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4-14-2008

### April 14, 2008: Senator Barack Obama's San Francisco Comments

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: Senator Barack Obama's San Francisco Comments

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4/14/2008--Today must be the first time that William Kristol quoted Karl Marx at some length in the New York Times. The occasion, of course, was the controversy over Senator Barack Obama's comments at a San Francisco fundraiser. You have presumably already read what Senator Obama said. Here is Kristol's quote from Marx ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"): "Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition. It is the opium of the people." Kristol is making the point that Senator Obama, like Marx, sees people clinging to religion out of pain. Kristol seems to be right about that. And that should remind us that Senator Obama's comments were not a putdown of guns and religion. Marx is not saying—here at least--that religion is bad, unneeded or untrue. Indeed, insofar as Senator Obama was claiming that people victimized by powerful interests can be distracted by side issues instead of addressing the real cause of their pain, he was making an argument like that of Thomas Frank in his book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* So, is the attack on Senator Obama for these comments, unfair? No. They are not unfair. What was great in Senator Obama's speech about race is that he spoke to us about us. What was shameful in his remarks in San Francisco, is that he spoke about people to others rather than to the people themselves. To my knowledge, Senator Obama had never said anything like this in a small Pennsylvania town. The flaw, therefore, that his comments demonstrate is not elitism, as his critics say, but political cowardice. He is now paying the price not for speaking his mind, but for failing to do so.