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THE JOSHUA GENERATION

Race and the campaign of Barack Obama.

by David Remnick

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Speaking at a church in Selma, Obama was not a patriarch and not a prophet but the prophesied. “I’m here because somebody marched,” he said. “I’m here because you all sacrificed for me.”

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Barack Obama could not run his campaign for the Presidency based on political accomplishment or on the heroic service of his youth. His record was too slight. His Democratic and Republican opponents were right: he ran largely on language, on the expression of a country’s potential and the self-expression of a complicated man who could reflect and lead that country. And a powerful thematic undercurrent of his oratory and prose was race. Not race as invoked by his predecessors in electoral politics or in the civil-rights movement, not race as an insistence on tribe or on redress; rather, Obama made his biracial ancestry a metaphor for his ambition to create a broad coalition of support, to rally Americans behind a narrative of moral and political progress. He was not its hero, but he just might be its culmination.

In October, 2005, two months after Hurricane Katrina, Rosa Parks died, at the age of ninety-two, in Detroit. Her signal act of defiance on the evening of December 1, 1955, her refusal to vacate her seat near the front of the Cleveland

Avenue bus in Montgomery, Alabama—what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the ultimate gesture of “I can take it no longer”—was the precipitating act of the city’s bus boycott and the civil-rights movement. For two days, her body lay in state at the Capitol Rotunda, in Washington—an honor accorded only twenty-nine times before. Then, on November 2nd, in Detroit, there was a funeral service at the Greater Grace Temple Church. Thousands lined the streets to wave farewell and sing the old anthems and hymns. Four thousand packed the sanctuary. The service lasted seven hours.

“That funeral was so long that I can hardly remember it!” Bishop T. D. Jakes, the pastor of the Potter’s House, a Dallas church of thirty thousand congregants, said. “*Everyone* was there!” Jesse Jackson, the Clintons, Al Sharpton, Aretha Franklin, and a phalanx of preachers all paid tribute to Parks. Bill Clinton reminisced about riding segregated buses in Jim Crow Arkansas—and then feeling the liberating effect of Parks’s act. On the street, a marine played “Amazing Grace” on the bagpipes, and the congregants sang “She Would Not Be Moved.”

Obama, the sole African-American member in the United States Senate, had also been invited to speak. As he sat in the pews awaiting his turn, he writes in his book “The Audacity of Hope,” his mind wandered back to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina: the news footage from New Orleans of a body laid near a wall, of shirtless young men, “their legs churning through dark waters, their arms draped with whatever goods they had managed to grab from nearby stores, the spark of chaos in their eyes.” A week after the hurricane, Obama had accompanied Bill and Hillary Clinton and George H. W. Bush to Houston, where they visited the thousands of refugees from New Orleans who were camped out at the Astrodome and the Reliant Center. One woman told Obama, “We didn’t have nothin’ before the storm. Now we got less than nothin’.” The remark was a rebuke, Obama felt, to Donald Rumsfeld and other Bush Administration officials who had given him and fellow-legislators a briefing on the federal response to the hurricane; their expressions, he recalled, “bristled with confidence—and displayed not the slightest bit of remorse.” In the church, Obama thought of how little had happened since. Cars were still stuck in trees and on rooftops; predatory construction firms were winning hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts, even as they skirted affirmative-action laws and hired illegal immigrants for their crews. Obama’s anger, which is rarely discernible in his voice or in his demeanor, ran deep. “The sense that the nation had reached a transformative moment—that it had had its conscience stirred out of a long slumber and would launch a renewed war on poverty—had quickly died away,” he wrote.

And yet when Obama got to the lectern at Parks’s funeral he betrayed no emotion, raised no words of protest. He was restrained and brief, as if taking pains to say nothing to compete with the Clintons, who had forged a close bond with the African-American community over the years, let alone the older organizers, activists, and preachers. Obama was still a relative stranger to the audience in Detroit.

“In terms of operating in the space of African-American politics, people hadn’t seen him much,” Mark Morial, a former mayor of New Orleans and the president of the National Urban League, said. “They didn’t really know who he was, where he came from, or what he was all about. You don’t come in there as a senator and try to upstage anyone or abuse the podium and give a speech that’s too good. He has to think, My presence is enough. The people who worked with Rosa Parks—this was their time to speak.”

