



BARACK OBAMA: HOPE AND POSSIBILITY
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

Barack Obama's meteoric rise from obscure Illinois state senator to Democratic nominee for President of the United States has caused many African Americans to beam, to swagger, to stand a bit more tall, to speak more hopefully about the United States of America and about racial progress. He is walking proof, for many, of the fact that "anyone" can be President. He is the recipient of the baton passed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Rev. Jesse Jackson. In accepting the Democratic nomination for President exactly forty-five years after Dr. King delivered the "I Have A Dream" speech in Washington DC, Obama is a visible symbol of racial progress.

As his candidacy has progressed, African American conversations have progressed from cautious whispers of "will they let him have this" to gleeful shouts. For some, there has been the utter suspension of critical thinking as hearts bursting with pride reach out to embrace hope, dreams and possibilities. An African American female colleague, a progressive Democrat who has voted "holding her nose" for Carter, Mondale, Clinton, Gore and Kerry says that if she has criticisms of Obama she will keep them to herself. "He is all of our son," she said. "My heart bursts with pride." The nearly 70 year old woman could hardly contain her glee as she spoke of the Obama family, of tall, regal Michelle, of the delightful daughters Malia and Sasha, and her vision of them playing on the White House lawn, rolling Easter eggs during the traditional White House Easter egg roll. It is that image, of a man of African descent living in the White House, as the most powerful human being in the world (at least as long as the United States maintains its eminence), that has people like my friend grinning, literally shimmering, with pride.

And yet if he is to win the 2008 election, Obama must be more than a symbol of racial progress. He must not only consistently demonstrate that he is the best candidate to be President of the United States, but he must be at once racial and post racial. While inspiring black pride, he must also inspire white confidence, especially the confidence of whites who have ambivalent, or even hostile, feelings about African American progress. There is, after all, the Tom Bradley effect, which suggests that whites tell pollsters that they will vote for an African American, but some cannot bring themselves to pull the lever for a person of African descent when they get to the polls. While white Americans cannot feel the same pride in Obama that African Americans do, they must feel that he offers the best set of domestic and foreign policy options for our nation.

Expectations are high for Obama, perhaps impossibly high. The night that he accepted the nomination for President, thousands had opined on what he might do. He had to define himself, said some. Outline his differences with Senator John McCain, said others. Pick up the baton being passed from civil rights leaders on the historic 45th anniversary of the March on Washington, said still others. Outline a policy agenda. Inspire. Pay tribute and offer respect to the Clintons. Mobilize Democrats who were not that sure of him. Get a post-convention bounce and get back to leading in the polls. For all his rhetorical brilliance, there were high expectations and too many tasks for one human being to accomplish in a mere forty-five minutes.

Similarly, there are so many feelings on the line in this election, so much emotion, such intensity, and such ambivalence. As the Republican Party has systematically trashed the economy, turning a Clinton-generated surplus into a war

and bailout generated debt, the choice of a change agent like Barack Obama would seem to be an obvious choice. Instead, the Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, and Barack Obama are extremely close in the polls in October, and there is a real possibility that McCain may prevail although his economic and foreign policy policies are not significantly different from those of the unpopular Bush administration. Is it race or racial ambivalence that keeps more white Democrats from fully embracing the Obama candidacy?

Even if Obama does not win the election, his candidacy shifts the racial debate in the United States and in the world. It is difficult to imagine the disappointment of a loss, especially for those who have taken the candidacy so intensely personally; it will be equally difficult to eradicate the indelible series of images and possibilities that have emerged from the Obama campaign. The self-described "big-eared guy with a funny name" has cracked open hardened hearts and offered balm to wounded souls. Even though Obama has no magic dust to erase racial economic gaps, his candidacy has offered hope, possibility and, for a season, offered an antidote to the racial stereotypes that have been so damaging and crippling for the African American community, especially African American men.