Peter Robinson: Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Author Shelby Steele is the Robert J. and Marion E. Oster's Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution where he studies race relations, multiculturalism and affirmative action. Shelby's most recent book, published before November 4th is entitled A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Barack Obama and Why He Can't Win. Shelby and I discussed this book earlier in the year. Needless to say, we have reason to discuss it again now. Segment one about that subtitle. Why . . .

Shelby Steele: [Laughter] Now you've established my credentials as a prognosticator.

Peter Robinson: . . . why he can't win. Shelby, more than 64 million Americans voted for Barack Obama. He is now the 44th president-elect of the United States. Why did you expect him to lose? I want to lay out the argument of the book in a moment, but give me once sentence, if you can, on why you thought he couldn't win.

Shelby Steele: I thought he couldn't win -- by the way, I didn't really argue inside the book that he wouldn't win. I thought that he would have a difficult time winning because he never really revealed who he was. I thought that the American people finally would want to know something about who he really was before they elevated him to the presidency.

Peter Robinson: All right. Let's go to the argument. In my judgment, the quick way of getting to the basic argument [Clearing throat] of the book is a tale of two trumpeters, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis. Give us Louis Armstrong and why he's significant to your argument and to our understanding of the president-elect.

Shelby Steele: He's what I call a bargainer. When minorities enter the mainstream from which they have always historically been alienated, they wear a mask because they're at a natural disadvantage. They try to present themselves in a way that angles for some advantage or other that allows them to succeed. So Louis Armstrong is a sort of classic example. Here's a poor kid from Louisiana, no father and so forth, but he has a certain genius in music.

Peter Robinson: Genius is the word.

Shelby Steele: Genius is the word. He transformed American music almost single handedly. Well, what do you do? Do you stay behind the walls of segregation or do you move out into the world? The world he met was a segregated world that did not want to give him any chance to do anything. He developed what I call the "bargainer's mask" in which he basically, in his day, when segregation prevailed, he would stand before these all-white crowds at hotels where he could not, himself, stay, and he would bow a little bit. He'd have a kind of exaggerated grin and he'd put on this sort of humble mask, in effect, making to them a kind of offer of inferiority, of saying, in a sense, "I'm not going to challenge you in any way. In fact, I'm going to offer you an image of black inferiority that goes along with your prejudice, if you will let me play my music."
Peter Robinson: So Louis Armstrong, I think back to particularly the old black and white, his appearance in those old movies in the '30s. Louis Armstrong is implicitly saying, "I know my place and I'm happy in it. Now that we've got that out of my way, listen to my music."

Shelby Steele: Right. He knew that . . .

Peter Robinson: He's not necessarily telling the truth that he's happy.

Shelby Steele: No, he's not. That's right.

Peter Robinson: That's what he's saying so he can get on to the question of his music.

Shelby Steele: That's right. That was his mask and his mask is what made that bargain with whites. "I'm not going to challenge you in your prejudice," if you will and America loved him. Bargainers are always loved.

Peter Robinson: He does get something in return for it.

Shelby Steele: He gets something in return. He got to become Louis Armstrong, a well-loved figure in American life.

Peter Robinson: Miles Davis.

Shelby Steele: Well, history caught up with Louis Armstrong. After World War II and the rumblings of the Civil Rights Movement, America had changed. Miles Davis had exactly the opposite mask of Louis Armstrong. He came out on stage. He wouldn't speak to his audience. He would very often turn his back on his audience. If somebody spoke to him, he would glare at them with contempt or he'd curse them out. He knew that in the sophisticated world of New York jazz and so forth, he was dealing with whites who admired, who were proud to be an audience. As I've said, I know people today who brag about being cursed out by Miles Davis. But again, the same sort of thing, "I'm going to show you contempt. I'm going to show contempt for that." Whites, liberals, particularly, who supported him as an artist, not just as a performer but as an artist, had the feeling then that they were, themselves, above racism, that they were beyond it because, "After all, I am a Miles Davis fan."