It was only on March 4, 2007, a few weeks after he announced his candidacy for President, that Obama explicitly inserted himself in the time line of American racial politics. At the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, in Selma, Alabama, he joined older civil-rights leaders and churchmen in commemorating the voting-rights marches a generation ago. From the pulpit, Obama paid tribute to “the Moses generation”—to Martin Luther King and John Lewis, to Anna Cooper and the Reverend Joseph Lowery—the men and women of the movement, who marched and suffered but who, in many cases, “didn’t cross over the river to see the Promised Land.” He thanked them, praised their courage, honored their martyrdom. But he spent much of his speech on his own generation, “the Joshua generation,” and tried to answer the question “What’s called of us?” Life had improved for African-Americans, but “we shouldn’t forget that better is not good enough.” Discrimination still existed. History was being forgotten. Schools were underfunded, citizens left uninsured, especially minorities. People were looking for “that Oprah money” but had forgotten the need for service, for discipline, for political will.

In Selma, Obama evoked a narrative for what lay ahead, and in that narrative Obama was not a patriarch and not a prophet but—the suggestion was distinct—the prophesied. “I’m here because somebody marched,” he said. “I’m here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants.” He described the work that lay ahead for the Joshua generation and implicitly positioned himself at its head, as its standard-bearer.

And yet Obama embarked on a long, exhausting quest for the Democratic nomination, determined to avoid making race a singular theme of his day-to-day campaigning. His issues were Iraq, the economy, health care, the environment—issues with no identity attached. But as he prepared for the Democratic Convention Obama began to feel the weight of his historic distinction.

On August 28th, just hours before his speech at Mile High Stadium, in Denver, Obama had been rehearsing in a suite at the Westin Hotel. That night, he would appear before more than eighty thousand people. Now his audience was three: his political strategist, David Axelrod; a speechwriter, Jon Favreau; and the teleprompter operator. The rehearsal was mainly an exercise in comfort, in making sure that there was no awkward syntax, no barriers to clarity. Late in the speech, Obama came to a passage paying homage to the March on Washington, forty-five years earlier to the day, when hundreds of thousands of people gathered near the Lincoln Memorial to “hear a young preacher from Georgia speak of his dream.” Suddenly, Obama stopped. He couldn’t get past the phrase “forty-five years ago.”

“There was a catch in his voice,” Axelrod recalled.

Obama excused himself and took a short, calming walk around the room. “This is really hitting me,” he said. Obama told Axelrod and Favreau that he was coming to realize what a “big deal this is.”

“Usually, he is so composed, but he needed the time,” Axelrod said.

“It’s funny, I think all of us go through this,” Favreau recalled. “We’ve gone through this whole campaign and, contrary to what anyone might think, we don’t think of the history much, because it’s a crazy environment and you’re going twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And so there are very few moments—and I think it’s the same with Barack—there are very few moments when he stops and thinks, I could be the first African-American elected President.”

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Long before he ever had to think through the implications, racial and otherwise, of running for President, Barack Obama needed to make sense of himself—to himself. The memoir that he published when he was thirty-three, “Dreams from My Father,” explored his biracial heritage: his white Kansas-born mother, his black Kenyan father, almost completely absent from his life. The memoir is written with more freedom, with greater introspection and irony, than any other by a modern American politician. Obama introduces himself as an American whose childhood took him to Indonesia and Hawaii, whose grandfathers included Hussein Onyango Obama, “a prominent farmer, an elder of the tribe, a medicine man with healing powers.”

As a young man, Obama was consumed with self-doubt, trying always to reconcile the unsettling contradictions of his history. His parents married in 1960, when interracial marriage was still prohibited in almost half the states of the union. As Obama entered adolescence, in Hawaii, his father had returned to Africa and started a new family, but, at the same time, the boy was careful around his white friends not to mention his mother’s race; he began to think that by doing so he was ingratiating himself with whites. He learned to read unease in the faces of others, the “split second adjustments they have to make,” when they found out that he was the son of a mixed marriage.

“Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose—the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds,” he writes, with the wry distance of the older self regarding the younger.

