

# What's changed? Obama and race in America: Obama and race in America

by [Gerald Early](#)

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*What opportunities and challenges of racial reconciliation present themselves for the nation and the African-American community in light of the election of Barack Obama as president? Does Obama's success point to a generational change in the style or substance of black politics? Does Obama's victory create a new conversation on race or end an old one? What kind of conversation is needed? Five authors offer their reflections.*

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Barack Obama's victory underscores the contradictory nature of American politics, for in voting for Obama, Americans have chosen to both reassert and abolish the idea of American exceptionalism. Electing a black man means that America remains a special country with a special destiny, for the moment, not just in its own eyes but in the eyes of the world—a country dedicated to the proposition that diversity is a form of divinity, an expression of God's providence, the path of our new errand in the wilderness of bigotry, an errand that started in earnest in 1954 with the desegregation of public schools, the errand of liberation and justice.

But this expression of American exceptionalism is a marked rejection of the old American mission of empire and power, the spreading of democratic values by money and might, by Emersonian ideals and corporate expansion, manifest destiny and unbridled nationalism.

It is difficult to read the change: Is it a sign of our faith in our institutions or of our fear that they have failed? This difficulty is directly related to the political hieroglyphic that is Barack Obama. We elected change, but what sort of change? Hard-left change? Change to the so-called center because we were weary of Bush's right-wing change? Change to still more massive government which Americans now seem no longer to fear? (Give me European-style socialism or give me death! Our intellectuals have always loved that and are as tickled as their 19th-century

counterparts that Europe, our betters, love us again.) Reformist change for competent, less corrupt government? Or just change to have a pretty face, a charming demeanor, coupled with an unusual name? (It was not just any black politician we wanted for the presidency, as no other could have achieved this feat, but only this particular one with his new story of immigration and hybridity.)

What made Obama attractive to wealthy and intellectual whites was that he was not freighted with the provincial story of black American injustice. He was international! He had lived abroad. And he has a high IQ—a throwback to the early-20th-century notion that the mixed-race black was superior to his purer brothers and sisters and made up most of the leadership cadre.

Bush dramatically proved that Anglo leadership is worn out; so we now opt for exoticized leadership around which, like children around a Maypole, we can project our fantasies of a renewed, multicultural America, confident that, after all, it isn't possible that Obama can be as bad as Bush, whatever he might be.

It has always been a tendency of liberals and the left since the end of the 1960s to think that all American problems, all American political hypocrisy and cultural contradictions are subsumed by the race problem, are crucially embedded in it (African Americans have always thought this). To solve the race problem through some highly symbolic means such as electing a black president is tantamount to solving all of America's other problems: inequality, unregulated greed, poverty, a blundering and overbearing foreign policy, and all the rest. There must be some barrier-breaking that, when achieved, will undo all of our mistaken assumptions about ourselves forever.

Perhaps we have finally found The One, the one barrier-breaker upon whom all the other barrier-breaking depends. In this election, the liberals and the left managed to convince the majority of the American voters that this is so. An extraordinary and profound accomplishment. We have changed as a result, but it is not the end of the race issue in America. Race is likely to become a more salient and bitter topic in the months and years ahead, now that we have a black president. But perhaps it is the end of the beginning that started not in 1619, but in 1865.

—Gerald Early, *essayist and professor of English and of African and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis.*

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On the night of the presidential election, I watched the results come in with eight college students, four of them black and four white. As the news media projected key states for Obama, the excitement among my students was palpable. Screams, hugs, tears and spontaneous dancing erupted at the announcement of Obama's victory, as they did across the country.

Later we learned that, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the election of the first black president had triggered more than 200 hate-related incidents. Verbal altercations over the results clouded our campus and prompted rumors of physical assaults and arrests. The Associated Press and the SPLC reported on incidents of cross burning, racial epithets and racist graffiti.

These anecdotes encapsulate the range of possibilities and challenges that we now face in race relations. That I watched election results in a public accommodation with a multiracial group of youths in a state that just 40 years ago had outlawed such gatherings and prevented the participation of African Americans in the political process is certainly part of the progress that enabled Obama's ascension to the White House. The students reported how moved they were watching black Mississippians in their 80s and 90s voting, with tears in their eyes at the possibility a milestone might be achieved that they never thought they'd see. In an instant, at the projection of Obama's win, generations of thwarted hopes, diminished expectations and violent resistance to change were eased and perhaps healed.

Yet the backlash against Obama is a sobering reminder of the work that remains ahead. The displays of prejudice represent an opportunity. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has suggested that the greatest challenge in race relations is that most people do not believe there is a problem. I amend his remark to propose that the strongest obstacle to improved race relations is the lack of honest dialogue.