Peter Robinson: Louis Armstrong typifies the bargainer, Miles Davis, the challenger. Where does Barack Obama fit?

Shelby Steele: Barack Obama is an absolute, to-the-manor-born bargainer, who basically says, who takes the anxiety out of being white, who says to whites, "I am not going to pre-judge you as a racist if you will not hold my race against me." Whites are so thankful for that bargain because white Americans today, in the last 40 years since the Civil Rights victory, have been stigmatized as racist, have always had to defend themselves, prove the
negative, that they're not racist. Here comes a black that says, "I'm going to take you off the hook. I'm not going to presume you're a racist."

Peter Robinson: So Shelby, you argued, when we sat down some months ago, when it seemed, frankly, as I recall, at that point, it was unlikely he'd win the primary let alone the election. You had a strong form of the argument. Now that's the president-elect, I want to see if you wish to stick with that. You can correct me, but I believe I'm paraphrasing that argument correctly, that Barack Obama, the candidacy of Barack Obama, was not particularly about politics, the future of the country. It was about race, and above all, about making white folks feel good about what they had accomplished in the recent decades. Do you want to stick with that statement?

Shelby Steele: Absolutely. I stick with it. The only difference in my sort of feeling about these things today is that I underestimated. I wrote a book on white guilt. I talk about, in this book, the need of . . .

Peter Robinson: This book A Bound Man.

Shelby Steele: Yes. Yes. White Americans too -- because here's the thing. White America has made tremendous moral progress since the '60s. I grew up in segregation. I know the difference.

Peter Robinson: There is something worth celebrating.

Shelby Steele: And they've never given them, the white has never given themselves credit for that. And here is an opportunity, at last, to document this progress.

Peter Robinson: Right. We've got segment two, the content of his character. Two quotations from Shelby Steele, and I'd ask you to explain each one very briefly. Quotation one, this is you, "Obama's special charisma always came from the racial idealism he embodied. In fact, this was his only true political originality."

Shelby Steele: Yes. I absolutely stand by that. He was a cultural candidate.

Peter Robinson: Quotation two, "The golden rule of bargainers," you already said he is a prototypical bargainer, "is never to say what you really think."

Shelby Steele: Right.

Peter Robinson: Okay. Now you put those two arguments together, or those two quotations together, and what you've got here is the Shelby Steele argument that he appealed to voters because of the color of his skin while deeply submerging the actual content of his character. It would seem to me that a likely conclusion from that argument is that we have just elected a man about whose own inner self and character we know less than we knew about any other modern president. Will you go for that?
Shelby Steele: Absolutely. I entirely stand by that. I think we still don't know the man. It's going to be difficult once he's actually governing the country and having to make decisions every single day. He is going to reveal himself. There's no way not to. But that's the first time we're going to get to really know who Barack Obama is.

Peter Robinson: I'm giving you every chance to say, "Well, maybe I was a little hard on him."

Shelby Steele: No.

Peter Robinson: You will not take back a bit of it?

Shelby Steele: No. I . .

Peter Robinson: By the way, can I just, how did you feel on -- I know because we know each other. Frankly, you told us here when you were on this show last time, that you intended to vote for John -- you did not vote for Barack Obama.

Shelby Steele: Absolutely not, no.

Peter Robinson: How did it feel to watch that man get elected?

Shelby Steele: It hurt.

Peter Robinson: It did?

Shelby Steele: It hurt. He stands for things that, he stands for nothing that I stand for. His economic policies are -- one of the distinctions I make is that he was elected really as a cultural symbol rather than as a politician. Politically, if you look at his actual positions on things, I, as a conservative, don't agree with much of anything. To me, the mistake America made, a pretty brazen comment, I guess, is to vote for him on a cultural level, on a level of cultural symbolism, rather than on his politics.

