

newsday.com/news/opinion/ny-opmci255590495feb25,0,3654993.story

# Newsday.com

## Clinton veering close to stereotypes

### Attacks on Obama evoke the old biases - in pop culture and in politics - that black men are slick and lazy

BY CHARLTON McILWAIN

Charlton McIlwain is assistant professor of culture and communication at The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University.

February 25, 2008

Many suspected that Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent substance-over-mere-words attacks against Sen. Barack Obama smacked of desperation. Some expected these attacks to come to an end once Wisconsin had come and gone, giving the Clinton campaign its expected defeat there. But the fact that Clinton continues to repeat the substance-over-mere-words theme indicates that it may be the last card she has to play.

In her speech following the Wisconsin results, Clinton articulated several contrasts between herself and Obama. The first was a contrast of style versus substance, speeches versus action. With this alleged contrast, she comes dangerously close to the line of evoking a long-standing stereotype about black men: that they are "slick."

The stereotype has a history, especially tied to black men who deal in the currency of words. The idea is that they dazzle the soft-minded with a persuasive prose, but leave them with nothing more than a feeling, at best. At worst, the charm in their speech leaves unwitting audiences with something quite different from what they were promised.

In the blaxploitation films of the 1960s and '70s, the black slickster was the pimp who charmed women into selling their bodies and remitting the proceeds. He was the drug dealer who seduced the poor and oppressed into a chemical high that left them poorer, physically damaged, in jail or dead. It was he whose inspirational orations were used to set a trap, to lure the innocent into the realm of the criminal. The slick trickster can't be trusted; his words are dishonest, serving only himself.



In the world of politics, the seductive power of words is used by black politicians to gain something they don't deserve. At least, that was the story line according to former Republican Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina, in his Senate race against Harvey Gantt in 1990. If you are the Republican National Committee, slick and smooth politicians like Harold Ford Jr. use the gift of speech to attract white women and live a lavish lifestyle. Such was the idea behind an ad attacking Ford in his 2006 run for the U.S. Senate against Bob Corker of Tennessee.

When Clinton spotlights the seductive emptiness of Obama's words, is she making a substantive contrast or evoking a stereotype replete in both pop culture and political rhetoric? Maybe the second contrast Clinton highlighted the night of the Wisconsin primary last week will help answer this question.

Differentiating herself from Obama, Clinton said, "We have to have hard work." The implication is that Obama is either incapable of working hard or unwilling to do so. In either case, Obama becomes the stereotype of the lazy black. Like the slickster, the stereotypical lazy black is a prominent figure in the lineage of American cultural and political history - from the welfare queens that sparked the Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton revolutions in government assistance all the way back to the conspicuous representations of lazy blacks in "Birth of a Nation."

Similar to the slickster, the stereotype of black laziness formed the basis of countless racial appeals made by white candidates against their black opponents in recent electoral politics. It was the basis of an attack in 1994 for David Perryman, who pointed out that his opponent for the House of Representatives, former Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.), got paid a full government salary while admitting he "only needs to work 12 hours a week."

The laziness stereotype was cast on Florida congresswoman Corrine Brown in 1992, when opponent Don Weidner attacked her for receiving a government grant for a jobs program, where he claimed she never worked to produce a single job. And former Illinois Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun fell prey to this allegation in 1998, when her opponent, Peter Fitzgerald, said she used money she did not work for to pay for luxuries.

The lazy black stereotype is so much a part of white political parlance against black candidates that the term "hard work" specifically has been used by most black politicians to characterize themselves when appealing to white voters. It's become a way of inoculating themselves against one of the most common of stereotypes.

Should Obama become the nominee, it will be interesting to see how his camp responds to such attacks. If history is any indication, they are likely to continue.

Copyright © 2008, [Newsday Inc.](#)