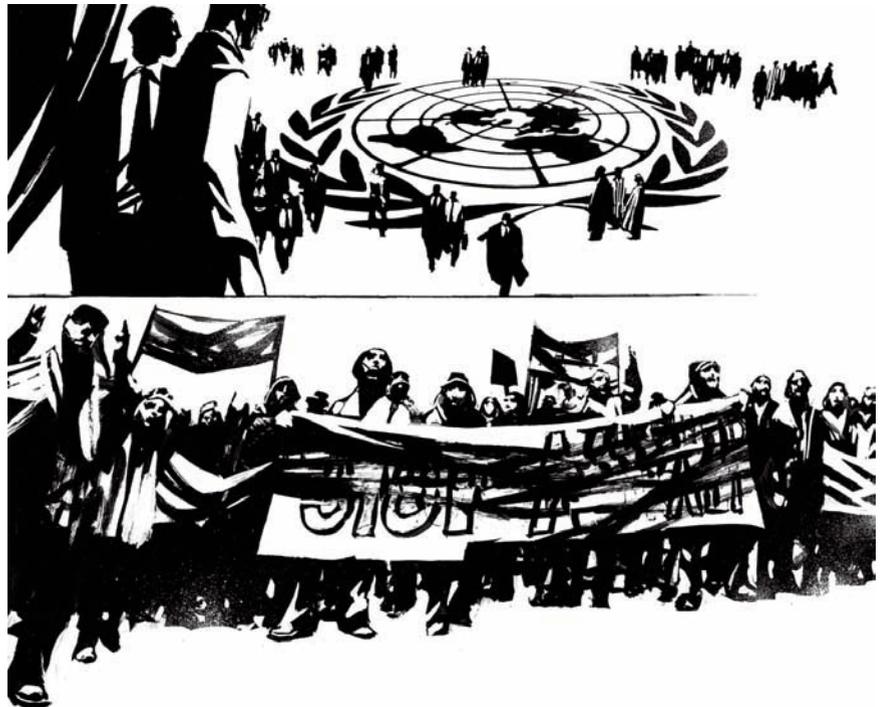
By the spring of 2001, reparations had become a hot-button topic on talk shows and op-ed pages. And although opponents consistently portrayed the demand as blacks wanting individual handouts from the government, most reparations advocates were clear that they were seeking group solutions: mass scholarship funds, for instance, or major investments in preventative health care. By the time Durban rolled around in late August, the conference had taken on the air of a black Woodstock. Small radical groups like the December 12th Movement and the National Black United Front spent months raising money to buy 400 plane tickets to South Africa. They called their delegation The Durban 400. Activists traveled to Durban from 168 countries, but the largest delegation by far came from the United States: approximately 3,000 people, roughly 2,000 of them African Americans. Charles Ogletree pumped up the crowds with an energetic address: “This is a movement that cannot be stopped. There are no plaintiffs that will not be considered. I promise that we will see reparations in our lifetime.”

In Durban, this increasingly confi-

dent U.S. movement converged with the reparations call coming from Africa and the Caribbean, and a single, muscular demand rose up from the mass of delegates: If you want to end racism, pay us back for what you have stolen. The demand for payback proved contagious, and it took many forms. Indigenous peoples wanted broken treaties honored. Brazilian peasants, many descended from

backward,” National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said. It was a losing battle. Durban, according to Amina Mohamed, chief negotiator for the Africa bloc, was Africa’s “rendezvous with history.”

There was one hitch. Six months before the meeting in Durban, at an Asian preparatory conference in Tehran, a few Islamic countries requested language in their draft of



slaves, said racism would not be addressed without redistributing land to them. And the South African protesters outside, tired of waiting for the ANC to make good on its promises, wanted reparations for the crimes of apartheid.

In all these different but connected ways, anti-racism was transformed in Durban from something safe and comfortable for elites to embrace into something explosive, threatening, and potentially very, very costly. North American and European governments, the debtors in this new accounting, were vastly outnumbered and in the months before the conference tried to steer the negotiations onto safe terrain. “We are better to look forward and not point fingers

the Durban Declaration that described Israeli policies in the occupied territories as “a new kind of apartheid” and a “form of genocide.” Then, a month before the conference, there was a new push for changes that were sure to grab international headlines. Some references to the Holocaust were placed in lower case, pluralized (“holocausts”), and paired with the “ethnic cleansing of the Arab population in historic Palestine.” References to “the increase in anti-Semitism and hostile acts against Jews” were paired with phrases about “the increase of racist practices of Zionism,” and Zionism was described as a movement “based on racism and discriminatory ideas.”

There is a strong argument to be made that Israel's legal system—which has different laws and even roads for Israelis and Palestinians living in the West Bank, and which grants and denies citizen rights based largely on religious affiliation—meets the international definition of apartheid (a few years later, former president Jimmy Carter would use the same term to describe the segregation in the occupied territories). But taken as a whole, this proposed language—by attempting to downplay the significance of the Holocaust and diluting the clauses on anti-Semitism—carried an unmistakable whiff of denialism.