Peter Robinson: Here, to me, is one of the great puzzles, which you touch on in A Bound Man. Barack Obama is raised by his white mother and then, after she dies an early death, by his white grandparents in Hawaii in a white world. He graduates from Columbia. He becomes President of Law Review at Harvard Law School. The world of conventional and compelling white success is open before him. But he goes back to Chicago, becomes a community organizer on the South Side, attends a Jeremiah Wright's -- I don't know if it's fair to call it a Black Nationalist church, but . . .

Shelby Steele: That's fair.

Peter Robinson: That's fair. He attends a Black Nationalist church. In other words, Barack Obama, he has a black father and a white mother, he makes it very, very far in a
world that I think is culturally white -- these are crude terms. There's a sense in which he chooses, in his 20's, to become black. Is that a fair way to put it?

Shelby Steele: Absolutely.

Peter Robinson: And why does he make that -- what's going on there?

Shelby Steele: He was raised in an era of identity politics, where the most important thing in the world, for anybody who was black, was to establish their credentials, their bona fides as a black. He had so many strikes against him, coming from an interracial background where people could look him in the eye and say, "You're not really black," and could always have that vulnerability over his head. His need to be black became much more obsessive, in many ways, than somebody else's might have come. Again, he came of age in an era where identity was everything. You had to be -- your authenticity as a human being required that you be strictly and narrowly identified with the racial politics of blackness. So you see in his career, all these opportunities, as you say in the white world. Then he goes back and becomes a community organizer. But then he goes to Harvard. There's this zigzagging in his life, back and forth between the two worlds.

Peter Robinson: Now, you grew up in circumstances that were kind of a mirror image. As I recall, your mom was white, your dad was black, but you were raised in the entirely black community. Nevertheless, you have a feel, I suppose, for -- as you can tell you're talking to the white-bread white guy. So I'm poking around here because I don't understand some of this. How about if I put the question to you this way? Based on your experience, your own experience, and your close reading of Barack Obama, give us one or two items about his inner character that you think we're going to be finding out that he hasn't yet revealed, that he's kept under the mask.

Shelby Steele: I don't know if I can do it that quickly. One of the problems, being in that situation, is that you are told the vulnerability is that you are not authentic. When I was a kid, I grew up in a segregated world. In the morning, a black could say to me, "You're not really black." In the afternoon, they could say, "You're a you-know-what just like the rest of us." You were held on that sort of a tether. That breeds in an insecurity. When I came of age, I fellow traveled with black nationalists. I did my three years. Just like he did this community organizing, I went to East St. Louis and worked in Great Society programs for three years. Now, have I resolved it? No, you never resolve it. What made the difference for me is that, at a certain point, I just said, basically, "Screw you. I'm going to be my own man. If it suits you, then that's fine. If it doesn't, then that's also fine." I am proud to be black, but I'll determine what the meaning of that is. I sort of had that kind of a moment in my life. . .

Peter Robinson: Has he . . .

Shelby Steele: . . . early on . . .

Peter Robinson: Has Barack . . .
Shelby Steele: . . . and one of the scary things for me is that I don't think he has, or if he has, then he hasn't -- 20 years in Reverend Wright's church, a church his own mother could not go to -- the first day, it would have occurred to me that my mother couldn't come here. Now what does that mean? What am I doing here? The problem for kids like that, and kids like myself, is that you can get seduced into self-betrayal as a form of getting along with people, of accommodating people. One of the things that troubles me about Obama's character is that he can get along with anybody. He can articulate a conservative point of view better than many conservatives can. He can be as strikingly far left and -- the problem is not so much that he's going to reveal who he really is. The problem is that he may not be anybody. He may not have strong convictions and passions.

Peter Robinson: Segment three, race relations during the Obama administration. Shelby Steele, "It is not hard to see why Reverend Jackson might have experienced Mr. Obama's emergence as something of a stiletto to the heart. Mr. Obama is so successful at winning gratitude from whites precisely because Mr. Jackson was so successful at inflaming and exploiting white guilt." Explain that.

