

Election-night symbolism

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

November 11, 2008

Last Tuesday night, I went down to Chicago's Grant Park to witness Barack Obama's election and victory speech. At the event, I was struck by the fact that the crowd was at its loudest and most excited not when Obama and his family took the stage but earlier, when CNN projected him as the winner. There was no drama left when the networks finally called it: they waited till the West-coast polls closed, by which time the outcome had been certain for some time. Yet seeing what we already knew to be true confirmed by faraway TV anchors—who don't exactly have a pristine record on this sort of thing—was somehow at least as thrilling as being present for Obama's first speech as president-elect.

It shouldn't have surprised me to see the symbolism of CNN's "breaking" the "news" compete with and mediate the experience of the thing itself. Yes, the concrete reality of the scene at the park was remarkable. Strangers from different walks of life, invested in Obama's candidacy for same and different reasons, celebrated together as friends. It was incredible to see older black adults—who walked and stood and waited in line at an event more hospitable to younger bodies—joyfully embracing white college students. (And don't miss this [set](#) of photos, from which the above photo is taken, via [April Winchell](#).)

Yet

I found myself preoccupied by the symbolism of the location. This was the site of violent clashes between police and protesters during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Forty years after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy—on the heels of that of Martin Luther King—robbed the youth, antiwar and civil rights movements of their best hope for electorally induced change, Obama built a successful coalition around similar groups. Right where thousands voiced their isolation from

establishment politics, hundreds of thousands watched their candidate win. In 1968, Mayor Richard J. Daley and the Chicago Police Department confronted protesters with disproportionate force. In 2008, Mayor Richard M. Daley joined with the CPD in planning and executing a smoothly run celebration.

My friend Rose [participated](#) in an impromptu election-night celebration at the Lincoln Memorial, which last Tuesday more than ever conjured images of both Lincoln's and King's contributions to racial equality. The symbolism of the Lincoln Memorial is very different from that of Grant Park, if not quite contradictory: Obama represents a crowning achievement of the civil rights movement, even as his inspiring message and relative youth represent the hope to finally move on from the cultural and political divisions of the boomer generation. That's a lot to pack into one candidate and one election.

Obama's win is meaningful to many people and for many reasons. (Even a prominent conservative LDS blogger is [feeling the hope](#).) Inevitably, there will be disappointments when the realities of this pragmatic, often conventional politician's governance clash with the idealistic tone and symbolism of his campaign.

But Tuesday, the literal and the symbolic met as we both elected Barack Obama president and celebrated the real progress represented by *electing Barack Obama president*.