Most importantly, by reviving the incendiary equation of Zionism with racism that had torn the U.N. apart for decades, the Islamic states instantly upstaged Africans' demands. As Nicole Lee, the current director of the TransAfrica Forum, told me, there was an acute awareness in Durban that "if you put Zionism on trial, that's all you can do." What was particularly frustrating to the countries fighting for a new consensus on the legacy of slavery was that the Zionism sentences were attracting all the media attention despite the fact that they had no chance of making it into the final draft. The Islamic states did not have the votes, and Mary Robinson, the conference's secretary general, had made it very clear "that we cannot go back to the language of Zionism as racism." In short, the proposed clauses had little hope of helping Palestinians, but they did serve another, entirely predictable, function: they gave the U.S. government the perfect excuse to flee the scene.

**T**he official U.S. delegation in Durban was led by E. Michael Southwick, a former ambassador to Uganda and a deputy assistant secretary of state under Colin Powell. A few days into the gathering, Southwick called a meeting of all the Americans attending the U.N. conference. He told them that the U.S. government was formally withdrawing from Durban because of the Israel clauses. The room of mostly African Americans exploded in shouts and boos. The South African police whisked South-

wick away before he could take any questions; they told him they were worried about a riot breaking out.

At the time, most U.S. Jewish groups praised the walkout as a principled stand against anti-Semitism. The vast majority of delegates in Durban, however, saw things very differently: in their view, the U.S. had never wanted to be part of these discussions, and it had seized on the clauses about Israel—which everyone knew would not survive the negotiations—as "a flimsy excuse," in Dudley Thompson's words.

Southwick, now retired and talking about Durban candidly for the first time, told me that the skeptics were largely right. Secretary of State Powell was inclined to fully participate in Durban, he said, but others, particularly Special Assistant to the President Elliott Abrams, were firmly opposed. President Bush had declared that the U.S. would not participate in a conference "so long as they pick on Israel." Southwick says he repeatedly told the White House that he was being set up to fail (he now calls it a "suicide mission"). He was sure that he could get the offending language out of the final document, but in order to do that, he explained, he needed to fully participate in the conference. He persuaded no one.

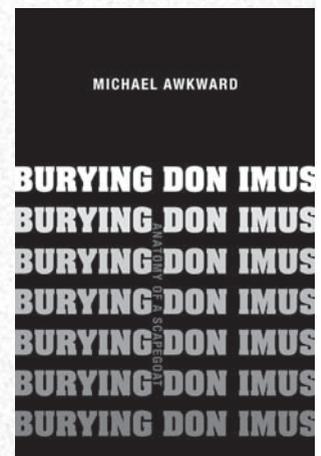
Southwick's account makes it clear that the Bush Administration's decision to get out of Durban was made, for its own political reasons, before the conference had even opened—not in principled response to the anti-Semitic incidents. Moreover, Southwick was quite right: after he left, all of the offending language was excised in the final round of negotiations. Which is why, in a detail conveniently excluded by Durban's critics, Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres praised the Durban Declaration at the time as "an accomplishment of the first order for Israel" and "a painful comedown for the Arab League."<sup>2</sup>

In the end, despite the walkout, Africa was not denied its rendezvous with history. The final Durban Dec-

<sup>2</sup> *The removal of the language prompted the representative from Iran to go out of his way to "disassociate" his country "from all paragraphs pertaining to the Palestinian and Middle East issue."*

# RACIAL SCAPEGOAT

**What the furor surrounding Don Imus shows us about unresolved race relations in the United States.**



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laration became the first document with international legal standing to state “that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade.” This language was more than symbolic. When lawyers had sought to win slavery reparations in U.S. courts, the biggest barrier was always the statute of limitations, which had long since expired. If slavery was “a crime against humanity,” however, it was not restricted by the statute—something, Southwick told me, that State Department lawyers were very concerned about at the time.

On the final day of the conference, after Canada tried to minimize the significance of the declaration, Amina Mohamed, now a top official in the Kenyan government, took the floor to make a dramatic speech. “Madame President,” Mohamed said, “it is not a crime against humanity just for today, nor just for tomorrow, but for always and for all time. Nuremberg made it clear that crimes against humanity are not time-bound.” Any acts that take responsibility for these crimes, therefore, “are expected and are in order.” The assembly hall erupted in cheers and a long standing ovation.

Members of The Durban 400 spent their last day at the conference planning a “Millions for Reparations” march on Washington. Attorney Roger Wareham, co-counsel on a high-profile reparations lawsuit and one of the organizers, recalled that as they left South Africa, “people were on a real rolling high”—ready to take their movement to the next level.

That was September 9, 2001. Two days later, talk of reparations, along with so much else, was blasted off the political map. Africa’s “rendezvous with history” was all but forgotten.

### DURBAN REINCARNATE

But Durban wasn’t simply forgotten. It was radically reinvented, growing more sinister and grotesque in its collective hatred of Israel with each apocryphal retelling. An “anti-Jewish diplomatic pogrom,” as one writer put it in the *Jerusalem Post*. An event “hijacked by global harbingers of hate,”

in the words of a full-page ad that ran in many U.S. newspapers.