Shelby Steele: Jackson is what I call a challenger who says to whites, "I will never let you off the hook. I'm going to presume you are a racist until you give me something. Then I'll offer absolution of some kind, but you have to buy your innocence." Bargainers like Obama grant innocence and that's why they're so well loved. Jackson is saying, "You have to prove your innocence to me." So Jackson could never go far. Challengers could never be successful broadly in American politics because whites secretly, quietly, can't stand them. They have this leverage, this moral authority over them and they keep using it, whereas Obama is saying, "I'm not ever going to use it. You can trust that I'm not going to play the race card."

Peter Robinson: Quoting you once again, "I don't think whites really want change from Obama as much as they want documentation of change that has already occurred."

Shelby Steele: Yes. I think that's the interesting phenomenon in this election, the hunger for, in white America, to prove, to document this moral progress that white America has made over the last 40 years.

Peter Robinson: The change we can believe in has already taken place.

Shelby Steele: The change is already here. If it wasn't here, Obama wouldn't be elected. He's not going to introduce change. He's going to document change that's already here. I already hear people, now that he is elected, saying that Jackson and Sharpton and so forth are anachronisms.

Peter Robinson: All right. So white people, in the very act of electing him, got what they wanted. In their deepest selves --
Shelby Steele: They think they did.

Peter Robinson: They think they got what they wanted.

Shelby Steele: That's the illusion.

Peter Robinson: Now, African-Americans in this election turn out in historic proportions and vote for him -- I haven't seen final and utterly reliable polling data . . .

Shelby Steele: Yes.

Peter Robinson: . . . but it's clearly by more than 95 percent.

Shelby Steele: Yeah.

Peter Robinson: It is a huge, monolithic turnout. What do black people want from this man?

Shelby Steele: Both groups, whites and blacks, their real investment in Barack Obama was that he was an opportunity to dispel the stigma that whites have been stigmatized as racist. "Well, if I vote for Obama and he becomes the president, then I'm not a racist and this is not a racist country." The stigma that blacks have lived under is that we're inferior.

Peter Robinson: Okay.

Shelby Steele: Now, if we vote for Obama, if Obama gets to be the president of the United States, he's the paramount, the most powerful man on the planet how can we be inferior? It puts the lie to that stigma. Both groups had that, I think that was their deepest investment in his presidency, and it was very powerful force.

Peter Robinson: Let me quote you once again, "But there is an inherent contradiction in all of this when whites, especially today's younger generation, proudly support Obama for his post-racialism, they unwittingly embrace race as their primary motivation." That is actually a beautifully written, elegant sentence, but it is an introduction to a nightmare. What is suggests is that in this wonderful moment when we think we've finally put race behind us, we're mired in it more deeply than we were the day before.

Shelby Steele: Absolutely. Yeah. It's an absolute -- there's pathos there. Everywhere I went on my book tour with regard to this book, young people would come up, "We're beyond your generation. We're going to vote for Obama," and so forth. "Don't you think that we, we grew up differently than you did." No, you didn't. You did not. You are now obsessed with race. Race is the only thing that's driving your interest in Barack Obama. You couldn't even tell me what his policies are. You're never critical to him in any way. If you were free of race, you would not judge him culturally. You would judge him politically. You'd look at his position on social security, on all these mundane, boilerplate issues that presidents actually have to deal with, his economic policies. You
never want to see that. You are consumed by race. That's the, I don't know if tragedy is the word, but it certainly is an irony.

Peter Robinson: And, for African-Americans, exactly the same thing applies?

Shelby Steele: Absolutely. Absolutely. If you were free of race, then it wouldn't be a 95, 96, 97 percent black support for Barack Obama. What's interesting is, you know, at the very beginning, blacks were not for Barack Obama.

Peter Robinson: That's right. You make the point, in Iowa -- what made him was Iowa, which was a white state.