I cannot imagine a more promising climate than the one in which we now find ourselves. A deep measure of hope in our country's founding principles has been renewed among many who had despaired of progress. And those who would resist the universal application of those principles are removing the patina of politeness that has disguised their sustained prejudice and has undergirded systemic discrimination. We might now have an honest, intensely local, grassroots dialogue about bias and structural racism and opportunity and inclusion in ways that have never been possible.

As president, Obama will face tremendous challenges, and he alone will not be able to solve them. But he tapped into the best strategies of the civil rights movement in his focus on grassroots, collective, participatory campaigning. Such local engagement is crucial to expanding the transformation of our country. Community building that grows from new relationships of trust across racial lines will mark the final fulfillment of a “more perfect union.”

—Susan M. Glisson, *executive director of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi.*

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In his book *The Luminous Darkness*, Howard Thurman wrote that “the burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being.” On November 4 that burden was lifted for many African Americans and other persons of color. Even if the burden was lifted for only a few hours or a few days it was a welcome experience. Many whites went to the polls and cast a vote on the basis of the content of their candidate’s character. They did not allow the color of his skin to sway their decision. These whites also felt the burden lift, even if only for a short time.

Obama’s election was a moment of reconciliation. After five centuries of racial injustice in America millions of people reclaimed a greater sense of their humanity. The question before us is: Can the moment become a season of reconciliation? And can a season cause a permanent shift toward a less racist and more reconciled society?

There have been moments in U.S. history when a national breakthrough for reconciliation seemed near. In 1968 the multiracial coalitions formed by the Poor People’s Campaign of Martin Luther King Jr. and the political campaign of Robert F. Kennedy held great promise. But those coalitions did not cause a shift in the landscape of reconciliation.

Forty years later the United States is in the midst of a dramatic demographic shift. At the midpoint of the 21st century the U.S. will be a diverse and pluralistic nation with no racial majority. The population will be 46 percent white, 30 percent Latino, 15 percent black or African and 9 percent Asian, with the remainder Native Americans, multiracial people and others. Obama’s election signals this new reality. The flexing of political muscle by Latinos in this election is another sign.

Racism is not over because one black person has been elected president. But because of Obama's election I have the audacity to hope for: children of color dreaming about the future with an imagination less restricted by racism; people discovering new spaces and new language for conversing about racism and reconciliation; youth growing up in diverse communities which lead to the erasure of racism as each subsequent generation becomes less racist and more reconciled; more whites welcoming an African-American pastor to oversee their intimate spiritual concerns because of the experience of a black president as their leader.

My son, a student at New York University, celebrated both his birthday and Obama's election in Times Square on November 4. Like Obama, my son has a parent who is white and a parent who is black. The election of Obama opens the door for multiracial people in our society to embrace the fullness of their identity without denying the reality of racism.

—Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *professor of reconciliation studies at Bethel University in St. Paul and author of Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice (Fortress)*.

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The defining question for an Obama-era America, pregnant with possibility, will be: What does it mean to be postracial? The term *postracial* has such potential for misinterpretation that Newark mayor Cory Booker disallowed it on MSNBC's election night coverage:

I reject the idea of a postracial America. I want to luxuriate in the racial deliciousness of our country: the Italian-Americans, the Irish-Americans, the Mexican-Americans. I mean, that's what makes America great. We are a nation that celebrates racial diversity. We're not Norway; we're not South Korea; we are the United States of America. The story of America is one of bringing such differences together to manifest a united set of ideals—not a united culture, not a united language, not a united religion, but a united set of ideals. That was what made America dramatic when it was founded, the first country of its kind in humanity. So I reject that. I want to celebrate all of America: its richness, its diversity, its deliciousness.

I concur with Mayor Booker. "God forbid if we ever get to a point where we 'transcend our race.'"

I get the distinct impression that many people who talk about postracial society mean a society in which we are “over and done with race.” As Robert Jensen reminds us in his book *The Heart of Whiteness*, “Race is a fiction we must never accept; race is a fact we must never forget.” The election of a person of color to the highest office in the land did not change this one bit.

If it is to follow the pattern of other such “post” constructs, *postracial* most appropriately identifies those who have suffered through the crucible of race and come out the other side determined to live and trust beyond race—still in visceral awareness of its impact and in unequivocal opposition to even the slightest of its indignities.