This hysterical response to Durban can perhaps best be explained by a phenomenon psychologists call “illusory correlation”: it happens when people experience two intense events in close proximity and their minds make a causal connection where no factual link exists. The first intense event was Durban itself. For many Jewish delegates the experience was unquestionably traumatic. It was not only the incidents of anti-Semitism, which were real and frightening. It was the dominance of a political discourse that described Israel’s citizenship and security laws as being a version of apartheid, deserving of the same kind of economic sanctions that ultimately put an end to the practice in South Africa. For Zionists in Durban, seeing an international consensus build around this idea—one that challenges core Zionist policies—was jarring enough. But the real trauma happened when they went home and immediately faced the far greater shock of the September 11 attacks. The pro-Palestinian activists in Durban seemed to merge with the Muslim hijackers, becoming a single, hostile Arab mass, while the political threat Israel faced at the conference dissolved into the very real attacks on New York and Washington, until somehow these wholly unrelated events fused into a single, seamless narrative.

The most influential exponent of the Durban–9/11 illusory correlation was the late Congressman Tom Lantos. The only Holocaust survivor in Congress and a staunch Zionist, Lantos had been part of the official U.S. delegation in Durban. Here is how he described it in *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*: “Hate is the thread that connects Durban and the terrorism of September 11 and it is the same ideology that produced terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. . . . The terrorist attacks on September 11 demonstrated the evil such hate can spawn.” Irwin Cotler, Canada’s former justice minister and, like Lantos, a Zionist profoundly shaped by world indifference to the Holocaust, went even further: “If 9/11 was the Kristallnacht of terror, Durban was the *Mein Kampf*.”

In a terrorized and terrorizing America, drawing a straight line between

Durban and 9/11 was no mere rhetorical exercise. If Durban was an intellectual prelude to the attacks, that meant whoever had provided funding for it was, at least in theory, an accomplice to terrorist incitement. Sure enough, a year and a half after Lantos’s essay appeared, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* ran an exposé entitled “Funding Hate.” The four-part witch hunt was entirely focused on outing the foundations that had financed the Durban NGO Forum, and the main target was the Ford Foundation. It seemed that Ford had not only helped a great many activists buy their plane tickets to Durban; it had also provided large grants to some of the Palestinian groups that dared compare Israeli practices with apartheid and called for sanctions. The series, for all its bluster, revealed not a single direct link between Ford and the NGOs that had distributed anti-Semitic materials in Durban, let alone funding of an actual terrorist group.

No matter. A group of twenty members of Congress, headed by Jerrold Nadler (D., N.Y.), sprang into action, demanding that Ford “immediately stop the funding.” Calling for sanctions against Israel’s ethnically based legal architecture was, they argued, “tantamount to calling for the destruction of the State of Israel.” Fearing the loss of their tax-exempt status, several of the large foundations wasted no time caving. Ford cut funding to the more controversial Arab groups, audited others, and pledged to give out many more grants to fight anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup> Most controversially, the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation began requiring their grant recipients to sign what became known as “loyalty oaths.”

<sup>3</sup> According to an investigation in *The Nation*, three of the main Jewish groups at the forefront of the anti-Durban campaign benefited directly from this outcome. The Anti-Defamation League, which had accused Ford of “aiding and abetting extremists,” hadn’t received a Ford grant since 1967; in the three years after the controversy broke, it landed grants worth close to \$1.5 million. The American Jewish Committee, another Durban critic, received \$400,000, its first Ford grant in eight years, while the Simon Wiesenthal Center landed one worth \$625,000 in 2004, its first ever from Ford. So it seems that Durban did manage to win reparations for some groups—if not the groups originally intended.

The one introduced by Ford was the most aggressive: “By countersigning this grant letter, you agree that your organization will not promote or engage in violence, terrorism, bigotry or the destruction of any state.” The link to Durban was unmistakable.

This campaign had several long-lasting effects. Not only did large foundations, including Ford, cut funding for any projects remotely linked to

2001, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International USA—were unwilling to sign the letter. Some told her it was too early to publicly criticize Obama, but the bigger problem, Dike discovered, was fear. People confided that they didn’t want to lose their funding, and others talked about not wanting to get “targeted” again.

Fear goes a long way toward explaining why so much unabashedly

conservative Hudson Institute) and directed by Anne Bayefsky; the Geneva-based UN Watch (affiliated with the American Jewish Committee), directed by Hillel Neuer; and the Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, directed by Gerald Steinberg and formerly backed by Dore Gold, an adviser to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Eye on the UN and NGO Monitor were founded after Durban specifically to launch an instant offensive against any similar events.<sup>4</sup>

When the U.N. finally announced that it would be holding a conference to review compliance with the commitments governments made in Durban, the anti-Durban trio sprang into action. Their websites became anti-Durban clearinghouses, with best-of video compilations and slide shows of the anti-Semitic cartoons and signs from Durban I, as well as hundreds of anti-Durban articles, press releases, and “Durban II alerts.”

