Today on Uncommon Knowledge, Shelby Steele, a fellow at the Hoover Institution and the author most recently of "A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win". Let's take the first subject in that subtitle first. Why are we excited about Barack Obama?

Barack Obama is what I call a bargainer. He makes us a certain deal with White America and he prom -- he says, "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I'm going to bet on your better side, that you are not a racist and I will not constantly rub America's racial history in your face if you will not hold my race against me." And this is a -- Whites are very excited about this, this kind of offer. It -- because he's -- it gives them an opportunity to feel that in a sense, they are at least as within themselves redeemed of this past. And so, they respond in great gratitude with even affection. Oprah Winfrey is another example of a great bargainer. So the special charisma that Obama, that surrounds him, sort of rockstar status, I think, comes aside from his talent and he is a -- he is a very talented politician. But much beyond that I think is this bargain, this capacity to make people feel affection.

He's intelligent. He's articulate. He's a graduate of Harvard Law School where he headed the law review, we put that to one side. He has a set of particular policies. As best I can make it up, frankly, they're fairly conventional liberal democratic policies. At least at this point in the campaign, we put that to one side. We're excited about Barack Obama because he's Black and before anything else happens, he makes us feel good that we live in a country in which a Black man can make now to serious bid for president.

It's -- the paradox of Barack Obama is that he has a campaign that pretends or wants to transcend race. That's part of what, that's what makes him attractive. So paradoxically, his campaign is all about race. His special appeal is all about race and very little else.

Black candidates for president, 1972 Shirley Chisholm, Congresswoman, 1984 Jesse Jackson, 1996 Allan Keyes runs as Republican and it could be argued that although he never officially announced for a period of a couple of months, Colin Powell was so seriously considering running for president that he was, in fact, a candidate for a period of months in 1996, 2004 Al Sharpton. So that's going back more than 30 years, half a dozen African-American candidates for president. What's distinctive about Barack Obama?

He's the first one that is a bargainer that brings this -- this is an old mask in Black American life. It's been there for certainly all the way back to slavery and recent times, we -- Louis Armstrong was a bargainer, Sidney Poitier was a bargainer, Bill Cosby, were bargainers. They made this deal, "I will not bother you with race. I will presume that you are not racists, that you're better than that, if you won't hold my race against me." It's
one of the ways Whites and Blacks developed over a long history in terms of relating to each other. And -- but it has never, it's never been really used in politics before. This is the first time we'll see how it works but it certainly is already done and would always does. It brings a special charisma, an aura, and affection. People -- our feelings toward bargainers are very warm and supportive.

>> Alright. Pushed back against Barack Obama. Let me quote to you Christopher Hitchens, journalist Christopher Hitchens. This is the longest quotation but Christopher covers a lot of ground here. "Senator Barack Obama sometimes claims credit on behalf of all Americans regardless of race, though his recent speeches appear also to claim a victory for blackness. Isn't there something pathetic and embarrassing about this emphasis on shade and why is a man with a White mother considered to be Black anyway? The more that people claim Obama's mere identity is a breakthrough, the more they demonstrate that they have failed to emancipate themselves." Christopher comes out saying larger point in a moment, first that more definite point. White mother, Black father but we all talk about him instinctive -- without giving it a moment's thought as if he's a Black man. Isn't that in some way a ratification of that odious one-drop rule because all the way back to slavery one-drop of Black blood and you are a slave rather than a freeman.

>> Right. Right. It's like so many things with race. It's not rational. The one-drop rule, if Barack Obama were walking down the street and you did not know his mother was White, you would hold him accountable as a Black man. And so, [stuttering] down on the ground, the everyday life he has lived, he's had, he's lived with that accountability. No one would say, "Well, he's light-skinned, so I don't really know what his race was". People would say there are a lot of light-skinned Blacks but they're Blacks. So on the one hand, he -- he -- this has been my own experience and so you are -- unless you announce somehow what the background is, you're going to be -- you're going to be held accountable to that.

>> So, he's a Black man. It's right and just for him to call himself a Black man. You write about him as a Black man because that's the life the society thrust upon him. He can't go through it --

>> Yes.