Long before such “post” language came into vogue, Cornel West, one of the notable American postmodern thinkers, wrote about the dangers of making race the sum of identity. West advocates the replacement of “racial reasoning” with a “moral reasoning” that engages beyond the arguments of the past, that obliterates the categories of left-right-center and conservative-liberal. That seems to be descriptive of Obama’s decentralized postracial cadre.

In order to be healing and generative, our future conversations must be rooted in the reciprocal admissions inherent in anything postracial—and must be rooted in two assumptions: 1) there are those who have been disadvantaged in our country, historically and consequently; and 2) there are those who have been historically advantaged in our country. Neither admission is debatable anymore, and we must recognize the existence of either condition as decidedly unfair and immoral. We must commit ourselves to rectifying both. We can’t settle for just doing better from this point forward. “Equal rights” to a piece of pie means little when the entire pie was divided up before one was even allowed to sit down at the table.

If *postracial* is to denote an actual repudiation of the discriminatory use of race, it must also become the catch-all concept for the refutation of any act of civil discrimination—paralleling the way people of color sometimes use *racism* to denote any abuse of power for which there does not exist a specific term. Not everything is about race, but race has been a fitting proxy for intractable abuses of power. If our Obama-inspired postracial impulses don’t demand from us unequivocal justice in all facets of democratic life—gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, national origin and so on—then we might as well throw the term out.

—Melvin Bray, *who teaches at Pine Forge Academy, a Seventh-day Adventist school in Pennsylvania. He is a participant in Emergent church conversations, and he blogs at melvinbray.wordpress.com.*

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Obama's presidency marks indisputable progress and the end of certain debates about race. Whether it was a matter of finally allowing character and excellence to trump skin color, or a new generation which embraces multiethnicity, enough white people have changed to support a black man as their leader. I suspect that many American hearts and minds will be further changed by witnessing the Obama marriage and family, their most up-close introduction to a black family that will defy stereotypes reinforced by lack of interracial friendships. And the debate has ended as to whether African Americans have gained significant power in America when the most powerful person in the world is Barack Obama.

Yet these new racial facts highlight all the more a strange paradox: progress toward assimilating into mainstream power is not the same as experiencing racial reconciliation and beloved community. Three challenges illuminate the difference.

First, if many whites have become less racist, and many blacks have gained power, together this "new mainstream" increasingly isolates itself from America's poor. What is true in my city of Durham seems true everywhere: 90 percent of gun murders occur in neglected communities of color, and people of all races and all churches are largely abandoning these communities. Furthermore, the new multiethnic mainstream does not seem disturbed by the new American segregation—we have the highest incarceration rate in the world and no social imagination about redeeming those in prison and the communities they come from. The force of exclusion is shifting from race to haves and have-nots, with profound results at the margins. An African-American pastor of an interracial church in inner-city Atlanta tells me that longtime neighborhood residents and the transplants (white, Asian-American, Latino, black) who have made the neighborhood their home for the sake of shalom and solidarity are creating a "new we" more powerful than ethnic identities.

A second challenge of racial reconciliation was revealed at a May gathering of U.S. peace and justice leaders at Duke Divinity School. The hottest issue that emerged was not black-white but immigration and the black-brown divide. One black pastor's honest admission—"My people don't view immigration raids as our issue"—opened a

candid and fresh conversation that led to redefinitions about who “our people” are. Since May this pastor has helped ignite a new interracial, grassroots coalition addressing immigration issues in Houston.

These first two challenges both point to the unfinished business of the civil rights movement: moving from integration to koinonia. Sharing spaces of everyday interracial life and mission together in local places is the deeper, more beautiful and transformational vision whose absence continues to impoverish us. Nowhere is this absence seen more vividly than in the segregated Sabbath of a church which has accepted ecclesial racialization as inevitable, coming somehow to believe that we can experience God’s new creation without experiencing one another’s company as brothers and sisters. We still don’t desire one another’s company in the intimate mutuality of worshiping together weekly, reading the Bible and praying together, eating together, and ministering at the margins together as allies for the sake of the gospel.

In this respect, the hope I am holding onto for Obama’s leadership is the depth and candor of his Philadelphia speech on race and the fact that his most fundamental racial identity seems to be his being biracial. He represents a new generation of children of interracial families who have experienced the rich gifts and real challenges of finding intimacy across the divide, who refuse to choose between the cultures of their two parents. They want the best of both, see the flaws of self-sufficiency, and are willing to lose some friends along the way for the sake of their desire for something better than the old categories of who “my people” are.

To finally have a person like Obama as president, neither black nor white, may point us to what it looks like to embrace the harder, deeper work of mutuality and koinonia which is the church’s unfinished business. Our communities and congregations need to look more like him.

—Chris Rice, *codirector of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.*