The goal of the anti-Durban campaign was not to fix the problems that occurred in 2001 but to smear, damage, and “delegitimize” (a recurring phrase) the entire process. And the anti-Durban warriors are an impressively prolific bunch. Bayefsky, a human rights lawyer with an obsessive hatred of the United Nations, wrote thirty anti-Durban articles in the year of the Geneva conference, published in the *New York Daily News*, *Forbes*, the *National Review*, and elsewhere. Steinberg, a hard-right Israeli academic, managed only fifteen, two in the *Wall Street Journal*. Thanks to the Durban chill affecting so many activists, the portrayals of the Durban Review Conference that appeared in these dispatches were virtually the only



Durban; human rights groups that rely on foundation funding started to fear that defending the Durban process was too risky. Ejim Dike, a New York anti-poverty activist, discovered this trend when her organization, the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center, drafted an open letter to Barack Obama expressing “profound disappointment” with the administration’s apparent plan to boycott the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, calling the gathering “a priority for many of us who supported your campaign for change.” Although many grass-roots groups signed, she found that most of the large human rights and civil rights groups—even those that had been key participants in

wrong information about both Durban conferences has been able to circulate unchallenged. Many of the people who believed in Durban were afraid to defend it, and those who weren’t afraid lacked the resources to amplify their voices. The forces that opposed the Durban process, on the other hand, faced no such obstacles.

**T**he most tangible legacy of the first Durban conference is a well-funded network of NGOs dedicated to bashing other NGOs as well as monitoring the U.N. for any signs of anti-Israel bias. The key groups are: the New York City–based Eye on the UN (associated with the neo-

<sup>4</sup> NGO Monitor’s Steinberg has taken pride in getting foundations to cut funding for pro-Durban groups and has called the canceling of the NGO Forum “one of the great victories.” Given their posture as watchdogs, it’s striking that none of these groups would disclose how much they themselves spent on anti-Durban activities. Hillel Neuer of UN Watch would not even provide his organization’s annual budget, or a full list of its board members, or a detailed list of funders. When contacted by a fact-checker, he said he refused “to aid or abet Naomi Klein’s apologetics for the fascist, misogynist, and genocidal regimes that organized Durban II in order to hide their crimes, scapegoat Western democracies, and demonize Jews.”

accounts available to U.S. readers—and they were wildly skewed.

Critical reports almost always contained some variation on the claim that the conference was “being chaired by Libya, with Iran and Cuba as vice chairs.” This, of course, made it sound as if these countries were the only ones organizing the conference. In fact, there were nineteen vice chairs of the planning committee, including Belgium, Greece, Norway, India, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile (and most of the work was done in Geneva by Pillay and her team). But the worst distortions were in Bayefsky’s bellowing full-page ads, which appeared in the *Washington Times*, the *New York Sun*, and other papers, and were signed by a long list of notables including Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, orientalist Bernard Lewis, former New York mayor Ed Koch, and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. In big bold letters the ads claimed that the final Durban Declaration stated “That ISRAEL, and ONLY ISRAEL, is guilty of racism.” Never mind that nowhere in the document was Israel accused, let alone convicted, of racism.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights realized a few months into the campaign that many governments were getting their information from these accounts—not from the original documents. When the U.N. attempted to set the record straight, suggesting that “the conference process has been the subject of ferocious, and often distorted, criticism by certain lobby groups focused on single issues,” UN Watch wasted no time firing back. Not only was this statement “intended to conjure up xenophobic and stereotypical images of the ‘Jewish lobby,’” it claimed, but the high commissioner’s office was “playing on imagery reminiscent of that which circulated in Durban in 2001.” (Even the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, one of the fiercest critics of Durban, rejected the charge. Accounts of Jewish influence were usually exaggerated, it reported; “this time, however, the Jews actually did conspire, albeit openly, to sabotage the conference.”)

The *Jewish Journal* has referred to the conference as the “Six-Day Durban War”—and the pro-Israel presence in Geneva was indeed mapped out with

military precision. Every day anti-Durban groups hosted a dizzying number of panel discussions, protests, rallies, and press conferences—some inside the U.N., some outside—all of them either denouncing the conference as illegitimate or attempting to draw attention away from Israel and onto abuses perpetrated by other (usually Islamic) states. An all-star cast of speakers and pundits, including the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy and the actor Jon Voight, was flown in to attract the press.

The Israel Project, a \$5.5 million operation claiming to provide journalists and politicians with “accurate information about Israel” (in fact, an unofficial adjunct of Israel’s press office), estimates that it spent half a million dollars on “Durban II.” According to its president, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the organization sent a delegation to Geneva to act as the “media war room for people who wanted sanity to be heard at the U.N.” They even flew in Frank Luntz, the infamous Republican pollster, to provide messaging advice.

