

Obama's American agenda benefits Black America too

Written by Cynthia Tucker
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WASHINGTON, DC — President Obama's historic status as the nation's first Black president hasn't spared him criticism from some Black commentators and members of Congress, who claim that the president ought to have a bona fide "Black agenda."

Several members of the Congressional Black Caucus have chastised Obama for, they claim, doing little to address the unemployment rate among Black workers, some six to seven points higher than the overall rate of just under ten percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Last month, talk show host Tavis Smiley's annual "Black Agenda" conference included a panel which heavily criticized Obama for failing to directly address a range of difficult social problems which still plague Black America. Indeed, Smiley has become a consistent critic.

Smiley has every right to score the president's accomplishments and failures as he sees fit. But it is naive for him to expect that the nation's first Black president will champion an exclusively Black "agenda," any more than John F. Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president, issued a "Catholic agenda." Obama was not elected the president of Black America. He's the president of the entire country.

Still, Obama hasn't ignored those detractors. Perhaps that's why he met with a group of Black preachers, including Atlanta's T. DeWitt Smith, head of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, on Tuesday. Here's hoping he took the opportunity to point out that his policies benefit Black Americans, too.

According to Families USA, a health care advocacy group, 40 percent of Blacks reported being uninsured during some portion of 2007-2008, compared to about 26 percent of whites. Black or white, they will be able to afford health insurance as a result of the new law, which Obama made a priority.

The president also battled entrenched interests to change the student-loan program, which freed up money to give a slight funding increase to Pell grants. Many Black students will benefit from the boost in tuition assistance, just as many white and brown students will.

But the most significant assistance that Obama is providing to Black students — to all students, actually — lies in his promising reform plan for elementary and secondary education. The new emphasis on charter schools and merit pay has the potential for bringing the best and brightest teachers into public school classrooms, while weeding out the incompetent and uninspired.

There are few things that the federal government can do that have a more significant effect on children than helping them to get a good education. For Black kids, that's crucial. The difference between those Black Americans who have achieved mainstream success and those mired in poverty lies, for the most part, in the difference in academic achievement. For Black boys, who have fallen behind Black girls in educational attainment, a "Black agenda" could be constructed around this issue alone. Black women now graduate from college at twice the rate of Black men.

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It's true that college-educated Black workers have a higher unemployment rate than college-educated white workers — a commentary on a “post-racial” America. But it's also true that college-educated Black men and women will fare much better than their less-educated counterparts.

So far, few Black opinion-makers have zeroed in on Obama's education reform plans. That reticence may stem from an ambivalence — or hostility — toward the reforms from a mainstay of the Black middle-class: teachers. Teachers' groups have not exactly rallied in support of Obama's plans.

(Georgia may have lost out in Round 1 of Race to the Top because it didn't get state-wide buy-in from teachers' groups. Some teachers remain especially critical of merit pay.)

Still, his emphasis on teacher accountability has the potential for doing more to shake up public education than any reforms of the last two decades. Obama may not have a plan for reducing the Black-on-Black homicide rate (who does?) or shoring up Black marriage (other than serving as a good role model), but, if he can boost educational achievement for all children — including those who are poor and Black — that would certainly qualify as progress. Let's call that an American agenda.