

# Chicago Tribune

## Obama's inner-Rev. Al

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE – August 29, 2014



It's not hard to figure out why the Rev. Al Sharpton, of all people, receives a strange new respect in President Barack Obama's White House. Every president needs a good "anger translator."

Fans of Comedy Central's "Key and Peele" show know what I am talking about: the combative character that hosts Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele call "Luther, the president's anger translator."

As Obama, played by Peele, addresses the nation with characteristic no-drama cool, Key's Luther interjects his unsweetened, R-rated version of barber-shop-populist rage that the president is really thinking.

"On the domestic front," Peele's Obama calmly states, "I just want to say to my critics, I hear your voices and I share your concerns."

To which Key's Luther hops up and down and shouts into the camera. "So, maybe you just chill the hell out for just a second? Then maybe I could focus on some (expletive), y'know?"

If that sounds at least in tone, minus the expletives, like the fiery Sharpton of his bullhorn-wielding days in the 1980s, you know where I'm headed.

The old Sharpton rose to national notoriety as a portly former protege of music star James Brown — complete with the signature pompadour, tracksuit and gold chains. He ballyhooed such demagogic fiascoes as the 1987 Tawana Brawley affair, in which he falsely accused a white New York prosecutor and others of gang-raping a black teenager.

Compared to those days, the new Sharpton — an older, slimmed-down, suit-and-tie-wearing version of his former self — still calls for justice, but aims his rhetoric at putting out fires more than starting new ones. For this he gained the ear of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, among other prominent Democrats. He also is described by The New York Times as "the White House's civil rights leader of choice" and by Politico's Glenn Thrush as "Obama's go-to man on race."

The new Rev. Al was on full display in Ferguson, Mo., where the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer touched off protests and riots.

Not surprisingly, Sharpton's new prominence enrages conservatives, among others, who agree with Fox News' Bill O'Reilly's assessment of Sharpton as a "charlatan" and "race hustler" who only cares "about his own self-aggrandizement."

But by his own description, a more humble Sharpton emerged after he barely survived a 1991 stabbing by a drunken white man during a march in the Bensonhurst section of New York City.

"Look back," Sharpton told me in a 2001 interview. "My image is no worse than Rev. (Jesse) Jackson's was in 1980," four years before the first of Jackson's two presidential runs.

Even then, he was talking openly about his aim to replace Jackson's prominence as a civil rights leader, although he denied trying to grease the slide.

That seems to describe Sharpton's status these days as Democratic candidates seek his endorsements and he hosts his own nightly show on MSNBC — on which, full disclosure, I sometimes have been an unpaid guest.

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