The Steinbergs and Bayefskys were the generals of the Six-Day Durban War, and they had plenty of ground troops: Zionist students who were recruited to come to Geneva from across Europe, North America, and Israel. Roughly 150 were accredited as NGO delegates, allowing them to attend official sessions. (No other group had such a large presence. By way of comparison, Human Rights Watch had three delegates, and the NAACP had no one at all in Geneva.) Many more students came to attend the pro-Israel protests, “Save Darfur” rallies, and side conferences. One activist wrote in the *Jerusalem Post*, “I had been warned, prior to the Durban Review Conference in Geneva, that Jews should not walk around the surroundings of the UN alone, but rather in pairs for their own safety.” Just in case, the Jewish Welcome Center kept a psychologist on call to help visitors cope with any traumatic incidents.

But as the conference approached, there was something of a snag, best summed up in a dispatch from the *New Republic’s* correspondent, Zvika Krieger: “This conference was supposed to be filled with anti-Semites. What hap-

pened?” The weekend before the opening, a ragtag group of European NGOs had organized panel discussions and rallies around Geneva. The young anti-Durban warriors had dutifully fanned out across the city to infiltrate and report back. It was deeply anti-climactic. Sure, a handful of Iranians showed up at one event with anti-Israel propaganda, but it was hardly grounds for derailing a major U.N. conference (especially since, with no official NGO Forum, these events had absolutely no link to the U.N.). This was a serious problem: for months the press had been promised a “hate-fest.” If there was no hate in Geneva to denounce, then sabotaging a conference designed to combat racism—especially at a time when the fascist far right was on the march across Europe—looked a whole lot less righteous.

#### AHMADINEJAD TO THE RESCUE

It almost seemed that Navanethem Pillay and her team could win (or at least not lose) the “Durban II” public-relations war. In the end, however, they were defeated by the one force no U.N. bureaucrat is willing to resist: protocol. Prior to a world conference, the U.N. body in charge extends invitations to all heads of member states—no picking and choosing, for obvious diplomatic reasons. At the original conference in 2001, fifteen heads of state accepted the invitation and came to Durban. This time the high commissioner’s office extended the same routine set of invitations. But because the conference had been so successfully tarnished in advance, only three heads of state expressed any interest in coming. In the end, just one showed up: Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in full campaign mode for Iran’s upcoming elections.

The order of speakers at U.N. gatherings is based on rank: heads of state first, then ministers, then ambassadors, then the riffraff, so Ahmadinejad would not only speak, he would speak first. Calling the opening session of the conference to order in the Assembly Hall at Geneva’s Palais des Nations, Pillay delayed Ahmadinejad’s moment for as long as possible. She

spoke, as did U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, as well as a survivor of the Rwandan genocide and a Holocaust survivor who was one of the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There were video testimonies from victims of racism, and the stage was briefly handed over to the Surialanga dance troupe—decked out in Zulu furs and blindingly colorful saris—who bounded around as the secretary-general looked on awkwardly. Someone read a letter from Nelson Mandela.

Then, at 3:00 P.M., six hours after the conference began, the inevitable: a rustle of men in slim-fitting suits escorting the president of Iran up to the podium. After ranting for a while about the imperialist make-up of the U.N. Security Council, Ahmadinejad proceeded to do exactly what everyone expected him to do: he called Israel “the most cruel and repressive racist regime.” The Iranians clapped, many more people booed, and then there was more rustling of suits as roughly fifty members of the European Union delegation walked out of the hall en masse. Meanwhile, a group of French Jewish students put on rainbow wigs and clown noses, one of them managing to hurl his red nose at the podium, narrowly missing Ahmadinejad.

As expected, the boycott crowd—hunting for hate—seized on the speech, claiming the presence of Iran’s Holocaust-denying president was why the conference deserved to be boycotted (even though his attendance was confirmed only six days earlier and the boycott campaign had been waged for over a year). Anne Bayefsky, writing in the *New York Daily News*, was scandalized that Ban Ki-moon remained “fixed to his chair immediately behind” Ahmadinejad as he spoke—clear evidence, she implied, that the secretary-general approved.

This was nonsense, of course. The U.N. has no power to vet speeches—that’s why we have been treated to such memorable spectacles as Hugo Chavez calling George W. Bush “the Devil” and Colin Powell making stuff up about Iraq’s weapons program. And Ban did not sit silently by. In a departure—for once—from U.N.

protocol, he denounced the speech, stating, “I deplore the use of this platform by the Iranian president to accuse, divide, and even incite.”

That morning the *Jerusalem Post* had quoted the secretary-general of the World Jewish Congress, Michael Schneider, boasting about his plans to press the Czech Republic for the boycott. “We’re still trying to pick them off.” He did pick them off, but how hard was it, really? Watching the European Union delegates stage their dramatic, pre-planned mass exit, I was struck by the near-perfect synergy of interests between these supposed adversaries: Ahmadinejad didn’t care if the conference crumbled, because he was playing the anti-Zionist hero for voters back home. Israel’s defenders were ready to torch the place if it meant protecting Zionist laws from human rights scrutiny. And most Western governments were happy to play their parts in the destruction if it meant getting out of having to discuss what they were doing to combat racism.

