

Twice as good and half as black

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

August 29, 2012

The must-read article of the last week or so is without question [Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay on race, racism and Obama's presidency](#). Along with being a magnificent writer, Coates is a sharp observer of the cultural and political ramifications of America's original sin. A couple highlights:

Obama's racial strategy has been, if anything, the opposite of radical: he declines to use his bully pulpit to address racism, using it instead to engage in the time-honored tradition of black self-hectoring, railing against the perceived failings of black culture.

His approach is not new. . . . [and] the strategy can work. . . . And yet what are we to make of an integration premised, first, on the entire black community's emulating the Huxtables? An equality that requires blacks to be twice as good is not equality—it's a double standard. That double standard haunts and constrains the Obama presidency, warning him away from candor about America's sordid birthmark.

And:

Jeremiah Wright was born into an America of segregation—overt in the South and covert in the North, but wounding wherever. . . . Wright's world is emblematic of the African Americans he ministered to, people reared on the anti-black-citizenship tradition—poll taxes, states pushing stringent voter-ID laws—of Stephen Douglas and Andrew Johnson and William F. Buckley Jr. The message is “You are not American.” The countermessage—[God damn America](#)—is an old one, and is surprising only to people unfamiliar with the politics of black life in this country. Unfortunately, that is an apt description of large swaths of America.

Whatever the context for Wright's speech, the surfacing of his remarks in 2008 was utterly inconvenient not just for the Obama campaign but for much of black America. . . . It was not simply the country at large that was tired of the old Baby Boomer debates. Blacks, too, were sick of talking about affirmative action and

school busing. There was a broad sense that integration had failed us, and a growing disenchantment with our appointed spokespeople. Obama's primary triumphs in predominantly white states gave rise to rumors of a new peace, one many blacks were anxious to achieve.

And even those black Americans who embrace the tradition of God Damn America do so not with glee but with deep pain and anguish. Both [Randall] Kennedy's father and Wright were military men. My own father went to Vietnam dreaming of John Wayne, but came back quoting Malcolm X. The poet [Lucille Clifton once put it succinctly](#):

They act like they don't love their country  
No  
what it is  
is they found out  
their country don't love them.

One more:

In a democracy, so the saying goes, the people get the government they deserve. Part of Obama's genius is a remarkable ability to soothe race consciousness among whites. Any black person who's worked in the professional world is well acquainted with this trick. But never has it been practiced at such a high level, and never have its limits been so obviously exposed. This need to talk in dulcet tones, to never be angry regardless of the offense, bespeaks a strange and compromised integration indeed, revealing a country so infantile that it can countenance white acceptance of blacks only when they meet an Al Roker standard.

This clip is also worth a look—Coates and other formidable commentators talking about the article. (I recommend the whole segment from Chris Hayes's show, available in separate clips [from MSNBC](#).)

Elsewhere, the best thing I've seen on Governor Romney's birther moment is [by Adam Serwer](#):

Birtherism is more than just a conspiracy theory about the president's birth. Its underlying principle is a rejection of American racial pluralism. The refusal to believe—in the face of all evidence to the contrary—that Obama is an American reads to many as saying black people don't really count as American unless they talk like Herman Cain or Allen West.

That's the problem with Romney's "joke," too. It falls into a long list of remarks that suggest an emotional myopia based on an extremely sheltered life experience. It comes across as gloating about the fact that, as a rich white man born into a wealthy and powerful family, Romney has rarely been subject to the kind of racist or sexist assumptions that clog the daily lives of millions of Americans. Romney might as well joke that he's never been mistaken for a waiter in a restaurant or a clerk in a retail store, or that he's never been selected for extra screening at an airport or randomly told to empty his pockets by the NYPD. The reason Romney doesn't have to [show the country his papers](#) isn't because everyone knows he was born in Michigan. It's because whiteness remains unquestionably "American" for some people in a way blackness does not. That should not be a point of pride for Romney; it should be a matter of anger and disappointment.