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**Maureen Dowd on Michelle Obama or  
Who's Afraid of Thunder and Lightning?  
By Dr. Horace Campbell, PhD  
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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On March 8, International Women's day, men and women of conscience in all parts of the world were reflecting on the call of the Global women's strike for societies to 'invest in caring not killing.' This call represented the maturation of a movement of women who grasped the depth of the social and economic crisis. In her own tribute to the day to reflect on the struggles of women, Maureen Dowd, the columnist for the **New York Times**, placed a spin on the raging debate in the United States on whether Michelle Obama should cover up. Dowd ended up praising the confidence of Michele Obama. But, was this tongue in cheek, given the record of Dowd?

Using her usual mix of cunning wit and sarcasm, Dowd entered the fray by joining the thousands of words in print and the hundreds of pictures about Michelle Obama, the first lady of the United States. In brief, the debate has centered around the appropriateness of the dress code of Michelle. From fashion magazines such as **Vogue** to super market tabloids such as **People** magazine, from **Essence** to bloggers and to the pages of quality news outlets - the question echoed, should Michelle Obama cover up?

Others who wanted to place a twist on the second amendment debate on the right of gun owners to carry guns used the debate on Michelle's dress to refer to "the right to bare arms." When the official portrait of the first lady was released towards the end of February, the image ignited even more debate. The official portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama, taken in the Blue Room of the White House by photographer Joyce N. Boghosian, shows Michelle Obama wearing a sleeveless dress. One blogger called this sleeveless style the signature style of Michelle Obama and then went on to cite the designer.

Into this debate waded Maureen Dowd who has represented herself as one spokesperson of the wounded US ruling elite. A week earlier, before entering the debate on whether Michelle should 'cover up', she had opined in her column that she



did not like the speech of Eric Holder, the Attorney General. In a speech to Justice Department employees marking Black History Month, the Attorney General said that while the country has a lot to be proud of, "in things racial we have always been and I believe continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards."

Maureen Dowd reflected the discomfort of the establishment when she had written in her column,

"In the middle of all the Heimlich maneuvers required now — for the economy, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, health care, the environment, and education — we don't need a Jackson/Sharpton-style lecture on race. Barack Obama's election was supposed to get us past that."

Joining with the very conservative commentators, Dowd wanted to squash any serious discussion on the history of those who had lynched black people and raped millions of Black women. Dowd is very much at home with the founding fathers and mothers who preached liberty and equality but practiced slavery.— Her line was telling not only because she had warned the Obama White House that his election was 'supposed to get past race,' but also because, at the end of that week, Barack Obama himself in an interview with the New York Times distanced himself from the comments of Holder.

President Barack Obama said he would not have used the same language that Eric Holder did last month when the attorney general declared that the United States is a nation of cowards on matters of race.

Maureen Dowd had demonstrated to her readers that she had a backchannel to the communications sector of the Obama White House.

One week later, Dowd represented herself as the filter for the heir of William Buckley and Samuel P. Huntington.

Representing the discussion in a taxi cab between herself and David Brooks, the self proclaimed intellectual voice of the conservatives, Dowd reported the following version of the cab ride,

In the taxi, when I asked David Brooks about her (Michelle Obama's) amazing arms, he indicated it was time for her to cover up. "She's made her point," he said. "Now she should put away Thunder and Lightning."

## **Thunder and lightning**

The United States is now experiencing one of the most severe thunderstorms in its history. In thunder storms, lightning is probably the most dangerous element. So it was curious that David Brooks referred to the arms of Michelle Obama as Thunder and Lightning, in other words, the arms of a dangerous woman.

Because the conversation was filtered, we will probably not know what other choice metaphors were used by this writer who was one of the principal cheer leaders for the occupation of Iraq.

The imagery of Michele Obama as representing Thunder and Lightning is coming from a section of the US intelligentsia that cannot consider black women in any other public positions other than that of nannies or wet nurses. Maureen Dowd used references to a character in Jane Austen when it may have been more profitable to use Sethe from ***Beloved*** in a context when she was referring to the confidence of black women while at the same time commenting on the slave ships of the British. As a successful crafts



person, Dowd was able to introduce in one paragraph the history of British colonialism and repression in Kenya as well as the horrors of the slave trade. Citing a formulation from the British newspaper-, the **Telegraph** on Michelle Obama, Dowd repeated their nervousness,

“Her broad-brush view of history associates Brits with the wicked white global hegemony responsible for the slave trade.”

Seven months year earlier, it was this same nervousness that led the New Yorker to bring out their Thunder and Lightning in the cover page of Barack Obama and Michelle Obama as unreconstructed black militants. The July 21, 2008 cover of The **New Yorker Magazine** carried a cartoon of Michelle Obama as an afro-wearing, gun toting militant and Barack Obama was depicted dressed wearing traditional Muslim garb. They were greeting each other with a “fist bump”, with an American flag burning in the fireplace, and a portrait of Osama Bin Laden on the wall of the Oval Office.