This last point, Navanethem Pillay had told me, was the real reason governments were being so obstructionist, whether they were threatening boycotts, crying anti-Semitism, or blaming the world’s problems on Israel. No one wanted to talk about what was actually on the agenda: a concrete review of the race-relations commitments 166 governments had made in 2001. “The anti-Semitism misrepresentation,” as Pillay called it, was “very useful for states who want to duck dealing with issues.”

Perhaps the best way to describe the convergence of interests in Geneva is to say that pro-Israel groups succeeded in convincing ten governments to boycott a conference that they never wanted to come to anyway, while granting permission to many more to act as if, in the words of the French students wearing clown wigs, “Durban is a joke.”

**A**s I approached the Palais des Nations on Wednesday, day three of the conference, I spotted a lone protester holding a STOP THE GENOCIDE IN GAZA placard. He was steps away from the huge bronze Mahatma Gandhi statue, and he was being hauled away by four cops. It had final-

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ly stopped raining in Geneva, and everywhere else in this alpine city people were drinking beer in plazas and lolling in parks. It wasn't at all clear why hundreds of us bothered to trudge up the steep hill to the U.N. to submit our bags to X-rays and manual searches for "offensive materials." The truth was that, with Ahmadinejad gone, absolutely nothing was happening. The text of the final declaration had been agreed to before we arrived—part of the ill-fated and extravagant efforts to lure Obama to Geneva. That meant that there wasn't any actual negotiating or lobbying to do. Most of the press had left along with the president of Iran, and inside the main Assembly Hall low-level bureaucrats were delivering meaningless speeches to an empty room.

Many of the activists who made the trip to Geneva spent their time catching up with old friends in the Serpentine Lounge, located in the basement of an adjoining building. The scene felt a bit like a Pan-African Congress reunion, with lots of men in dashikis representing organizations that spell Africa with a "k" and Malcolm X's daughter, Malaak Shabazz, holding court in a corner. A few of the Jewish students continued to stage disruptions, running through the halls in rainbow wigs and shouting, "Durban is a joke" until they were thrown out by security. The delegates from Africa and Asia looked on with increasing resentment: Who was the target of this ridicule? Were these young white people calling them a joke? Was racism a joke to them?

As the week wore on, and the devastating impact of Obama's boycott set in, these tensions rose. "What this is really about is whose issues trump," an African-American delegate told me in the corridor outside the Assembly Hall.<sup>5</sup> And on

<sup>5</sup> Almost everyone who spoke about the tensions between blacks and Jews asked not to be identified. "I have never felt so nervous about speaking on an issue," a civil rights leader—hardly known for timidity—confessed to me. One person who has been quite open on the topic is Glen Ford, the executive editor of *Black Agenda Report*. "Blacks get nothing from Obama's White House except permission to worship him as the ultimate role model. Less than nothing, as the unfolding Durban outrage demonstrates."

one level that's the story of Durban: Jews vs. blacks, a struggle between America's two most powerful minority groups. The rivalry long predates the conference, of course. Reparations activists frequently point out that there is a Holocaust Museum in Washington but not a single major monument to the slaves who helped build the White House, or that many schools have far more detailed curricula about the Jewish genocide than they do about the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, it was the example set by Jewish organizations in winning Holocaust-reparations lawsuits against Swiss banks and insurance companies in the late Nineties that convinced prominent African-American lawyers that they had a shot at winning slavery reparations in U.S. courts. For many civil rights leaders at the conference, it seemed that Jews—more than any sector of society—should have been their natural allies in the reparations call. Instead, it was large Jewish organizations and the state of Israel—itsself a form of reparations, as Roger Wareham pointed out—that successfully undermined the one international forum in which reparations for slavery were on the agenda.<sup>6</sup> That reparations were collateral damage, and not the intended target of the campaign, was of little comfort.

These resentments were deepened by the fact that many African-American leaders were convinced that the review conference did not need to be fought as a winner-take-all minority death match. In Durban in 2001, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights—the largest civil rights coalition in the United States, representing roughly 200 organizations including the NAACP and the ACLU—formally withdrew from the NGO Forum in protest of the anti-Semitic incidents. Similarly, in the lead-up to the Durban Review Conference, the Leadership Conference, the NAACP, and the TransAfrica Forum attempted to broker the compromise that would

<sup>6</sup> Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally sent thank-you notes to governments that joined the boycott, "to express my appreciation for your decision."

ensure there would be no repeat of Durban's anti-Semitism, while still salvaging what was important about Durban, particularly the historic discussion on the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Most significantly, the diplomatic push to change the final declaration of the Durban Review Conference so that it did not cross any U.S. "red lines" was not led by the State Department—which often seemed happy for the negotiations to fail—but by the Congressional Black Caucus, particularly its chairwoman, Barbara Lee. The lobbying, which enlisted such allies as Egypt, was a resounding success. But it had no effect: the large U.S. Jewish organizations continued to oppose America's participation in "Durban II," and the State Department appeared to make its decision on that basis. "What troubles me tremendously," Lee told me, "is we made all those changes in the document, the entire world did that, and yet the reward was not participating."