Obama’s mother was an earnest and high-minded idealist, “a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for the New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism.” With Barack’s father gone, she emphasized, even sentimentalized, blackness to her son. She loved the film “Black Orpheus,” which her son later found so patronizing to the “childlike” characters that he wanted to walk out of the theatre. She’d bring home the records of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Martin Luther King. To her, “every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear.”

As a teen-ager in Hawaii, Obama suffered less from outright discrimination than from the sense that “something wasn’t quite right”; he was put off by the white girls who told him about their affection for Stevie Wonder, by the older white men who told him he was cool. Surrounded mainly by white relations and friends, Obama looked for a mentor. Holed up in his room and ignoring his homework, he read James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard

Wright, and W. E. B. Du Bois and tried to “reconcile the world as I’d found it with the terms of my birth”:

But there was no escape to be had. In every page of every book, in *Bigger* Thomas and *Invisible Men*, I kept finding the same anguish, the same doubt; a self-contempt that neither irony nor intellect seemed able to deflect. Even Du Bois’s learning and Baldwin’s love and Langston’s humor eventually succumbed to its corrosive force, each man finally forced to doubt art’s redemptive power, each man finally forced to withdraw, one to Africa, one to Europe, one deeper into the bowels of Harlem, but all of them in the same weary flight, all of them exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels. Only Malcolm X’s autobiography seemed to offer something different. His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me.

“The *Autobiography of Malcolm X*” did not turn Obama into a black nationalist or a street preacher, but it did provide a literary and personal template: the story of the young black man who flirts with dissolution and, through reading and determination, realizes his potential. It is the template of many such books, including Claude Brown’s “*Manchild in the Promised Land*.” “Junkie. Pothead,” Obama wrote. “That’s where I’d been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man.”

Obama, of course, never suffered like the young Malcolm Little or Claude Brown; Honolulu in the seventies was not Lansing in the thirties or Harlem in the forties. But the key difference was in the nature of his quest for identity. To be black was, for him, as much a matter of aspiration as of inheritance. It was an identity he had to seek out and master. When Obama shared his adolescent reading with some African-American friends, one told him, “I don’t need no books to tell me how to be black.” From then on, Obama decided to keep his explorations to himself and “disguise my feverish mood.”

Sometimes, as one reads “*Dreams from My Father*,” it’s hard to know where the real angst ends and the self-dramatizing of the backward glance begins, but there is little doubt that Obama was at sea, particularly where race was concerned. To ease that pain, to “flatten out the landscape of my heart,” he would do what kids sometimes do: he drank, he smoked grass, and, in his unforgettably offhand formulation, he did “a little blow” when he “could afford it.”

What Obama did learn in those days was the strategic benefit of a calm and inviting temperament. When his mother came to his room one day, prepared to remonstrate with him about his weak performance in school and the hazy direction that his life was taking, he flashed her, as he recalls, “a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry.” He didn’t get his back up, he didn’t yell. People, he was learning, “were satisfied as long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn’t seem angry all the time.”

The historian David Levering Lewis, who has written biographies of King and Du Bois, told me that after reading Obama’s books he had the sense of a young man almost alone in the world, trying to find a place. “The orphanage of his life compels him to scope out possibilities and escape hatches,” he said. “This very smart mother was somewhat absent, and certainly the father was, and the grandfather marched with Patton, but he was not a rock. Obama is in the world almost solo and he learns to negotiate.”

When he arrived, in 1979, as a freshman at Occidental College, in Los Angeles, Obama wanted “to avoid being mistaken for a sellout.” He hung around with the “politically active black students, the foreign students . . . the Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets.” At night, in the dorms, they “discussed neocolonialism, Frantz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. . . . We were alienated.”

After Obama graduated from Columbia (he’d transferred for his last two years), he set out for Chicago, in search of work as a community organizer. He would lie awake at night thinking of “romantic images” of the civil-rights movement, the “grainy black and white” scenes unspooling in his mind. He sought admission somehow into that distant world of seriousness and commitment—a connection to “the Moses generation.” He craved authentic experience, a sense of service and belonging, and a racial identity: “That was my idea of organizing. It was a promise of redemption.”