>> But I just --
[ Simultaneous talking ]

>> The [inaudible] are complicated as Ralph Ellison would say, "It's a complex fate".

>> Okay. Too complicated.

>> Because there are other price to him.
Ward Connerly, for example, who's a friend of yours and the great crusade against affirmative action state-imposed mandates for affirmative action. I've interviewed him and I started to ask him about his experience as an African-American and he cut me off as he does everyone who starts to call him a Black man or an African-American. He said, "No, I have part Cherokee, part this, part that." So he has decided to go through life asserting himself against the one-drop rule. I guess that –

>> Good for him.
[ Simultaneous talking ]

>> Okay. Well, so you see, I'm asking you how –

>> I applaud that -- I talk -- Obama talks about a girl that he met in college who was, who took a similar stance. "Don't call me African-American. My father is Italian. My mother's French and African." So you're gonna exclude all those other things that I'm just going to be limited to an African. So I support that and I'm happy when Ward does that. And I make my own background known and always have been in my writing. It doesn't do much good. [ Laughter ] But the point does need to be made. The point does need to be made.

>> Alright. So, Christopher Hitchens' larger point. 40 years ago, Barack Obama couldn't have been a serious candidate for president because of the color of his skin. Today, he's a serious candidate for president because of the color of his skin.

>> Because of the color of his skin. Exactly.

>> The color of his skin and not the content of his character or at least the content of his character is something that's second or third on the list, is that not right?

>> Absolutely right.

>> And so, are we to be pleased, but this is progress of a kind I guess. But isn't Christopher right that there's still something –

>> No, no. Christopher is absolutely right in a sense and I talk about this in the book. Barack Obama is the result of a very old paradigm bargaining where you come almost hat in hand and you have to give Whites the benefit of the doubt. He's not [stuttering], he's seen as something new or talked about as something new but he's something very old. I've been there before. He's very similar. Louis Armstrong had to make that kind of a bargain. You would expect somebody at this point in our history, as much as we've been through, to be fresher than that, to be able to run as an individual without regard to whether you flatter Whites or whether you flatter Blacks or whether you anger them. Run as an individual in the basis of your own convictions, your own personal deep beliefs that you've evolved over a lifetime. Make a politics of that. Obama is absolutely, he's like all bargainers. The one rule they have is they never tell you they really are, they never tell you what they really think, what their real convictions are. They nurture a kind
of invisibility and I can't think of a more invisible man than Barack Obama at this point. No one really knows who he is. It maybe that he's not that clear about who he is himself. He has a stunning facility with language. He writes like a novelist, he speaks beautifully but he has no voice of his own.

>> One of the chapters in A Bound Man, which I'm gonna hold up to the camera again because it's such a splendid book is entitled "Becoming an Authentic Black." I'll quote you. "The arch of Barack Obama's life is something of a zigzag between his passion to be Black and the siren call of the extraordinary opportunities in the American mainstream where the racial identity he longs for matters little. Blackness does not tempt him away from the mainstream, rather than mainstream tempts him away from blackness." Now, as you will have noticed by now, you're talking to a White guy. You've got to explain to me why does Barack Obama feel a passion to be Black in the first place?

>> I think in his case, this case is a little different than mine. He was abandoned by his African father at the age of 2. So in one stroke, he lost both a father and a racial identity. So here in this all White household is this little kid who is being held accountable in the world as a Black, being raised by a mother who's White, a grandmother who's White, a grandfather who is White. Almost no experience whatsoever with other Blacks and so, as I talk about it in the book, as there's a longing to know the father in Barack Obama. There's also a longing to know himself as a Black, to feel that he belongs, that simple sense that, that other Blacks take for granted that, of course, where it's not a question at all. For him it's a lifelong angst and so, he's driven in that direction and, you know, ends up on the south side of Chicago doing community organizing [stuttering] when he clearly could have gone straight ahead to law school and so forth.

>> I'm trying to remember the career pattern and he graduates from Harvard Law School and then goes back to the -- or have I got that backwards?

>> Well, he graduates from Colombia. Then goes 3 years in [inaudible].