**T**he premise of all the behind-the-scenes wrangling by black leaders in Washington was that Obama was personally in favor of Durban—it was just a matter of resolving the Israel issue so he could participate without paying a steep political price. And this may have been the most serious miscalculation of all. Although Obama's White House was certainly concerned about the perception of the conference in the Jewish community, it had its own reasons for wanting to avoid Durban's particular take on the historical roots of contemporary racism and on the structural barriers to its eradication. Ahead of his July trip to Ghana, Obama let it be known that he was tired of hearing that Africa's troubles were "somehow the consequence of neo-colonialism, or the West has been oppressive, or racism—I'm not a believer in excuses." He has sent much the same message at home, lecturing black families on personal responsibility ("No excuses! No excuses!" he told a gathering of the NAACP in July). Meanwhile, Obama has studiously avoided anything that could be considered a black issue,

from mass incarceration to the abandonment of New Orleans. For Vernellia Randall, an expert in international human rights law at the University of Dayton, the problem is obvious: Obama's "desire to be color-blind," she says, is wholly incompatible with the entire premise of the Durban process. "You can't be color-blind and go to a racism conference."

### OBAMA'S RACE PROBLEM

On the last day of the conference, in the Serpentine Lounge, I caught up with Roger Wareham, the reparations attorney who is something of a rock star here. All he wanted to talk about was the Wall Street bailout. If the government can bail out AIG, he pointed out, it can also say, "We're going to bail out people of African descent because this is what's happened historically." The economic crisis does appear to have handed the reparations movement a powerful new argument. The hardest part of selling reparations in the United States has always been the perception that something would have to be taken away from whites in order for it to be given to blacks and other minorities. But because of the broad consensus for large stimulus spending (at least for now), there is a staggering amount of new money floating around, money that does not yet belong to any one group. So far Obama's approach to stimulus spending has been rightly criticized for lacking a big idea—the \$787 billion package is a messy grab bag, with little ambition to actually fix any one of the problems on which it nibbles. Listening to Wareham, it occurred to me that closing, at long last, the gaps left by slavery and Jim Crow is as good a big stimulus idea as any.

What is tantalizing (and maddening) about Obama is that he has the skills to persuade a great many Americans of the justice of such an endeavor. The one time he gave a major campaign address on race, prompted by controversy over the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, he told a story about the historical legacies of slavery and legalized discrimination that have structurally prevent-

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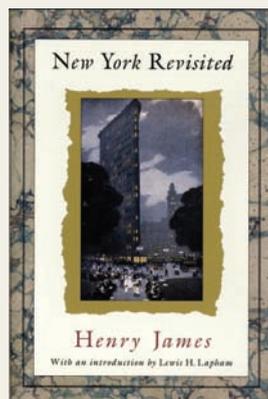
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ed African Americans from achieving full equality, a story not so different from the one activists like Wareham tell in arguing for reparations. Obama's speech was delivered six months before Wall Street collapsed, but the same forces he described go a long way toward explaining why the crash happened in the first place: "Legalized discrimination . . . meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations," he said, which is precisely why many turned to risky subprime mortgages. In Obama's home city of Chicago, black families were four times more likely than whites to get a subprime mortgage.

The crisis in African-American wealth has only been deepened by the larger economic crisis. In New York City, for instance, the unemployment rate has increased four times faster among blacks than among whites. According to the *New York Times*, home "defaults occur three times as often in mostly minority census tracts as in mostly white ones." If Obama traced the Wall Street collapse back to the policies of redlining and Jim Crow, all the way to the betrayed promise of forty acres and a mule for freed slaves, a broad sector of the American public might well be convinced that finally eliminating the structural barriers to full equality is in the interests not just of minorities but of everyone who wants a more stable economy.

Since the economic crisis hit, John A. Powell and his team at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University have been engaged in a project they call "Fair Recovery." It lays out, in detailed policy papers, exactly what an economic stimulus program would look like if eliminating the barriers to equality were its overarching idea. Powell's plan covers everything from access to technology to community redevelopment. A few examples: Rather than simply rebuilding the road system by emphasizing "shovel ready" projects (as Obama's current plan does), a "fair recovery" approach would include massive investments in public trans-

it, to address the fact that African Americans live farther away from where the jobs are than any other group. Similarly, a plan targeting inequality would focus on energy-efficient home improvements in low-income neighborhoods, and, most importantly, require that contractors hire locally. Combine all of these targeted programs with single-payer health care and a plan to desegregate the school system and you have something like what Randall Robinson called for in *The Debt*: "a virtual Marshall Plan of federal resources" to close the racial divide.

There is, of course, no danger that Obama will attempt anything so bold. In his Philadelphia "race speech," Obama was emphatic that race was something "this nation cannot afford to ignore"; that "if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American." Yet as soon as the speech had served its purpose (saving Obama's campaign from being engulfed by the Wright scandal), he did simply retreat. And the Obama Administration has been retreating from race ever since.