Shelby Steele: He had to win the white vote in order to convince blacks to then invest in him, to then emotionally invest that this is a guy that can prove we're not inferior. Before that . . .

Peter Robinson: But the white validation had to take place first.

Shelby Steele: . . . the white validation. Whites had to buy in to Barack Obama before blacks would buy in, another chilling irony, ugly irony.

Peter Robinson: Barack Obama on affirmative action, "I still believe in affirmative action as a means of overcoming both historic and potentially current discrimination, but I think that it can't be a quota system and it can't be something that is simply applied without looking at the whole person, whether that person is black or white or Hispanic or male or female." Does he entrench affirmative action more deeply or begin to scale it back?

Shelby Steele: I think he's going to probably entrench it more deeply. He feels not politically he owes it to blacks who came out in such vast numbers for him. He's a Chicago politician. You pay off your political debts. My guess is we're going to have affirmative action, race-based, not class-based, but race-based affirmative action, for a long, long time.

Peter Robinson: All right. Segment four, A Bound Man, about Barack Obama. What just happened on November 4th? Now I'm edging away from race to the political culture of the United States. Two quotations, one is from you and one is from Tom Sowell, your friend, our friend. Shelby Steele, "On the level of policy, Obama was quite unremarkable. His economics were the redistributive axioms of old-fashioned Keynesianism. His social thought was a recycled Great Society." This guy's thinking, policy thinking, is, at best, 40 years out of date. Tom Sowell, "This man has been a far-left ideologue for 20 years." Is Barack Obama a tweaker of the status quo, just a stale, old democrat, in policy terms, or is he a hard-left ideologue? And how on earth can you and Tom Sowell look at the same man and draw such different conclusions?

Shelby Steele: I don't think of him -- well, it is -- let me put it this way. He is certainly going to try to be more than a tweaker of the status quo. He is going to come in with
economic policies that are Keynesian. He's going to raise taxes on all sorts of people, on capital gains, on corporations. He's going to spend money on Great Society-style social - he's going to take us sort of backward to that era. He's not going to speak ideologically. You're never going to see the ideological fire in his eyes, but he is going to definitely try to take the country back in that direction, there's no doubt about that.

Peter Robinson: [clearing throat] All right. Let me give you a longish quotation from Mark Steyn, but it's a quotation, like everything from Mark Steyn, that really delivers and I want to see if this makes sense to you. "The president-elect's so-called tax cut will absolve 48 percent of Americans from paying any federal tax at all. Just under half the population will be on the dole. By 2012, it will be more than half. This will be an electorate with the majority will be able to vote itself more lollipops from the minority still dumb enough to prioritize self-reliance, dynamism and innovation over the cocoon of the Nanny State. That is the death of the American idea." Mark Steyn is arguing that while we're all obsessed with the cultural and racial significance of this new president, precisely what you talk about, the old-fashioned, Great Society, incrementalism, government gets bigger and bigger and bigger, we're at a tipping point.

Shelby Steele: Right.

Peter Robinson: And Barack Obama is likely to take us past it.

Shelby Steele: You know what's interesting to me about that, no white candidate in America could have won an election based on those policies. It had to be a black -- it had to be somebody who could bring to bear on this old-fashioned socialistic point of view, the moral authority of race, the moral authority of being black. That's the insidious and interesting thing to me. No white man could -- John Edwards could never win an election based on policies like that, that I'm going to raise - raise taxes and you win?

Peter Robinson: So his special appeal to liberals is that everything old is new again.

Shelby Steele: The price America is paying for its racial history is this reversion. I've had friends, liberal friends, say this, "Well, it took me a little while but I said, 'Okay, maybe I should pay more taxes.' If I'm going to get a black man in the White House, I'll do it."

Peter Robinson: Pay the price.