The image was supposed to be seen as a joke but the minds that created the cartoon reflected the anxiety of those who are afraid of Thunder and Lightning. Other cartoonists from the same city have gone past subtlety and have simply revealed what is sometimes discussed at chic dinner tables. In the same period when Maureen Dowd rebuked Eric Holder, the **New York Post** had shown a cartoon of a dead chimp and two police officers, one with a smoking gun.

The caption reads, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill."

This was the same city where Amadaou Diallo and Sean Bell were gunned down.

### **Michelle Obama's sculpted biceps : texts and sub texts**

Maureen Dowd was trained in an institution where the Professors taught about text and sub text. Hence, those committed to openness and transparency are calling for a deciphering of the text of Maureen Dowd on whether Michelle Obama should cover up. The reader should carefully analyze the words of Dowd. She ended her offering in this way:

“Let's face it: The only bracing symbol of American strength right now is the image of Michelle Obama's sculpted biceps. Her husband urges bold action, but it is Michelle who looks as though she could easily wind up and punch out Rush Limbaugh, Bernie Madoff and all the corporate creeps who ripped off America.”

Echoing other concerns over the biceps of Michelle Obama

“I'd seen the plaint echoed elsewhere. “Someone should tell Michelle to mix up her wardrobe and cover up from time to time,” Sandra McElwaine wrote last week on The Daily Beast.”

Apparently, Maureen Dowd does not know the history of Georgetown, South Carolina and the crimes against Black women. It is for this reason that her commentary on Eric Holder was out of step with the historical record of the atrocities committed against black people which are outlined in the book, **Killing the Black Body**. This ignorance of the sexual and racial terror permitted Dowd to render these sentences.

Washington is a place where people have always been suspect of style and overt sexuality. Too much- preening signals that you're not up late studying cap-and-trade agreements. David was not smitten by the V-neck, sleeveless



eggplant dress Michelle wore at her husband's address to Congress — the one that caused one Republican congressman to whisper to another, "Babe."

### **Ostentation and sensually avoidant**

He said the policy crowd here would consider the dress ostentatious. "Washington is sensually avoidant. The wonks here like brains. She should not be known for her physical presence, for one body part." David brought up the Obamas' obsession with their workouts. "Sometimes I think half the reason Obama ran for president is so Michelle would have a platform to show off her biceps."

During the campaign, there was talk in the Obama ranks that Michelle should stop wearing sleeveless dresses, because her muscles, combined with her potent personality, made her daunting.

She ignored that talk, thank heavens. I love the designer-to-J. Crew glamour. Combined with her workaday visits to soup kitchens, inner-city schools and meetings with military families, Michelle's flair is our depression's answer to Ginger Rogers gliding around in feathers and lamé.

Her arms, and her complete confidence in her skin, are a reminder that Americans can do anything if they put their minds to it. Unlike Hillary, who chafed at the loathed job of first lady, and Laura, who for long stretches disappeared into the helpmeet role, Michelle has soared every day, expanding the job to show us what can be accomplished by a generous spirit, a confident nature and a well-disciplined body.

I also have no doubt she can talk cap-and-trade with ease and panache.

### **Confident Nature**

On a quick read, it may sound as if there is solidarity between Maureen Dowd and Michelle Obama when she ended by noting that Michelle has soared and what can be "accomplished by a generous spirit, a confident nature and a well-disciplined body." If this is praise, then the support for the confidence was betrayed by the imagery of the nanny in the soup kitchen. There is an economic depression in the country and the soup kitchen metaphor must be complimented by a rigorous call for the redistribution of wealth in the United- States. The progressive forces must organize and intervene so that Obama does not have to call back the editors of the New York Times to plead that he is not a socialist.

Two days after International Women's day, ***the New York Times***, as if endorsing the imagery of Michelle as a First Lady visiting soup kitchens, brought us a picture of Michelle Obama serving food to homeless people.

It is clear to this writer that the rulers of the United States would like to define Michelle Obama. Such a definition will be in keeping with the historical image of Black Women in the United States. Michelle Obama is undeniably beautiful. However, this does not undermine the fact she was trained at two Ivy League schools and is a thinker as well as an activist for social justice. Those who fear this kind of thinking as well as those who fear the full rendition of the history of Georgetown, South Carolina, will call on Michelle Obama to cover up. This column on whether Michelle Obama should cover up ended up praising her confidence and we look forward to the same praise when Michelle Obama raises her voice against the bailout for the banks and insurance



companies.

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### **The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**


**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, Dr. Horace Campbell, PhD, is Professor of African American Studies and Political Science at Syracuse University in Syracuse New York. His book, [Rasta and Resistance: From Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney](#) is going through its fifth edition. He is also the author of [Reclaiming Zimbabwe: The Exhaustion of the Patriarchal Model of Liberation](#) and is currently working on a book on Obama and 21st Century Politics. He has contributed to many other edited books, most recently, "From Regional Military de-stabilization to Military Cooperation and Peace in South Africa" in [Peace and Security in Southern Africa \(State and Democracy Series\)](#) , edited by Ibbo Mandaza. He has published numerous articles in scholarly journals and is currently writing a book on the Wars against the Angolan peoples. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Campbell.

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