Public-policy activists report that the White House is only interested in hearing about projects that are "race neutral"—nothing that specifically targets historically disadvantaged constituencies. Its housing and education programs do not tackle desegregation, and Obama's enthusiasm for charter schools—some of the most segregated schools in the country—may well deepen the problem. When asked specific questions about what his administration is doing to address the financial crisis's wildly disproportionate impact on African Americans and Latinos, Obama has consistently offered a variation on the line that by fixing the economy and extending benefits, everyone will be helped—"black, brown, and white"—and the vulnerable will be helped most of all.

All this is being met with mounting despair among inequality experts. Extending unemployment benefits

and job retraining mainly help people who have just lost their jobs. Reaching people who have never had formal employment—many of whom have criminal records—requires a far more complex strategy that takes down multiple barriers simultaneously. "Treating people who are situated differently as if they were the same can result in much greater inequalities," Powell warns, pointing to the New Deal programs like Social Security that helped white men but locked out blacks who worked on farms and women who worked in homes. It will be difficult to measure whether this is happening again, because the White House's budget office is not keeping statistics on how its programs affect women and minorities.

**T**here were those who saw this coming. The late Latino activist Juan Santos wrote a much-circulated essay during the campaign in which he argued that Obama's unwillingness to talk about race (except when his campaign depended upon it) was a triumph not of post-racialism but of racism, period. Obama's silence, he argued, was the same silence that every person of color in America lives with, understanding that they can be accepted in white society only if they agree not to be angry about racism. "We stay silent, as a rule, on the job. We stay silent, as a rule, in the white world. Barack Obama is the living symbol of our silence. He is our silence writ large. He is our Silence running for president." Santos predicted that "with respect to Black interests, Obama would be a silenced Black ruler: A muzzled Black emperor."

Many of Obama's defenders responded angrily: Obama's silence was a mere electoral strategy, they said. He was doing what it took to make racist white people comfortable voting for a black man. All that would change, of course, when Obama took office. What Obama's decision to boycott Durban demonstrated definitively was that the campaign strategy is also the governing strategy.

Two weeks after I returned from Geneva, Rush Limbaugh sprang a new theory on his estimated 14 mil-

lion listeners. Obama, Limbaugh claimed, was deliberately trashing the economy so that he could give more handouts to black people. “The objective is more food stamp benefits. The objective is more unemployment benefits. The objective is an expanding welfare state. And the objective is to take the nation’s wealth and return it to the nation’s ‘rightful owners.’ Think reparations. Think forced reparations here if you want to understand what actually is going on.”

The outburst was instructive. No matter how race-neutral Obama tries to be, his actions will be viewed by a large part of the country through the lens of its racial obsessions. Since even his most modest, Band-Aid measures are going to be greeted as if he is waging race war, Obama has little to lose by using this brief political window to heal a few of the country’s racial wounds.

**O**n April 24, as I took my final tram ride to my hotel from the Palais des Nations, the roads were lined with Tamils protesting the world’s indifference to the massacre of their friends and families in Sri Lanka. The elderly black man in front of me, his beard flecked with gray, was wearing an Obama watch and reading a position paper on reparations. I asked him what he thought of the conference. He turned around slowly and answered in a deep, deliberate baritone, as if he had been sitting there waiting for someone to ask the question. “I see it not so much as a conference as a historical journey to alter the course of humankind.”

His name was Moses Williams and, as his manner suggested, he was a preacher, from New Jersey. Williams had been at the first conference in Durban. “I had believed, at the time, that it would mark a turning point, a reconciliation with the past that would bring a new era of dignity and justice. Then”—he paused for effect—“then the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell.”

At the time, he had imagined that the terrorist attacks might themselves provide the catalyst for “global healing.” That dream also

died, and stayed buried for eight long years. When Barack Obama was elected president, Moses Williams dusted off the old hope. He let himself imagine a world in which Obama would attend the Durban Review Conference, standing before the world “as a healing force against hate.” But, said Williams, “he chose not to do that.”

So what’s next? Williams, getting up for his stop, looked back at me. “The people here have to take the message to the highways and byways. That’s the only way.”

Two months after the conference, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution apologizing for slavery and Jim Crow. The resolution did not call slavery a crime against humanity, and it ended like this: “DISCLAIMER—Nothing in this resolution (A) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (B) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.” Unsurprisingly, the resolution was not greeted with celebratory fireworks or tearful testimonies in Harlem and the Mississippi Delta. It did, however, have one unintended result: by clumsily attempting to foreclose on the possibility of reparations, the resolution reawakened a national discussion that had been dormant since 9/11. Suddenly, reparations were back in the news, a hot topic on op-ed pages and cable news shows once again. As the debate raged, Obama, predictably, stayed silent.

The Durban process, meanwhile, is not dead yet. The United Nations, so help us all, has its protocols, so there will likely be another review conference at some point. And despite U.S. efforts to the contrary, the final document adopted in Geneva does “reaffirm *in toto* the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action,” which means that, at least in theory, slavery is still “a crime against humanity.”

That is enough, Roger Wareham says, to start a real conversation about America’s other debt crisis, about how repairing the damage done to African-American communities could be an organic step toward repairing the country as a whole. The President is welcome to join that conversation, he says, but it will happen with or without him. ■



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