Methodically, Obama went about meeting important members of the older generations on the South Side, African-American elders who could advise him and, subtly, approve of him. Timuel Black, an activist in his late eighties who has published oral histories of the black migration from the South, told me that Obama came to him eager to soak up everything he could about the politics, churches, and neighborhoods of the city. But, even as Obama found his way as a community organizer, working for tenants’ rights and job training at the Altgeld projects, on the far South Side, he never quite stopped seeing in the faces of young black men reminders of his own past, and the direction he might have

taken:

One of them could be me. Standing there, I try to remember the days when I would have been sitting in a car like that, full of inarticulate resentments and desperate to prove my place in the world. . . . The swagger that carries me into a classroom drunk or high, knowing that my teachers will smell beer or reefer on my breath, just daring them to say something.

Obama went to Harvard Law School, where he became the first African-American elected president of the *Law Review*. Studious, disciplined, ambitious, Obama received, in 1991, the honor of being asked to speak at the annual banquet of the Harvard Black Law Students Association, an occasion at which a prominent judge or attorney is usually featured. One professor at the banquet, Randall Kennedy, was impressed by the deference that a ballroom of students, so full of sap and self-regard, paid the young man.

As Kennedy followed Obama's career, he was struck by the uniqueness of his background and how it may have affected both his temperament and his public appeal. "He's operating outside the precincts of black America," Kennedy said. "He is growing up in Hawaii, for God's sake. And then, when he comes to the mainland and tries to find his way, he has to work at it. He does have to go find it. He is not socialized like other people. I can't help thinking that he might have thought it a burden at the time, but maybe some of the things he missed out on were a benefit to miss out on. For one thing, he didn't absorb the learned responses, the learned mantras and slogans, the learned resentments of that time that one got in college."

David Levering Lewis told me that he read the memoir as if Obama were a densely layered character in a coming-of-age novel. "To say he is constructing himself sounds pejorative, but he is open to the world in a way that most Americans have not had the opportunity to be," Lewis said. "That is something that outsiders have to do. But, as he evolves, the African-American pathway is the pathway to service, to success, and to a more complete self-definition."

3

For Obama, the politics of race took on a less abstract cast once he returned to Chicago and settled in Hyde Park, with his wife, Michelle. Hyde Park and Kenwood make up a South Side neighborhood that takes in the University of Chicago and is as distinctive as George H. W. Bush's Greenwich, Connecticut. By the middle of the twentieth century, the area was home to Jews (some of whom came from Europe to escape anti-Semitism) and blacks who were starting to enter the middle class. The neighborhood today is racially mixed: of the forty-nine thousand residents, fifty-two per cent are black, thirty per cent are white, nine per cent are Asian, four per cent are Hispanic.

A measure of self-regard is also part of the Hyde Park atmosphere. "It's a magical community," John Rogers, Jr., a close friend of the Obamas, who runs Ariel Investments, said. "When you remember that there have been just three African-American senators since Reconstruction, it tells you something that two of them, Barack and Carol Moseley Braun, came from Hyde Park." (The third, Edward Brooke, was from Massachusetts.) Louis Farrakhan's stained-glass-fronted house is a few blocks from Obama's, and so is Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition headquarters. Muhammad Ali once lived nearby. "Hyde Park is the real world as it should be," Obama's friend and adviser Valerie Jarrett told Peter Slevin, of the *Washington Post*. "If we could take Hyde Park and we could help make more Hyde Parks around the country, I think we would be a much stronger country."

Over all, the neighborhood is liberal—Jesse Jackson says that the area has been a nexus of "social activism and also progressive, multiracial, multicultural politics for as long as I've been here, since 1964"—and that quality has made it an occasional target for conservative disdain. An article in *The Weekly Standard* observed that Obama's neighbors looked "like NPR announcers." And yet there are complexities within liberal Hyde Park—especially in the black community—that have played a role in Obama's evolving political life.

Running in 1996 from the South Side, Obama won a seat in the Illinois State Senate, but three years later, when he tried to take on Bobby Rush, a four-term Democratic incumbent in the House of Representatives, Obama got a lesson in Chicago politics. The First Congressional District included not only Hyde Park but far less affluent neighborhoods like Englewood and Woodlawn. Rush, a former leader of the Black Panthers in Chicago, made easy work of Obama. Jesse Jackson said that Rush "was and is an icon in the civil-rights movement" in Chicago and had established himself, first on the City Council and then in Congress. "So this relatively new guy, moving on him, didn't sit well," said

Jackson, who supported Rush.

