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**New Messages, New Threats
The African World
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The "Joe the Plumber" story has unraveled, yet Senator McCain continues to make reference to what is, in fact, a mythical character. Sure, there is a Joe, but he is not what he described himself to be. This has been exposed. Yet, McCain continues to reference "Joe the Plumber" as if to lend credibility to his story.

It would be easy enough to laugh off the story of a white man who would like to believe that he will, someday, be the person that he presented himself to be, but the story tells us as much about the consciousness of many middle income and working class whites as it tells us about the propaganda strategy of the political Right.

It is not just that Joe the Plumber, aka Joe Wurzelbacher, aka Sam J. Wurzelbacher, is not the person that Senator Obama believed him to be. Wurzelbacher, to paraphrase Frank Sinatra, seems to have "high hopes," that is, he is prepared to ignore his current situation of being a low to moderate income, working class, single parent who would benefit from Senator Obama's tax plan. Instead, he has embraced an identity that makes it easier for him to identify with the politics of McCain/Palin.

This incident highlights the desperate attempts by a section of the white working class to find some means to identify with a candidate who has a platform and approach contrary to their short and long-term economic interests. There are only three ways to pull that off, and Joe the Plumber found one: invent a new identity. A second way is to focus on issues that have little to do with one's living standard, i.e., so-called cultural issues. The third way is to simply acknowledge that one cannot vote for a Black man.

Yet the Joe the Plumber incident also tells us something about the messages being advanced by the Right, and specifically, by the McCain/Palin campaign. In a fit of desperation, the McCain/Palin campaign is suggesting that it does not matter whether or not Joe the Plumber is a myth. In fact, the McCain/Palin campaign has refused to acknowledge that the story is just this side of a hoax. Rather, they continue to reference this man as if his story is completely credible. In doing this, they raise, once

again, the *irrationalist* side of their right-wing politics. In effect, the McCain/Palin campaign is saying that facts are irrelevant.

Wurzelbacher's aspirations speak to the dream of climbing the ladder of success and upward mobility, a dream that has proved to be a myth for many; a myth that has been preached to all citizens and residents of the USA, but absorbed largely by the white population. It is a myth that says if you work hard, you advance; if you are dedicated to your job, your living standard improves; and if you work hard and prove your value to the company (and to society) the living standard of your children will always be better than your own.

So, the question that arises is simple but profound: what happens when one finds out that this story line is true for only small numbers of people? There seem to be 2-3 answers. One can get angry and recognize that one has been hood-winked by the system and, as a result, turn on the system, i.e., move to the Left. In the alternative, one can feel betrayed and turn on those who one perceives to have been the source of the betrayal. Or, one can engage in fantasy, and pretend that one's current circumstances are only temporary, to soon be replaced by something a lot better.

Wurzelbacher is currently fantasizing, but this fantasy can easily morph into option #2, or the right-wing populism about which I and others have been warning. In either case, options #2 and #3 correspond to the message that sections of the political Right wish to advance. They say, in essence, that the only reason that you - the white worker or white small business person - are not succeeding has little to do with the system, but has to do with the "other." In the case of the current economic crisis, the problem for McCain and the Right is not the system, but a few greedy individuals. This is the sort of message that Wurzelbacher wants to hear. The message goes: there is nothing wrong with the system; there is nothing that should really stop him from becoming the person he wants to believe he can be; the only obstacles are some greedy, shady individuals, and, quite possibly, the tax plan of a Black man that allegedly might take money away from him...money that he does not currently possess.

The myth that surrounds Joe the Plumber is a powerful one. It is a myth that many people insist on believing despite a great deal of evidence that it is largely a fraud. Although whites have always had a relative advantage over people of color, this has never meant that whites automatically succeed or rise to the upper crust. Nevertheless, in challenging the myth, one is calling into question a belief system that so many people, particularly within white America, have grown to accept.

Senator Obama has described the current economic crisis as being far more than a crisis created by some individuals. He has pointed to the results of thirty years of deregulation. This is an important contrast with Senator McCain. Yet it is not enough. Wurzelbacher/Joe the Plumber, and others like him, deeply wish to believe the myth with which they have grown up. The myth in its entirety must be shattered. That can only happen by confronting the truth that the current economic crisis and the thirty plus year decline in the living standards of the average working person are not the result of some "other", e.g., Jews, Blacks, minorities, immigrants, but, as I raised in my last commentary, are the result of a very amoral economic system.

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