>> In any event, from Colombia he could have gone to Wall Street if he'd wanted to.

>> He could have gone, and did for a brief moment and he quits, can't take it. Wants to -- this call is there, this need, and so, he takes this job at below minimum wage as a community organizer and on the south side of Chicago.

>> Okay. Now as we have this conversation and as I read A Bound Man, I'm evaluating this man as a candidate. It's a fascinating story merely as a matter of character study and what it says about the state of race in the United States but he's running for president. So this notion of seeking out a black identity, the way it struck me was understandable and even commendable. Does it strike you the same way? Or is it still too much race? He's doing something because of race? How do you understand it? How do you evaluate it?
>> Well I went through something of it myself again from that kind of a background, I was lucky to have my father and so, and I grew up in segregation and that will give you a clear sense of [laughter] identity.

>> But you -- he was raised in a White –

>> In a White world, yes.

>> World, but you were raised in a Black world.

>> An entirely Black world.

>> Alright.

>> So it was -- I didn't feel the pressure, I don't think, in the way that he did but it was there. I'm aware of it. There's just, there's a vulnerability that you have that people can say, as Christopher Hitchens says that, "Why is he really Black?" So somebody who doesn't know you, who can walk up and say, "Well, you're not really who you seem to be." And always along with that goes that suggestion that you're a phony, that you're a bit of a fraud because of your birthright, your fate. So, it's a vulnerability and there was - - there's this desire to resolve it and that's I think Obama's compulsion really, to keep trying to find, to establish himself as an authentic Black.

>> Okay. Now you write about –

>> Trailing all along.

>> You write he goes to Illinois State Legislature. He's now a member of the United State Senate for the last couple of years. He affiliates himself with a specifically black church in Chicago called Trinity United Church of Christ. You write about it at some length, so incidentally does Christopher Hitchens. Qoute -- Christopher now: "Run by the sort of minister that the press often guardedly describes as 'flamboyant', this bizarre outfit the church describes itself as," now he's quoting from their website, "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian and speaks of a Chosen People whose nature we are allow to assume is afrocentric." Operative sentence: "Nobody who wants to be taken seriously can possibly be associated with such a sub-standard and shade-oriented place. Now, there's a point there. This is a graduate of Columbia and of Harvard Law School who's going to a place that it's reasonable to suppose that, in one way or another, is intellectually beneath him, right?

>> Absolutely.

>> So how -- do we say we -- we cut him slack because he needs this like -- well, how do you understand that one?
Well, that's [stuttering] one of the question I think the press, you know, he's been on this what I call "White Guilt Bubble" where they never ask him anything meaningful. How is it that you go to an afrocentric, Black Nationalist church, where everything is black - the morality black, community black, values black, a church that your mother would not be comfortable in, if she would be welcome at all. How do you reconcile something that -- why don't you just -- could you stand up in this church and say, "It wasn't blackness that created Barrack Obama. It was the midwestern values of my mother. That's how it got done. So maybe the people in this church might spend a little more time talking about those values that about blackness. I don't think Obama is likely to do that but how does he resolve it? How does he reconcile?

>> How do you? Again in this question of evaluating him as a candidate for the presidency, does this participation in the Black church -- you have nothing against religious belief, Christopher Hitchens does. Christopher's religious belief per se makes him nervous but –

>> Right. I know.

>> You don't have that. But does this make you nervous going to this church because it's Black? Do you say, "Oh well, that's understandable. He has to."

>> No, he -- this is like -- I talk about this a little bit. This is something -- when you are born, as he was, you endured this abandonment and it leaves these wounds and there is going to be, for anybody, an attempt to sort of fill up that void in someway or another. The only way you can do it is through a thousand little self betrayals where you go to that church and you turn the blind eye to the fact that it's beneath you intellectually, that it subscribes to an ideology that would exclude your own, the loving family and parents that you had, you betray yourself. You get used to self betrayal as a survival mechanism as a way of getting through the world, getting through society. And that becomes the real -- that's where you pay the price because when you're doing that, you're not developing yourself, you're not individuating and there clearly is some of that with Obama, this habit of self betrayal.

