

# Presidential Musings

Moderated by Grace Virtue, Ph.D.

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*Alvin Thornton, Ph.D.,  
associate provost*

**O**n Nov. 2, this year, the people of the United States of America elect their 44th president. Framed by the residue of the 2000 election, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, the subsequent pre-emptive invasion of Iraq and an uncertain economy, scholars agree that this election promises to be one of the contested in the history of American politics.

To this end, *Howard Magazine* invited four of the University's most prolific public affairs experts to a discussion to offer their insight on the election's most decisive issues, the Black community's stance, and whether or not the incumbent Republican President George W. Bush will prevail over his challenger Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.).

Discussants were: Associate Provost Alvin Thornton, Ph.D., Chairman of the Department of Political Science; Lorenzo Morris, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the department of Political Science; Michael Frazier, Ph.D.; and Associate Professor Radio, TV, Film, Paula Matabane, Ph.D.

Senior Writer and Executive Communications Manager, Office of University Communications, Grace Virtue, Ph.D., moderated the discussion.

**Moderator:** Every election is historic and significant. However, this year's will have some especially critical dimensions to it. For one, there seems to be a depth of fervor and urgency among Democrats to get out the vote and unseat George W. Bush. Is this just another presidential election or is it also a referendum on so-called conservative values vis-à-vis liberal ones and everything that those terms connote?

**Matabane:** It's not just another election. And it's not only about conservative and liberal values. It's about whether or not we are going to have free and fair elections, given what happened in the last election. This president was not elected; he was appointed by the Supreme Court..

**Morris:** For African Americans, the election will be almost like a referendum on whether or not full participation will even be strongly supported by each of the major political parties. The election of 2000 was not only a failure in terms of fair and reasonable protection of the Black franchise, it was a failure on the part of all of the participants—the Democrats as well as the Republicans. Every African American who votes this time will be voting in part to affirm their commitment to reasonable access to participation, which is missing.



*Clockwise from L. to R.: Alvin Thornton, Ph.D., Lorenzo Morris, Ph.D., Paula Matabane, Ph.D. and Michael Frazier, Ph.D.*

As far as conservative-liberal issues go, I see them as inescapable dichotomies. But they are deceptive. Since the 1990s one party has moved to an ideological position that can't be fully defined by conservatism, because it has some very specific, riveting characteristics about their concepts of race and groups, and justice beyond the most rudimentary individual interpretations, and the other party is trying to avoid ideology. So you have this bizarre calculation about what conservatism really is.

**Moderator:** Wouldn't you say that the absence of a legitimate left is simply because the left's position is un-winnable or at least perceived that way?

**Morris:** No. It's been labeled unwinnable because it has never been tried. Pragmatic party politics was the way to go, and everybody wanting to run in an election tries to get the middle, but you have to define your field first. Reagan knew that-and I hate to say anything about him that implies admiration-but Reagan's people knew they had to define their winning side. There was never a similar commitment from the Democrats. Clinton did well in valuing those leftists' ideas, but he made sure he did not commit himself to any of them. That is the option that has been dominating the Democratic Party. They are losing now because of naïve pragmatism not because of naïve liberalism.

**Thornton:** It is not going to be a traditional election for reasons that my colleagues have already indicated, and I would add the following: I think there is an institutional distribution of politics that is fairly even.

The Senate is almost evenly divided; the House has around eight seats separating the parties; the Supreme Court, as you have seen in recent decisions, is basically five-four, right down the line. So just in terms of institutional politics, there is going to be a major struggle. Also, over the last eight years we have seen the maturation of conservative public policy in politics, and Bush has been able to reopen those issues and place them front and center.

But the raw issues that divide Americans today are cutting-edge issues: affirmative action, which is essentially the race-based approach to electoral politics; privacy issues, which is manifesting itself in the discussions around gay and lesbian issues and marriage rights issues. Bush has been willing to [raise] these questions, and also deep questions about religiosity, faith and consciousness. His willingness to do that creates a great chasm in the American society.

Another reason is that the imbalance in the distribution of wealth has reached a crisis in the country,

where the few own the most at a level where it is beginning to parallel the turn of the century type notion of mal-distribution-and I do think that the American people are beginning to see the consequences of that and, there is going to be response to that. It's going to be a very interesting November.

