

## President Obama's other hand

Written by George E Curry, NNPA Columnist  
Wednesday, 22 July 2009 17:02

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President Obama is causing me to identify more and more with President Harry S Truman. After receiving advice from economists who sprinkled their projections with “on the one hand...on the other,” Truman demanded: “Give me a one-handed economist.”

Listening to the president's remarks in Ghana earlier this month and before the NAACP recently in New York, I wanted to yell, “Give me a one-handed president.” Not a left-handed president, not a right-handed president. Just a president who doesn't offer “on the other hand” comments.

The most glaring example of this came during the Obama family visit to Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. In an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper, the president seemed genuinely moved by the tour, connecting his past to the “Door of No Return,” the last sight enslaved Africans saw before departing for a forced journey to a strange, distant and brutal land.

Seeking to explain how he would explain the unexplainable to his two daughters, Obama said he wanted the girls to imagine the feelings of the slave masters as well as those subjected to slavery. He stated, “I think it's important that the way we think about it and the way it's taught is not one in which there's simply a victim and a victimizer. And that's the end of the story.”

I have visited the Cape Coast Castle, the site where captured Africans were shipped to the New World, and stared at the “Door of No Return” there and in Senegal. As any African-American who has visited either site will tell you – except Barack Obama – the last thought that enters your mind during such a heart-wrenching tour is how the slave masters felt.

It's such an emotional and unforgettable experience that all I could do was imagine the pain and suffering that our ancestors suffered. I could almost hear the frightening screams as I stepped into the dungeons. I imagined a blood-drenched ocean. Silence overtakes everything but the voice of tour guides as they tell one hallowing story after another one.

Years before visiting the slave trading posts of West Africa, I took my son, Edward, to Jamestown, VA, where enslaved Africans landed in 1619. He was writing a research paper for school on slavery and I thought it would help him if we visited Jamestown. Looking back, the feelings I had in Jamestown were similar to the ones I would later share in Senegal and Ghana. It was a profound sense of cruelty and inhumanity. Yet, it was also an unmatched sense of accomplishment: We had endured the worst that the world could offer.

When I heard Obama tell Anderson Cooper that he wanted Malia and Sasha to put themselves in the minds of those doling out the punishment, I wondered how he could make such a quick and seamless transition from the plight of the oppressed to that of the oppressor. It was one of the strangest comments I have ever heard.

I was also struck by the contrast between Obama's remarks at Cape Coast Castle and those he uttered at Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany. His speech in Germany was powerful. After touring the camp with two survivors, Elle Wiesel and Betrand Jerz, the president said: “We saw the ovens of the crematorium, the guard towers, the barbed wire fences, the foundations of barracks that once held people in the most unimaginable conditions.” He noted, “Now these sights have not lost their horror with the passage of time.”

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His four paragraph speech at the Cape Coast Castle did not come close to striking the same emotional chord. He said, "One of the most striking things that I heard was that right above the dungeons in which male captives were kept was a church and that reminds us that sometimes we can tolerate and stand by great evil even as we think that we're doing good."

Yes, that was a stark contrast, but as any other visitor will tell you, it does not rank as one of the most striking things you'll hear on the tour.

On the other hand – I had to say that in deference to President Truman – Obama's NAACP speech hit many of the right notes, praising W.E. B. DuBois, my hero; acknowledging women who "decided to walk instead of taking the bus, even though they were tired after a long day of doing somebody else's laundry, looking after somebody else's children;" declaring that "the pain of discrimination is still felt in America" and proving that he is familiar with an "Amen corner."

Yet, as he often does before predominantly African-American audiences, he felt compelled to lecture African-Americans on their personal responsibilities.

"To parents, we can't tell our kids to do well in school and then fail to support them when they get home," Obama said, sounding like the president of a local PTA. "You can't just contract out parenting. For our kids to excel, we have to accept our responsibility to help them learn. That means putting away the Xbox, putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour. It means attending those parent-teacher conferences and reading to our children and helping them with their homework."

I agree with President Obama's advice. On the other hand, it's not a lecture he should give only when speaking to Black audiences.

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