>> The challengers and the bargainers. You described this sort of 2 templates in A Bound Man to which every African-American, between which every African-American has to choose, challengers and bargainers. Now, maybe the quickest way to get to this is to describe the contrast between Louis Armstrong, between 2 trumpeters, Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis, both of whom you write about beautifully. You know a lot about jazz music. There's no doubt about that. But give us Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis and explain what they say about the Black experience in this country.

>> Well, what they have in common is and what all blacks have in common and it's an inevitable part of the minority experience is masking. When you are -- when you don't have as much power as the mainstream society, you have to learn to present yourself strategically so you can offset that power differential in some ways. Here's Louis Armstrong, a musical genius who transformed the music not of America but of the world.
Born poor black in Jim Crow, New Orleans. As I say in the book, he -- his talent was so big he couldn't just stay behind on the Black side of apartheid. He had to come out in the main -- into the mainstream. How do you do that? You wear a mask. In his case, he took some things, some gestures from menstrual shows. He make his bogus eyes out, he'd smile relentlessly, he'd bow too much, and he'd show how homage to Whites and he'd say, "I'm gonna entertain you but I'm not gonna presume to be your equal." And so, I'm not gonna -- I'm not gonna call into question this whole Jim Crow thing, that your involvement in this [stuttering]. You're gonna be able to listen to me and I'm gonna entertain you and you're gonna go home feeling good.

>> And he is a prototypical bargainer. The bargain is you let me play my music and I won't upset you about your world.

>> He's a classic bargainer. And I won't bother you. I'm not gonna become a protester and so, people then, as always with bargainers, they love him for that deal. They love Louis Armstrong for that deal. And it only made him more popular and more successful. Miles Davis is a challenger, Miles Davis comes along after the World War II, military's integrated schools, integrated the world's changing, Whites are beginning to feel guilt about what has happened in the past. And so, Miles turns his back on his audience. No bowing, nothing, no affect, he -- between sets, he curses them out and what he's -- but that too was a mask because in a sense, he's -- Whites go flock to see Miles Davis, were happy to be insulted by him, would tell stories of it because again, I can be insulted by a Black, I mean, which therefor indicates "I'm not a racist, I'm above that national shame." And so, it was a mask that worked superbly for Miles.

>> Alright. Now, you proposed a thought experiment. I'm gonna quote you and ask you to explain what you mean here. Again we'll come back to Barack Obama in a moment but you say things here that placed him in context. "Suppose Oprah Winfrey suddenly presented a series of programs making the point that individual responsibility was the greatest power available to Black America. Suppose she announced that racism while still a nuisance had receded to the point where individual responsibility could at last pay you off, suppose she said that we Blacks like free peoples everywhere should be entirely responsible for our uplift whether or not help or even fairness came from others. What would be the likely consequence for Oprah Winfrey, one of the great bargainers of all time, were she to go down this road."

>> She would lose her iconic status overnight. Her career would -- she's an enormously talented woman and so, that certainly would be something for her to do but the Oprah that we know, that sort of almost magical figure who can sell books and so forth, that would all be gone, that's precisely what Bill Cosby did.

>> Bill Cosby did it.

>> He did it. He said what he really felt and broke the golden rule of bargainers, never say what you really think. He broke it, said it, lost his iconic status no longer sells Jell-O because now –
You see, I can understand -- I follow the argument easily. It's intuitively graspable, why if she starts talking about individual responsibility, she will upset the Jesse Jacksons and the Al Sharptons of the world because they have, as you explained, a vested interest in white guilt, right? But ordinary African-Americans and ordinary White people, why doesn't it -- [stuttering] that's not as easy for me to grasp.

If Oprah Winfrey says “I think for Blacks personal responsibility is the greatest source of power we have.” Meaning Blacks should be more responsible for their own output [phonetic]. What White person is gonna stand next to her then because the instant a White person stands next to her and is preaching in a sense to Blacks and telling them that they need to be responsible for their own uplift, that White person is gonna be seen as a racist.

Right.

