

The Way To A Post-Racial America

Senator Obama is the only presidential contender who has the ability to unite this country and inspire a new generation of Americans

WITH THE emergence of Sen. Barack Obama as a top-tier contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, the issue of race has been a common storyline throughout this campaign. Journalists, commentators, observers and voters alike have asked questions such as "Is America ready for a black president?" or its more sinister corollary, "Is Obama black enough (or too black) to become president?"

While pundits and pollsters have spent countless hours dissecting the implications of Obama's race on this or that demographic group, I would humbly submit that the more appropriate question in the upcoming election is: What would Obama's nomination and election to the presidency mean for the state of race relations in this country?

Let me first make clear my unequivocal disagreement with anyone who believes that a candidate's race or skin color is – by

itself – either a qualifying or disqualifying characteristic to warrant one's vote. But that mode of thinking is reflective of the zero-sum approach to problem-solving that has dominated America's political discourse over the past quarter century. It is a mindset that preaches a politician who favors open trade and immigration policies must not care about American workers. It says that a candidate who envisions a role for government in addressing urban poverty must trivialize the role of personal responsibility.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

The past several election cycles have seen both major political parties pursue a strategy of divide and conquer. They reduce our country to a set of dots on an electoral map: blue/red, liberal/conservative, Democratic/Republican. While this strategy may have proven successful in helping individual politicians win individual elections, it has failed to address the real problems we face as a coun-

try. Most importantly, it has offered nothing to the vast majority of Americans who do not fall within this all-too-convenient binary paradigm. As a result, there is no voice for the voter who opposes the Iraq war, but also believes the government should curb excessive violence in our own popular culture; no voice for the voter who believes in limited government, but also feels strongly that all people should have access to affordable health care.

And it is at this intersection of politics, culture, class and race that Obama's healing power really thrives. His campaign, like his entire career before it, is about rejecting the black/white, red/blue paradigm of 51-percent solutions. He is the product of a mixed-race marriage and spent his formative years in the diverse communities of Hawaii and Indonesia, before venturing into the mainland metropolises of New York and Chicago. He is Ivy League-educated (Columbia University, Harvard Law School),

KENNEDYESQUE?: Barack Obama, the Illinois senator and Democratic presidential candidate, addresses 20,000 young supporters at a campaign rally at Washington Square Park in New York City in September.



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but has applied his talents and energies to addressing the needs of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic food chain. And he has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to bring people together, as evidenced by his U.S. Senate victory in Illinois in 2004 – winning more votes in the primary election than his six opponents combined and sailing to a 70 percent victory against his Republican opponent in November. He has enjoyed approval ratings of around 70 percent among his constituents since arriving in the Senate nearly three years ago.

The key to Obama's success in this regard is neither mysterious nor original, and yet it is a quality far too rare among our elected officials today, including the other major contenders for the Democratic nomination. It is, quite simply, the ability to listen to and empathize with, with sincerity and humility, the genuine concerns of well-meaning people. As a state senator in Illinois, these qualities enabled Obama

to bring Democrats and Republicans together to achieve sweeping ethics reform. They likewise allowed him to bring law enforcement together with the civil rights community to pass a bill against racial profiling and to help protect against wrongful criminal convictions.

BIPARTISAN LEADERSHIP

In the U.S. Senate, Obama has worked with Republicans like Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn to bring transparency to the federal spending process, with Alabama Sen. Richard Lugar to help secure loose nuclear materials and with Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback to help combat the spread of HIV and AIDS around the world.

So, what does this mean for the state of race relations in America, and particularly for the Indian American community? For one thing, it means a president who presumes the best, not the worst, intentions of other people, even his political opponents. It means a president who

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sees diversity as a source of strength and who recognizes the common humanity among us all. And perhaps, most importantly, it means a leader who understands that we each have a stake in one another's success.

We cannot begin to heal the racial divisions in this country until we accept the fundamental principle that the sum of what unites us is far greater than the sum of what divides us as a people. To achieve that end, we need a president who represents the values that drew our families to this country in the first place. We need a leader who challenges us to find the best in ourselves, as well as in others. We need someone who speaks more about optimism for the future than about settling old political scores.

Like no other candidate in the past 40 years, Obama has both the skills and the experience to move us beyond the with-us-or-against-us brand of politics that has left our country divided and paralyzed. He alone has the ability to inspire a new generation of Americans – regardless of race, color or national origin – to approach our problems with a renewed sense of confidence in the collective talents of our country.

Given the opportunity to lead this country in a new direction, an Obama presidency can definitively settle the question of "Is America ready?" and move us on to the more noble challenge of "Together, what can we accomplish next?"



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