

# Post-Feminist Swill Redux

By Susan Douglas

There it sat on the dining room table exuding kryptonite: the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* with the cover headline: "Q: Why Don't More Women Get to the Top? A: They Choose Not To." The subtitle read, "Abandoning the Climb and Heading Home." An angelic white Madonna in her Ann Taylor outfit with what appeared to be the Hope diamond on one finger, several selections from Tiffany's bracelet department on her wrist, and a toddler in her lap represented all these American mothers who are "heading home." I feared the worst—yet another post-feminist piece of swill about how mothers can't hack it at work and would much rather play Chutes and Ladders all day. I was not to be disappointed.

Since the late '80s and the debut of "the mommy track," we have been subjected to these stories about mothers seeing the light and chucking it all for junior. The format is almost always the same. Five women who went to Yale and, say, the Harvard Business School, married to men whose salaries equal the operating budget of Wal-Mart, decide to have kids and then quit their jobs and—poof—there is a national "movement" of mothers not only rejecting the workplace, but feminism as well. This article, written by Lisa Belkin (a former *Times* reporter who decided to quit and write freelance because her husband could easily support them), follows the template perfectly. Only here the privileged white women we meet from the "Opt-Out Revolution" are Princeton alums (as is Belkin) or from other elite universities who then went to work in law firms or newsrooms.

This post-feminist drumbeat is a slap at mothers who do work for a living, because they need to, want to, or both. It is also, of course, an assault on feminism as misguided, irrelevant, out-of-date, or all the above. As one of the mothers tells Belkin, "I don't want to take on the mantle of all womanhood and fight a fight for some sister who isn't really my sister because I don't even know her." Ouch. Well, as a feminist throwback to the days of "sisterhood is powerful," I do think that all mothers must debunk these stories each and every time they appear, for ourselves

and for each other. We mothers, whether we work outside the home or not, must say "Excuuuse me" to such alleged "trend reports" that pit working mothers against stay-at-home mothers and undermine mothers who work. So let's begin.

**Excuse me #1:** Class bias, race bias, need we say more? In fact, at one point Belkin notes that 95 percent of white men with MBAs are working but only 67 percent of



white women with MBAs are. But she adds (parenthetically, no less) that the numbers for African-American women are closer to those of white men. Doesn't this make you a tad suspicious about the whole notion of "choice?"

**Excuse me #2:** The discourse of "choice." Despite the headlines, what we learn inside the article is that the first two women we meet, one an attorney, the other a television reporter, were confronted with speed-up at work—55- to 75-hour weeks—at the same time they were having children. Both asked for shorter and more flexible hours and were turned down. Their "choice" was to maintain their punishing schedules or to quit. I am sorry, but this is not a choice. As one of these women admits, "I wish it had been possible to be the kind of parent I want to be and continue with my legal career." The cover headline totally misrepresents this woman's dilemma.

**Excuse me #3:** Selective use of statistics. The article emphasizes findings from a recent survey in which 26 percent of women in senior management said they did not want a promotion. So that means nearly three-quarters did. And how does that compare to men, many of whom don't want high-stress jobs either? We

then learn that *Fortune* reported that out of 108 women in high-powered jobs, "at least 20" have chosen to leave. Maybe I'm dumb at math, but doesn't that mean that four-fifths have not made this "choice"?

**Excuse me #4:** Biology is destiny. Whenever you need to keep women in their place, it's always good to cite examples from the animal kingdom. Belkin uses baboon analogies. She makes the usual disclaimer about the misuse of biology, and then goes on to tell us that we mothers (but not dads?) are genetically driven to protect our kids and "seeking clout in a male world does not correlate with child well-being." You mean earning a decent salary does not correlate with being able to take care of your kids?

**Excuse me #5:** Buried lead. The real story here is not about mothers "choosing" not to work. It's about the ongoing inhumanity of many workplaces whose workaholic cultures are hostile to men and women. Americans work anywhere from six to nine weeks a year longer than most Europeans. And many "high powered" jobs like corporate attorney are lethally

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boring and stressful to both genders.

But, you know, when the real story is about capitalism run amok, it's commonplace to turn it into a story about a human failing, in this case the failure of feminists. So let's be clear about who has really failed mothers, including the privileged ones in this article. First, Congress and successive presidential administrations. For decades, the federal government has refused to provide a quality national day-care system, decent maternity and paternity leaves, or after-school programs. Second, much, though not all, of corporate America and the preposterous workaholic culture it fosters.