Any Black person who stands next to her, if she would say that, would be seen as a sell out, an Uncle Tom, giving away Black power. So Bill Cosby who did say that enters a kind of exile and that is the way it goes. We have not moved beyond that yet. For Blacks who don't wear either one of this mask, bargainers or challengers. They enter a kind of -- a kind of exile at least in a metaphorical sense.

Alright. This brings us the A Bound Man. This brings us to the second assertion in your self's, A Bound Man: Why We are Exited About Obama and Why He Can't Win, Why he can't win. I'm gonna quote to yourself again. "Barack Obama has to bargain. He has to give Whites their innocence until they prove they are unworthy of it. This is what White Americans sense in Barack Obama. On paying of his personal integrity, he simply cannot be a challenger. Yet to be Black, he has to exaggerate Black victimization in America. Obama is, today, a bound man who cannot serve the aspirations of one race without betraying those of another". Explain that.

Yes, that's right. If he -- the black American identity is still for the most part grounded and challenging. You never give White people the benefit of the doubt. That's our power is keeping them on the hook, keeping them in a -- keeping ourselves entitled and then obligated. Well, here's Barack Obama becoming a superstar precisely by giving Whites the benefit of the doubt. He seems –

Letting them off the hook.

Letting them off the hook. He seems to be giving, you know, giving away the family jewels. He is [stuttering] uncompletely undermining Black power which is based on challenging and challenging Whites, white guilt and so forth. So he is a profound threat on that -- in that level and that's why he's had so much difficulty garnering the Black vote, getting accepted in the Black community. On the other hand, if Whites see him over here too much talking about Black victimization and putting on the mask of the challenger in order to get the Black vote, they're gonna say, "We like you precisely
because you don't challenge, because you are an anti-Al Sharpton, that's why we like you." And so, then his White support begins to wane. So he's -- he is caught there and the only way out of that, I mean the only -- his only solution to that is always the bargainer's solution, become more and more invisible.

>> But you have a specific meaning when you say invisible in here. Explain that.

>> You never reveal your –

>> Your inner self, your true character.

>> Your individuality, your self -- the convictions that your really have, what you really believe. In fact, you take them out as all of your calculations and you put in only what is effective with this group or with that group. You become a shape-shifter.

>> So, this is a retreat from Dr. King's dream that people, Americans would be judged on the content of their character not the color of their skin. Barack Obama is in a bind the dynamic of which is to make him hide the content of his character more and more and more deeply. Is that correct?

>> Absolutely. You know we all know who Hilary Clinton is. I mean she's -- there's no mystery there. She's a post-'60s liberal, big government, government is virtue intervention. John Edwards is a populist. Who is Barack Obama?

>> Good darn question.

>> No one -- no one, no one asks.

>> Can I try something on you Shelby? We've been talking about race and maybe there is a way out. He forgets about race.

>> Okay.

>> And talks about economic growth. I know this is a -- but this is what Barack Obama said.

>> If he were talking about economic growth, he'd still be in the Illinois State Legislature.

>> Well hey, he said this, he said this -- he said this just a few days ago to some editors in Reno, Nevada where he is campaigning for the Nevada primary. Qoute -- I'm quoting Barack Obama, "I don't wanna present myself as some sort of singular figure. I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America." This is breathtaking in some way that he compares himself to Ronald Reagan. He just tapped into what people were already feeling which was 'We want clarity, we want optimism, we want to return to the sense of dynamism and entrepreneurship that had been missing.' And you remember,
Pat Moynihan wrote a memorandum which is still famous when he was serving as Richard Nixon's Domestic Policy Adviser in which he called for a period of benign neglect of African-American sounded insulting but what he meant was, "Stop talking about race. Economic growth, everybody will be better off."

>> Uhmm.

>> Or is this -- am I this -- am I lunging at this little slipper of daylight or is this Barack Obama just shape-shifting again?

>> It's, the problem with that is that race is what brought him to the dance, not economics. And so, he is -- the entire phenomenon is explained solely by race. I don't really know what is, and I don't think most people know what is economic positions are on much of anything.

>> Closing quotation. This is very close to the end of the A Bound Man. "The challenge for Barack Obama is the same as it is for all free people to become an individual rather than a racial cipher." Between now and November, can he do so?