**Frazier:** [The election] will be a referendum, but in a dual context: support of the current administration's policies and the fact that many people are just angry at this administration primarily for their rationale for the Iraq War.

As far as the idea of Democrats as liberals and Republicans as conservatives go, it is a kind of a moral politics where anything that falls outside of the Republican's paradigm is immoral or deviant.

**Moderator:** But the polls continue to show a very tight race. How do you explain them?

**Frazier:** The polls are taken every day and people put out what they want the public to know. The polls don't talk about the "X" factor: young people who have never voted and are very fearful of what it would mean should this president be re-elected. I anticipate the war expanding, since you have an administration that said that unilateral decisions will not be held captive by international sanctions.

**Moderator:** The American mass media seems determined to present the issues nationally or internationally, in terms of dichotomies. Do these dichotomies, particularly the liberal vs. conservative notion, accurately reflect the nature of the belief systems of Americans? Is this an accurate way to define the American value system?

**Thornton:** It is, but it reflects a kind of reductionism in the sense of what is happening to the Americans' understanding and awareness of public policies -that that awareness is very immature. And the media does not see an interest in trying to inform, because what the media is trying to do is sell things and commodities, and they do not want a lot of complexities as people are observing the policy process, and ultimately making choices about what is being sold to them.

I want to be respectful of ourselves as Americans, but there is a certain amount of simplemindedness that is anticipated by the media and the talking heads. It is just as easy to reduce the public to the simple notion of whether you are liberal or conservative, whether you are black or white. I don't think the media has any interest in changing that because it is easier to market and to sell.



*"There is an ideological fight going but conservatism and liberalism only hints at it. They do not fully explain it."*

*Lorenzo Morris,  
Ph.D. chair-  
man,  
Department of  
Political Science*

**Morris:** It's normal for people in a society like ours to see things in easily consumable ways. It is reasonable to expect the conservative and liberal labels, because that is the way the media build a single focus around governing officials and parties that are already in place.

You are always going to have that dichotomy, but it's not going to reflect the range of things people feel, and for minorities, who often discuss things that are outside of the normal media, there's a whole different level of conceptualization that is not formalized or articulated in the media, but is often expressed in music and elsewhere. I hate to say it, but amounts to a kind of structured limitation of our thinking in which the media play a role.

**Matabane:** The media continues to play a role as agenda setters. Not necessarily telling us what to believe, but what to talk about. The media does not capture the depth of who we are as African Americans.

For example, I don't know where I land because on one side I tend to be conservative when it comes to issues of personal morality. On the other, I am probably quite liberal when it comes to political freedoms, and so I don't fit into either party. Further, the Democrats represent some of the same values as the Republicans. You have Democrats who are just as heartland, just as warlike, as some of the Republicans, so I think it's a kind of illusion that we are different in terms of how you see yourself.

A part of it is that the media is so adept at incorporation of styles. We get caught up in the styles through music and other forms of expression, and we never come back to have the real conversations. No one is articulating a real different perspective. You have to fit into this liberal-conservative thing, and the result is alienation of a lot of black people because we don't have a moral center. We need a moral center

**Frazier:** What the media and society have done is to allow people and groups to be typecast, and they have moralized politics to fit into our Judeo-Christian heritage so that morality then becomes a split as to how Christianity is active in the real world. Whether you are strictly in accordance with the hierarchy in terms of following the rules, it does not matter. The society and the media project these two boxes and you have to fit in either or.

**Moderator:** What do you think is the overall impact of the mass media's simplistic characterization of a much more complex socio-cultural, socio-political landscape?

**Matabane:** It is very difficult to say. I think we have a lot of people who don't pay attention to the media in terms of that kind of political analysis. But, again there are so many channels and such a plethora of information from all these sources that it is very difficult for the average person to sift through it and make accurate or discerning decisions about what is really happening.

**Frazier:** And truth is slippery, as we saw in the period after 9/11. You have a situation where people felt vulnerable and the president said a group has weapons and they are going to kill you. He said if you are not with us, you are against us. And if you send your children off to fight a war you are patriotic, but if you don't support that notion, you are being un-American. So what is the truth?

**Moderator:** Where are the Black leaders in all of this? Is there an absence of a moral center as Paula said, and what is the importance of this?