Shelby Steele: I'll pay the price. That's what happened and we are going to pay the price now. We are going to pay the price because that same racial moral authority is going to be his greatest weapon as a president. Who's going to want to stand in his way and block all these beneficent things that he wants to do, this redistribution of the wealth to people who've been locked out? It's always going to work for him.

Peter Robinson: Let me try another longish . . .

Shelby Steele: Because whites are still motivated by race, the dummies.
Peter Robinson: Okay.

Shelby Steele: [Laughter] There's painful ironies. When I grew up in segregation, I prayed for some white liberals. "Where are these people?" The same people now, whose attention I couldn't get then, now are voting for Obama.

Peter Robinson: [Laughter] My embryonic political movement is Shelby for President. Okay. Another longish quotation, makes a different point, makes it in a very compelling way, and I think delivers it. I'm going to put this on the table and see how you respond. So it's worth the longish quotation. This is from Peter Hitchens, not Christopher Hitchens . . .

Shelby Steele: His brother.

Peter Robinson: . . . his brother, who disagrees with him on everything, but writes with the same ratatatatat irresistibility. "I was in Washington, D.C. the night of the election. There had been a few white people blowing car horns and shouting as the result came clear," that is as Obama's victory becomes clear, "but among the Mexicans, Salvadorans and other third-world nationalities, there was something like ecstasy. They grasped the real significance of this moment. They knew it meant that America had finally switched sides in a global, cultural war. Suspicious of welfare addiction, totally committed to preserving its own sovereignty, unabashedly Christian in a world part secular and part Muslim, the United States was unique. Now the U.S., like Britain before it, has begun the long, slow descent. Where now is our last best hope of earth?" I think it would be pretty easy to deride that as a racist, or as the English might put it, racialist comment. It's not really. He's making a cultural argument, right?

Shelby Steele: Yeah, I think he is . . .

Peter Robinson: Sound? Is there something to it? How do you respond?

Shelby Steele: No, I think there's definitely something to it. What he's saying is that in one sort of sense is this, that in the election of Obama -- if a black like Colin Powell had been elected president, nothing would change much. He is, at the very least, a centrist, centrist-right sort of figure. Obama really does want, he likes identity politics. He really does want to use his moral authority as a black to usher America into a new kind of an era, of a new kind of age. White Americans have now pretty much, at least for the moment, I think this may change, but for the moment, they've signed on to that. With the race also comes the cultural change, also comes the assault on classic American values like hardworking American and fairness and so forth rather than government interventionism and so forth. Obama is going to use his racial and moral authority to take us in that direction.

Peter Robinson: There's something there.
Shelby Steele: There is something there. It's scary.

Peter Robinson: Segment five, the politics. We're talking about A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win, the paperback to be entitled Why He Was Bound to Win?

Shelby Steele: [laughter] Yeah, How He Won.

Peter Robinson: All right. You've been talking about the way his moral authority as a black man is irresistible. Let me read to you an exchange that popped up Christopher Buckley's new column in the Financial Times. It was a Q&A. He was taking questions from a reader. "It's clear to me that the current GOP," the Republican Party as it now stands, "the current GOP has dissolved into the angry white-people's party much as the old National Party of South Africa." Christopher Buckley, "An interesting comparison." Now, that Christopher Buckley can let that premise stand and slip by suggests to me that the Republican Party is on the defensive in the most profound manner of my entire lifetime.


Peter Robinson: How does the Republican Party grapple with this new man and the cultural phenomenon he has spawned? It is, by the way, overwhelmingly a white party.

Shelby Steele: That's right.

Peter Robinson: If John McCain received a majority of white votes, there is that racial element in the result.