>> I can't imagine how he would do it, no, and that's why I don't think he'll win because I think I think you have to, in the end, give the American people concrete reasons to vote for you. You have to tell us what you wanna do with the country. That's why I don't -- his Reagan comparison so off-the-wall for me. Reagan knew exactly what he had, these 3 things he wanted them. That's, "You vote for me, this is what you're gonna get."

>> I'll cut your taxes, I'll take on the Soviets, here's what I'll do.

>> That's right, and that's the end of it. And so you can take that or you can leave that. What do I get with Barack Obama? What I get is that vote for me for what I represent, rather than for who I am or what I will do. So in other words, he's asking the American people to put this enormous amount of power in his hands without ever telling us what he's gonna do with it.

>> And some Black leaders sense that White people will say, "Great. We'll vote for this guy once and we'll never have to listen to talk about race again."

>> And that's right. They're right, are they not?
[Simultaneous talking]

>> They're right, and I may have underestimated that. He might win on that, on that alone. I would be disappointed with the American people if he did but there is -- the point is that there is a hunger out there in White Am -- the Barack Obama phenomenon is about White America, it's not about Barack Obama. There is this –

>> And it's not about Black America.
It is not about Black America. There is this need, this driving hunger to somehow get this race thing resolved, to redeem the country, to get beyond it and of the arch of Obama's political career has simply just come right in to that hunger and that need and that's his phenomenon.

Alright. A few short answer questions.

Okay.

Barack Obama is in a bind as Black man, Hilary Clinton is in a bind as a woman, she has to demonstrate strength, she's asking people to make her Chief Executive, Commander In Chief but she has to demonstrate some degree of femininity as a political matter. Whose bind is the greater drawback?

Obama's by far.

Not close. Not close.

It's not even close, you know. When people may comment -- comment about a tear or whatever from Hilary but she's not, you know, pulled and completely opposite etiological directions like Obama is. I mean he is -- and so -- and we, as a result of that, we know her a lot better. Do you admire Barack Obama?

Yes.

You write with something that comes very close to affection here.

I identify with him on some level. He's a person with enormous facility entail. I think he's got in terms of raw political talent, he's the best there is, just that he --

Just maybe too crude to question but does he makes you feel proud as a Black man yourself? He does.

Absolutely, he makes me feel proud. I say that everywhere I go. I feel proud of him and his potential is enormous. I'd just wish he would, he'd go a little deeper.

The California primary takes place on February 5th. For whom will Shelby Steele be voting?

I honestly, truly do not know at this point. I can guarantee you it will be on the republican side of the isle.

Oh, you will not cross the isle to vote for Barack.

I will not, I would never vote for Barack Obama because politically I have -- I'm much at odds with what I know of his politics.
>> Who will win the democratic nomination?

>> Well, I think –

>> In other words, when you say why he can't win, are you saying in a certain sense, this guy is in a psychological bind, psychologically, he's damned if doesn't but I'm not making a political prediction. Or are you actually -- do you mean this is a political prediction that his out?

>> Ultimately, it has to come down to -- I leave myself a couple back doors in there but I ultimately, it seems to me it's accountable to applaud -- I cannot see him winning.

>> You can't?

>> I cannot.

>> Could you have seen Colin Powell win?

>> I would be -- I would be surprised. I could absolutely see Colin Powell. Colin Powell was much more visible as an individual. This was an American General. He had fought in 2 or 3 different wars. He has -- he was wounded. He had, you know, all sorts of achievements. His loyalty is understanding of foreign policy and national security, all these things were off the table because they were so clear in his case. I think in '96 against a weak Bill Clinton, I would have been surprise if he hadn't won.

>> So the advice to America is wait for another Colin Powell?

>> The advice to America is to wait for an individual. If you have to vote for somebody, because they're Black, don't do it. That's a -- you're making things worse not better. You're back in an old paradigm, rather than in a new one. It should be self evident that you're voting for somebody who's an individual who tells you who he is and ask for your support. You can take it or leave it.

>> Shelby Steele, thank you very much. For Uncommon Knowledge, I'm Petter Robinson. Shelby Steele is the author of the "A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win". Thanks.