

Smiley, West and Obama

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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It's been a while since pals

Tavis Smiley and Cornel West took up the task of challenging President Obama from his left flank. The talk-show host and the philosopher have taken some heat for their criticism of the president, notably from political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry, who [argued](#) this spring that West's beef with the White House "is clearly more personal than ideological"--he's been openly disappointed by his lack of access--and that he "offers thin criticism of President Obama and stunning insight into the delicate ego of the self-appointed black leadership class."

But ego issues aside, one can

think of far worse things Smiley and West could do with their celebrity than [go on the road](#) to drum up support for fighting poverty, a word most elected officials simply talk around. The question of Obama's culpability is [complicated](#), but the problem itself is [quite clear](#).

The Smiley and West vs. Obama

story is a complex one, and [the best and fairest treatment](#) I've seen came out last week. It's by Adam Serwer, whose writing is airy enough to include lines like "West and Smiley's relationship can fairly be called a bromance" but also this incisive:

West was incredulous [when Steve Harvey called him and Smiley "Uncle Toms"]. "How can you be an Uncle Tom when you're defending poor and working people?" he says. "It doesn't make any sense."

It doesn't, but it

represents the strange dynamic at work with the presidency of Barack Obama--the first time a black man could be called an Uncle Tom for criticizing the president of the United States. Smiley and West are, in many ways, flawed spokesmen for the dispossessed. But if the president himself is constrained by racial *realpolitik* from explicitly representing the interests of the black community, shouldn't someone be out there doing it?

Elsewhere, Anthea Butler [didn't much like](#) Obama's speech to the Congressional Black Caucus this past weekend:

Why is it that every time

the president speaks to a predominately black audience, he goes into a preacher's cadence, and starts to speak as though he were at a pulpit? Why is

it that he never gets "righteously angry" with the white folks as often as he does at the black folks?

If you think I am harsh, consider a segment of the president's 2010 CBC speech: "I need everybody here to go back to your neighborhoods to go back to your workplaces, to go to churches and go to the barbershops and go to the beauty shops, and tell them we've got more work to do."

Damn. I think most black people I know do more than just work, go to church, and get their hair done.