

**PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT
HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS
DUE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2008**

I. Election Issues – Will racism cost Obama the election?

Read the article below and answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper.

If Barack Obama loses in November, said Nicholas D. Kristof in *The New York Times*, it will likely be because “ugly prejudices” cost him crucial votes. The nation’s first black presidential candidate is now running against a strong headwind of latent bigotry, with a disturbing number of voters viewing him as a suspicious and threatening Other. More registered voters—13 percent—erroneously say that Obama is a Muslim today than thought so in March. “More ominously,” 16 percent say they’re unsure of his religion because they’ve heard “different things.” In conservative Christian circles and radio stations, there is talk that Obama might actually be—no kidding—the Antichrist. What’s happening? Simply put, the campaign to “de-Americanize” Obama is succeeding.



Obama: Facing resistance

some whites still hold stereotypes and resentments about blacks. But virtually everyone—including the liberal elites—operates on the basis of broad stereotypes, as even Obama did when he referred to small-town Americans “clinging” to guns and religion. Nonetheless, most Americans are quite capable of seeing past broad generalizations to evaluating specific candidates “on their own merits.” And it’s for that reason that Obama can’t close the deal with so many Democrats and independents, who still worry about his “inexperience” and “naïveté.” If he can reassure voters on those counts, “the matter of his race will largely take care of itself.”

Even some of Obama’s advisors are now worried, said Marc Ambinder in *The Atlantic.com*. About a third of white Democrats have a stubborn resistance to supporting him. A new survey of racial attitudes by the Associated Press and Yahoo News explains why, finding persistent racial resentment among these voters. Many complain that blacks have received “special favors” and don’t work as hard as whites. The resentment factor, the polltakers estimate, could cost Obama as many as six percentage points in November.

Crying racism may make Democrats feel better, said Christopher Hitchens in *Slate.com*, but it’s a poor excuse for Obama’s pitiful performance in this campaign. Given the state of the economy and the public’s appetite for “change,” the Democratic nominee should be far ahead in the polls, instead of leading by a scant couple of points. He’s struggling not because of his complexion but because he is “so vapid and hesitant and gutless.” This supposed orator has not uttered a single memorable line in the past six months, and on such topics as the surge in Iraq and Russia’s offensive in Georgia, has provided nothing but politically calculated and incoherent responses. Obama’s real problem is that the longer voters see him perform, the more they doubt his “credentials for the presidency.”

So spare us the whining about “latent racism,” said Carol Platt Liebau in *Townhall.com*. It may be true, as that AP poll found, that

Tell that to the guys down at the union hall, said Dick Polman in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Union organizers in key states are being widely quoted as saying they are facing outright resistance to Obama because of his race. A Kentucky miner was quoted as saying he wouldn’t vote for “a colored man” because “he’ll put too many coloreds in jobs.” The evidence of racism among working-class whites “has become impossible to ignore.” In Pennsylvania’s presidential primary, for example, 12 percent of Democrats were “willing to tell exit pollsters, eye to eye, that race was an important factor, to Obama’s detriment” in their vote. “Isn’t it fair to assume that the real percentage was actually higher?”

It’s a fair guess, said John B. Judis in *TheNewRepublic.com*, but a guess is all it is. Consider the AP poll that found persistent white resentment of blacks: Half of the Democrats with supposedly bigoted views said they were supporting Obama anyway. With jobs fleeing abroad and Wall Street in collapse, Obama may still win over working-class whites if he succeeds in drawing “a sharp line between him and McCain on economic issues.” In this election, said Adam Smith in the *St. Petersburg, Fla., Times*, previous verities may be moot. Never before has America chosen between a white man and a black man to be its next president, and never since the Depression has the electorate been so dissatisfied with the status quo. Even after the votes are all counted, “no one can know with certainty how much race mattered. Probably no one ever will.”

The AP poll is a report of the answers that random Americans give to a series of questions. It is intended to give an idea of what Americans think about different topics.

1. According to Nicholas D. Kristof, what is the primary reason that Obama might not win the presidential election in November?
2. Explain what Kristof means by the campaign to “de-Americanize” Obama.
3. What does Christopher Hitchens say is wrong with the Obama campaign?
4. What are the real challenges facing the Obama campaign according to Carol Platt Liebau? How can he fix these problems?
5. Do you think that race will make a big difference in the upcoming election? What do you think that Obama and his supporters can do about it? How should McCain and his supporters exploit this weakness?

II. Election Issues – A rising tide of political mediocrity

Read the article below and answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper.

America used to be a meritocracy, said Dick Polman, but is now becoming a mediocrity. In a nation where every Little League team gets a trophy, we're now "dumbing down the standards for public service," requiring only that candidates remind us of us. Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin is just the latest beneficiary of this new celebration of ordinariness. Before her came U.S. Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers, whom President Bush lauded as "the best person I could find." In reality, Miers' chief qualification was handling the paperwork on Bush's fishing cabin. Or consider the case of George Deutsch, a 24-year-old political appointee who barred NASA scientists from discussing global warming and ordered the word "theory" appended to every mention of the Big Bang. And then there was Michael Brown, the former FEMA chief who learned everything he knew about disasters while working at the International Arabian Horse Association. Four decades ago, the late Sen. Roman Hruska of Nebraska defended an unqualified court nominee by saying, "There are a lot of mediocre judges and people out there. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they?" Hruska was mocked for his comments, but it turns out that he was just a little ahead of his time.

THE WEEK, October 3, 2008, p.16

1. Look up *mediocrity* and *meritocracy* in a dictionary and write their definitions.
2. What does Dick Polman think about the nomination of Sarah Palin?
3. Are you concerned about the situation that Polman describes? Why or why not?

III. Political Cartoon



Answer the questions that follow on a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper using the cartoon above.

1. What is the monster in the picture, and how do you know this?
2. Who are the other two characters, and how are they responding to the monster?
3. What do you think that the cartoonist is saying about this issue?
4. How would you handle this issue if you were running for president this year?