Mothers of America, it's time to talk back and refute insulting post-feminist propaganda. ■

# Worthy of the Land of Lincoln

By Salim Muwakkil

**B**arack Obama has emerged out of Chicago's boisterous mix of black and progressive politics as a candidate who just may make history as the nation's third elected black U.S. senator. He's an attractive political candidate: well educated and articulate with a history of commitment. He's also an exotic candidate.

First of all, there's his name. The 41-year-old Obama is the son of a black Kenyan father and a white Kansas mother. Obama was born in Hawaii, where he was raised by his mother and her family, and spent his formative years in many unexpected locations. He also lived for a time in Indonesia.

He's a graduate of Columbia University and Harvard Law School, where he graduated magna cum laude and became the first black American president of the Harvard Law Review. From there he settled in Chicago, where he directed a voter registration and education project in Cook County instead of joining one of the many corporate law firms that were beckoning. Obama also began reconciling his hybrid heritage with American realities and found a sense of belonging within the city's African-American community.

We know so much about Obama's inner struggles because he wrote a 1995 book about them titled *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. The book is a lyrical meditation on race, culture and issues of hybridity. In 1993, he joined a law firm, but it specialized in civil rights and voting rights litigation. And in that capacity he served as general counsel to community health clinics and social service agencies throughout Chicago. He also lectures on constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School.

Throughout his life, his name and hybrid identity provided a convenient target for detractors; they still do. A recent Web site, constructed by a Republican political operative, compared Obama to Osama bin Laden. The site was shut down. Letters to conservative publications in Illinois regularly refer to Obama as a radical Muslim, although he

has been an active member of a large South Side Methodist congregation for many years.

But it's not just conservative whites who find Obama troublesome. Chicago's substantial Black Nationalist community also has problems with him. This discomfort stems from a perpetual dynamic within progressive Chicago politics that finds the city's Black Nationalist activists



and theorists often in opposition to integrated activists.

Harold Washington was such a pivotal figure because he was able to fuse the interests of Chicago's influential nationalists with the city's progressives. The inability to forge such a coalition since Washington's death is the primary reason Richard J. Daley has won every election.

Although some nationalists distrust Obama for his close links to progressive political operatives, he still has one of the best opportunities, post-Harold, to cultivate and strengthen those nationalist-progressive links. Within the Black Nationalist community some are now urging all-out support for Obama. In addition to lauding his legislative record during his seven years as senator from Illinois' 13th District, they argue that it's perverse for black nationalists to reject the son of a Kenyan for not being black enough.

He has notched several legislative victories during his tenure in the Illinois Senate, including sponsoring a racial profiling law that requires police departments to record the race of stopped motorists and also sponsoring a law requiring that interrogations and confessions in capital crime cases be videotaped.

In addition, Obama co-sponsored a bill to raise the minimum wage and he was instrumental in expanding Kid Care and Family Care, the children and family health insurance program in Illinois. And he was the first senate candidate to forcefully oppose the Bush administration's Iraq invasion and has been in the forefront of continuing opposition.

Many of the state's more progressive unions and the public interest group Citizen Action have endorsed him. Along with endorsements from U.S. Reps. Danny Davis, Jesse Jackson Jr. and Lane Evans, Obama won the support of liberal icons Abner Mikva, former chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals and former White House counsel, and Newton Minow, former Federal Communication Commission chairman. He's also been endorsed by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley, (D-N.J.).

Steve Neal, dean of Chicago's political columnists, called Obama "the most intelligent and articulate contender in a surprisingly strong Democratic field." So

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far, nine Democratic candidates are running in the primary for the vacated Senate seat of Republican Peter Fitzgerald. Seven Republicans are running in the March 2004 primary. "It is said that Illinois is represented by lightweights in the Senate," Neal wrote. "Obama would be a Senator worthy of the land of Lincoln."

Most serious political observers of Illinois politics share Neal's assessment. "The general reaction to Obama is that he would probably be a great U.S. senator, but that his foreign-sounding name and his race hurt his chances," chimed in Rich Miller, a columnist for the *Daily Southtown*, a suburban publication.

The best candidate for the U.S. Senate from Illinois also happens to be the most progressive. He also happens to be black. This is a convergence so rare it's likely to ignite a progressive firestorm. It better. ■