Shelby Steele: That's right. What happened was, the whites, in general, were stigmatized as racist. Liberals have now, by going with Obama and so forth, feel at least, their illusion is, that they've gotten some leverage of their own and they've escaped that stigma. The stigmatization of whites now is focused like a beam on the Republican Party and on conservatism as a point of view in the world. This is now sort of a racist, by definition, by default, really, this is where racism now is located. We can all see it over there and we can isolate it and it's in those red states in the South and the Southwest and so forth. It is going to be a difficult, difficult struggle for the Republican Party. They might end up betraying -- what I fear is they will end up betraying what is good about them, which is those values of fairness and merit and so forth, in order to play the game, to get back in the game. That's how societies do begin to decline. When you trade away those values, the whole thing weakens.

Peter Robinson: Shelby Steele, "The black illegitimacy rate remains at 70 percent. Blacks did worse on the SAT in 2000 than in 1990. Fifty-five percent of all federal prisoners are black. The academic achievement gap between blacks and whites persists, even for the black middle class. All this will continue despite the level of melanin in the president's skin." That's a horrifying set of statistics, but it's all true. Here's the question.
Is there a Nixon to China opportunity here? That is to say, are there going to be things that Barack Obama can do, of which people like Shelby Steele and I would approve because he's African-American? Is he somehow going to be able to talk with new moral authority about the importance of education, about the important of intact families? Do you see openings that he could pursue and do you think he will?

Shelby Steele: Oh, I think -- yes to both the questions. I think he already has certainly talked about responsibility, black fathers being more responsible. I give him credit for that. I think that's good. It's certainly not the first time. That's not a new idea for black America. Bill Cosby is the most recent casualty.

Peter Robinson: Bill Cosby, exactly. He paid a price.

Shelby Steele: He paid a price. So Obama is going to, he's going to utter it. Because you see, it helps him bargain with whites. He's going to utter it. But is he gonna really...what disturbs me is that he turns around and stands for, advocates social policies that don't ask for responsibility, that, in fact, blunt the incentive. That's what bothers -- yes, he will give some lip service to it, but that's about it.

Peter Robinson: But his effort to address the various pathologies of the underclass will be lip service.

Shelby Steele: Will be lip service, right. As I say there, in one of those sentences somewhere, I think, again, from my experience in the Great Society programs, people don't change because the government intervenes with a social program. It never happens. They change when they become exhausted with their suffering. The Civil Rights Movement is the greatest example of reform, certainly in my lifetime. It happened when people said, "That's it. Kill us if you want, but we're not going to live the segregated life anymore. We're exhausted with this. Enough." Then change happens. They didn't care who the president was. They had no social programs from the government. The government did not support this in any way, in fact, tried to repress it. Nothing could stop it. When black America determines that it's going to overcome statistics like that, they'll do it.

Peter Robinson: A century from now, who will be viewed as the more significant figure, Barack Obama or Martin Luther King, Jr.

Shelby Steele: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Peter Robinson: Without a moment's hesitation.

Shelby Steele: Without a moment's hesitation. This was a man who, again, as I was just saying, was leading an exhausted people into freedom, people who were just ordinary people. It was a movement of real dignity. One of the biggest problems black America has, one of the problems why you see the statistics like that, is that we sold out our dignity to the government. They're going to be the ones who -- in the Civil Rights
Movement, again, we had no government support. We did it. We had our dignity. It was a magnificent achievement. We have to go after our dignity again. There ought to be that. If Obama could speak in that language, it would be helpful. I don't think he will, but it would be helpful.

Peter Robinson: Final question, the playwright and journalist of 20th Century, Clare Boothe Luce used to say that history would give even the most important figures just one sentence. Lincoln freed the slaves. Churchill defeated Hitler. Reagan won the Cold War. Take a guess at Barack Obama's sentence in history.

Shelby Steele: The first black man in the White House.

Peter Robinson: And that's it.

Shelby Steele: [Laughter] That's it.

Peter Robinson: [Laughter] Shelby Steele, the author of A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Barack Obama and Why He Can't Win, to be retitled, I'm sure, in the next edition. Worth reading and rereading. Shelby, thanks a lot.

Shelby Steele: Thank you, Peter.

Peter Robinson: I'm Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge. Thanks for joining us.