



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

July 22, 2010

# Persistent Issue of Race Is in the Spotlight, Again

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — It was exactly one year ago on Thursday that [President Obama](#) plunged into a thicket of racial politics by declaring that a white police officer in Cambridge, Mass., had “acted stupidly” in arresting a black [Harvard University](#) professor in his own home. Suddenly, the president whose election suggested the promise of a postracial future was thrust into the wounds of the past.

Not much has changed.

Mr. Obama sought Thursday to tamp down yet another racial uproar, this one over his administration’s mishandling of the case of [Shirley Sherrod](#), a black Agriculture Department official who was dismissed based on a video clip of remarks — taken out of context — that appeared to suggest she had discriminated against white farmers. One day after Agriculture Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) apologized profusely to Ms. Sherrod and offered her a new job working on race relations for the agency, Mr. Obama offered his own apology.

During a seven-minute telephone call, White House officials said, the president shared some of his own personal experiences, and urged Ms. Sherrod to “continue her hard work on behalf of those in need.”

Later, in an interview with ABC's "Good Morning America," Mr. Obama weighed in publicly for the first time. "He jumped the gun," the president said, referring to Mr. Vilsack, "partly because we now live in this media culture where something goes up on YouTube or a blog and everybody scrambles."

That, however, is unlikely to be the end of it for Mr. Obama, who has struggled since the beginning of his presidency with whether, when and how to deal with volatile matters of race. No matter how hard his White House tries to keep the issue from defining his presidency, it keeps popping back up, fueled in part by high expectations from the left for the first black president, and in part by tactical opposition politics on the right.

The Sherrod flap spotlighted how Mr. Obama is caught between these competing political forces, and renewed criticism from some of his supporters, especially prominent African-Americans, that he has been too defensive in dealing with matters of race — and too quick to react to criticism from the right.

For many liberals, Ms. Sherrod's hasty dismissal carried strong echoes of the ouster of Van Jones, an environmental adviser to the president who was forced to resign after Fox News focused attention on some of his past work and statements, and his decision to sign a petition in 2004 questioning whether the Bush administration had allowed the terrorist attacks of September 2001 to provide a pretext for war in the Middle East.

"I think what you see in this White House is a hypersensitivity about issues of race, that has them often leaning too far to avoid confronting these issues, and in so doing lays the foundation for the very problem they would like to avoid," said Wade Henderson, president and chief executive of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, an advocacy group here.

It is not as if Mr. Obama does not have expertise in the matter. While he was running for president he made what even his critics acknowledged was a serious and thoughtful effort to address race relations, during a speech in Philadelphia in March 2008. It followed a storm of controversy about racially inflammatory statements made by his pastor.

And as Michael Eric Dyson, a sociology professor at [Georgetown University](#), notes, Mr. Obama wrote an entire book on race: “Dreams From My Father,” in which he dealt with his own complicated biracial history and struggle to fit into a country that sees things in black and white. Professor Dyson, who is working on a book about Mr. Obama and race called “Presidential Race,” says the president at times seems either unable or unwilling to talk about it.

“You’ve got one of the great intellects on race in the presidency, and yet he is hamstrung, there’s a gag order,” he said. “Now some of that gag order is self-imposed, and some of it is at the behest of nervous white Americans who are fearful that Mr. Obama may racialize the presidency, so he’s got a legitimate concern that he doesn’t get pigeonholed. But the tragedy is that we need his leadership.”

The White House rejected the notion that he has not provided leadership, or is avoiding a conversation on race. “I don’t think anyone has confronted this issue more directly than the president,” said [David Axelrod](#), Mr. Obama’s senior adviser.

Still, the Sherrod controversy has renewed calls for Mr. Obama to tackle race head-on. After the Harvard professor, [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), was arrested last summer, Mr. Obama convened a much-publicized “beer summit” at the White House — a moment of reconciliation for Mr. Gates and the arresting officer.

In interviews, both Mr. Henderson and Charles J. Ogletree Jr., a Harvard law professor who represented Mr. Gates, suggested the president should now convene a national conference on race relations. [Ward Connerly](#), a black conservative who leads an institute devoted to fighting racial preferences, endorsed the idea.

“This president has never wanted to have his fingerprints on the issue of race, and I can understand why — if you’re a self-identified black man and you’re running for president, you know how treacherous the waters can be,” Mr. Connerly said. “But I think the president can, if he’s masterful — and he certainly is — introduce this subject in a way that he’s doing it as our leader, not as our black leader.”

Mr. Axelrod, though, threw cold water on the notion, saying Mr. Obama has “pressing matters that are significant to all Americans,” like the economy.

On Thursday, Ms. Sherrod stuck to her assertion that the White House had played a role in her ouster, even as Mr. Obama’s advisers said that was not the case. The White House press secretary, **Robert Gibbs**, was once again peppered with questions about whether the Sherrod controversy was “a teachable moment,” and if so, what the lesson was and whether Mr. Obama should be the teacher.

“I don’t think you have to have a teacher,” Mr. Gibbs replied, “for this to be a teachable moment.”



More in Politics (1 of 28 articles)

OPEN

## Washington Memo: Warren’s Candidacy Raises a Partisan Debate

[Read More »](#)