**Thornton:** It's important to have a moral center, but that moral center must obviously be in response to the goal of creating a more just nation, not just what I would consider to be isolated personal morality.

The mortality [during the Civil Rights Movement] I experienced was one that contested the power and the configuration of the nation that was in fact hurting people, and the thrust, the movement, the praying and the marching, and all that was centered on that.

In the absence of a paradigm that questions the fundamental structure of America, there will be literal morality, but that to me is isolated and it reflects itself in isolated gatherings of people who say they are moral. But I would say that in this society, we always have to be King-like in the sense of a morality that is pushing the nation and a people to mobilize for the larger purpose of universal principles of justice, creating social space that is forever and successively more just and inclusive of more people.

The issue of Black leadership is very difficult, and is problematic to us as academics to create that environment within which one could exist. The social and economic structure would then call us to do something to bring it into existence. That is a very difficult thing to do conceptually, organizationally and structurally. The absence of that is causing the malaise and the indifference, and obviously the opposition to truly doing that is very strong. Probably the new vanguard will do it.

**Moderator:** Who is the new vanguard?



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*Michael Frazier,  
Ph.D., associate  
professor,  
Department of  
Political Science*

**Thornton:** They are at Howard University and other great universities in the country. They are the young people who will commit the same kind of intellectual sacrifices, group sacrifice and class sacrifice on behalf of the whole, just as those who we respect now did when they were young.

**Frazier:** Since the death of King and Malcolm there has been that effort to organize Black people to put forward an agenda, but it gets circumvented. So the kind of leadership that would do what Alvin was talking about would have to emerge from those who were there first. You have to pass on what you have in terms of tactics, skills and experience, because the black middle class today is not going to do it. Further, I don't think it's just going to be based here in the United States. I think it has to be a part of the globalization process.

**Matabane:** I would like to disagree slightly with Dr. Thornton on the issue of public versus private morality. I don't see it as either or. I think we have to have both. In some ways, that is a part of where the Civil Rights Movement leadership fell down. They had a very strong commitment to building a just and righteous nation, but they did not have that same commitment to their personal morality, and that opened the door for a lot of destruction.

**Thornton:** I am cautious about that. Cautious about what I see as Black people mimicking. I see powerful conservative White people going into large Black congregations with their private morality. Right after the president did his University of Michigan thing, he went into a large black congregation as a privately religious and spiritual moral person, and he was having a good time.

I have a problem with the "I am a privately moral person and I love my wife and I read the Bible everyday so we are connected. We are bonded so we have no problems." That is what I am concerned about. I think it is crippling and immobilizing Black spirituality.

**Matabane:** I am not saying either or. I am saying both.

**Thornton:** More so, I am concerned about public morality. Private morality is a complex issue.

**Matabane:** That is true but I am saying we have to move it to another level and we need both.

**Thornton:** I certainly don't want to give the impression that it is either or. What we do as a society must be motivated toward the collective goal of social justice, and as we define our individual morality, hopefully it will be compatible with that larger goal of social justice.

**Morris:** I have been thinking about the moral issues surrounding the war in Iraq, and about our moral obligation to Sudan.

There are numerous articles about the war and what it is costing us. It is that kind of public morality that should define public action.

Since the Reagan era, the monopolistic control of the media has constrained the development of independent questions. The number of moral questions that the Civil Rights Movement brought to the surface for public debate and the quality of those questions helped to define this kind of public morality. It is important to recognize that individual morality has been eroded as a social value and cannot be effectively replaced by public authority.

This is a part of what the presidential campaigns could discuss that is limited not just by the politically conservative agenda, but by the unwillingness to take some of what we used to call social responsibility.

When you travel abroad and get to see some things differently, you realize that it is the strangest thing the way the media cover the issues here. They leave out most of the discussion, and that's part of the problem.

**Matabane:** We would be remiss if we did not talk about the monopoly in the ownership of the media since the '60s. It is well documented that the media played an unwitting but crucial role in helping to promote the Civil Rights Movement, and after they went through that the media had a self-assessment and they decided that were not going to play that kind of role in the future -that they would not be promoting these kinds of movements that are geared for social change.

And that's a crucial point when we consider who owns the media: very conservative multinational corporations that own and monopolize..

There is a lot of value in what Drs. Thornton and Frazier have said about that new generation. They are media savvy. They are making films. They might not be politicians, but I think the ideas get out there with the stories.

**Moderator:** Given Howard University's role in the Civil Rights Movement, what do you see as its parallel role in giving a voice to the black community at a time when it is so difficult to get alternative views into the public domain?

**Morris:** Universities are responsible in all societies for carrying their weight and using institutional resources for generating new ideas. African-American Universities have a historic responsibility to generate



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liberating, or at least socially conscious ideas, to the population they serve. Howard is unique in its strength and diversity and institutional resources and scholars, so we have a lot of obligations.

The strain on us is that there is so much money around the most established and unreflective ideas, some of which we may also want to subscribe to, that the individual sacrifices of researchers and of students who want to look at things differently are less well subsidized and less well-paid. Fortunately, we have had enough resources to do some things independently-to work with students who have bright ideas that they want to explore.

One of the pressures on us, on every institution, but particularly African-American institutions is to toe some socially traditional lines. We have to be sensitive to those pressures, but to avoid them whenever it challenges the creativity of ideas. That means make an effort to explore and encourage students to take some social and political risks that such exploration involves.

**Moderator:** Ultimately, what issues do you think are going to be the most decisive in the elections where African-American voters are concerned?

**Frazier:** The war in Iraq and the president cutting taxes in the face of rising deficits and increased expenditures for the war. And there is the question of whether or not Bush is trustworthy. There is certainly a lingering event from the election in 2000, because the premise of a democracy is that everyone has a fair chance to participate, and many people in Florida feel that they were cheated out of that right.

**Thornton:** Black people are multidimensional in the way they look at issues. The Black middle class is threatened by the performance of the market, and they are concerned by what they see as the attack on affirmative action issues.

Blacks generally are concerned about the economy and they feel threatened by the economic policies of the Bush administration.

**Moderator:** Will there a big voter turn out?

**Thornton:** The pollsters don't call people on these things, but I really believe that the young people are going to turn out.

**Frazier:** The young people are going to rock the vote. I sense it.

**Thornton:** For military persons and even the most disengaged young people, there is concern about what is happening to our country.

**Matabane:** It has to do with something that Dr. Frazier said about whether or not Bush can be trusted. It's not just Bush, but the whole administration. I hear Black people express the sentiment that Bush is where he is because of privilege.

**Frazier:** It's the privilege of having a father who was president and his uncle who was a senator; because if you look at his record there is nothing that was outstanding about it.

**Matabane:** Plus, Bush is also a continuation of the Reagan Administration—another president who Black people did not bond with. I don't think he is going to pull too many Black votes.

**Frazier:** The faith-based initiatives policy was an attempt to buy off Black votes.

**Thornton:** Black people are going to turn out and vote and help to decide the election. The question is whether they will be galvanized to help participate in governing. We don't participate in governing. We participate in the election, which is different.

We have to stay mobilized and participate in the policy process, because Black people have to set an agenda to include universal health care, access to higher education, access to reasonable credit, access to living space. They are arguing about whether John Kerry actually pulled someone into the boat, but the real issues are not being talked about. It's almost like a silent fascism, really.

**Moderator:** Then how do we get these issues into public discourse?

**Frazier:** There's centralized control of the media, like we have been saying, but we have to keep looking for alternatives. There are people at Howard University who are writing and publishing, and that's one way.

**Moderator:** Any Predictions on the elections?

THORNTON: The numbers don't add up, but I have Kerry up by about 7 points.

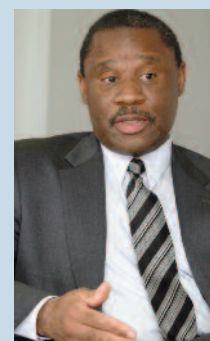
**Moderator:** Really?

THORNTON: Unless there's some kind of October surprise... It's going to be Mr. Kerry.

**Matabane:** Unless they bring out Bin Laden, Kerry will win.

**Frazier:** Kerry is going to win. My only fear is, if for whatever reason, what happened in the last election happens again, the war will be expanded and America as we know it will be changed forever.

**Moderator:** A somber note to end on. Thank you very much. [H](#)



*Alvin Thornton,  
Ph.D., Associate  
Provost*