Rush did not hesitate to mock Obama as inauthentic—and, by inference, insufficiently black. “He went to Harvard and became an educated fool,” Rush told the *Chicago Reader* during the campaign. “Barack is a person who read about the civil-rights protests and thinks he knows all about it.” State Senator Donne Trotter, who was also vying for Rush’s seat, told the same reporter that “Barack is viewed in part to be the white man in blackface in our community. You have only to look at his supporters. Who pushed him to get where he is so fast? It’s these individuals in Hyde Park, who don’t always have the best interest of the community in mind.” Rush’s tactics were brutal, and they were effective: Obama lost the primary by thirty points.

“I was completely mortified and humiliated,” Obama told me while he was still only considering a Presidential run. “The biggest problem in politics is the fear of loss. It’s a very public thing, which most people don’t have to go through. Obviously, the flip side of publicity and hype is that, when you fall, folks are right there, snapping away.”

An essential part of what revived Obama’s political prospects was a Hyde Park-centered circle of younger black businesspeople who held him close, advised him, and helped to support his future campaigns. The circle includes John Rogers, Jr., who knew Michelle Obama’s brother, Craig, when they played basketball at Princeton; Valerie Jarrett, the former board chairman of the Chicago Stock Exchange and a close adviser; and Marty Nesbitt, the president of the Parking Spot, a major parking-lot company.

“We all have dinner together, we take vacations together, play golf and basketball together, our kids go to school together,” Nesbitt told me. It is a circle linked in the way of boomer and post-boomer American élites: intersecting paths at top colleges and professional schools; crisscrossing wires of mutual professions, friends, charities, Little League teams. Nesbitt’s wife, Anita Blanchard, is an obstetrician who delivered Obama’s two daughters. Michelle Obama worked for Jarrett. And so on. The business friends saw in Obama the kind of intelligent, idealistic, yet moderate politician who represented them in a way that the older generation of Hyde Park leaders no longer could. They introduced Obama to the Commercial Club crowd downtown, to more friends of means beyond Chicago. This was part of what Obama was talking about when he referred to “the Joshua generation”—the successful, talented, networking, and, in many cases, idealistic daughters and sons who benefitted from struggles that they could not have known firsthand.

In 2004, Obama won a seat in the U.S. Senate. By the time he published his second book, “*The Audacity of Hope*,” two years later, he’d been a sensation as the keynote speaker at the Democratic Convention and sparked talk of a Presidential run. “*Audacity*” is a more conventional and careful book than “*Dreams from My Father*.” It is a largely programmatic text, a reasoned manifesto rather than a memoir, but it does manage to reveal that Obama’s sense of identity had broadened and found its level; he presents himself as a mature man settled on a sense of mission. He writes that he has known the slights experienced by any black man in America—the couple who toss him the keys outside a restaurant, thinking that he is the valet; the police car that pulls him over for no reason—and is under no illusion that a “post-racial” world is imminent. And yet he also sees the profound Americanness of his complex origins, even their political potency.

“As the child of a black man and a white woman,” he writes, “I’ve never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe.” His was not a typical African-American identity or experience, but it described someone who could conceive of becoming President of the United States.

4

Despite the small number of African-Americans holding office since Reconstruction in districts and states where blacks were not in a majority, there has always been talk—at times derisive or farcical; at times quixotic, even messianic—of a black President. As early as 1904, George Edwin Taylor, a newspaperman born in Arkansas, accepted the nomination of the all-black National Liberty Party to run, but even much later in the century the prospect of a black Presidency was almost always a discussion held in the spirit of dreaming. “We’d wonder, How long?” Martin Luther King’s press secretary in Chicago, Don Rose, recalled in an echo of the old movement chant, “How long? Not long!” In 1967, members of the National Conference for New Politics tried to persuade King to run on a national ticket with Benjamin Spock. King refused, knowing that he would never win and might damage his reputation in the process.

Since then, a number of black men and women have run, but none with serious prospects of winning and a few for purely symbolic reasons: among them were the comedian and writer Dick Gregory and the Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, in 1968; the Brooklyn congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, in 1972; King's follower Jesse Jackson, in 1984 and 1988; the conservative activist and former diplomat Alan Keyes, in 1996 and 2000; and Al Sharpton and Carol Moseley Braun, in 2004.

Some of those candidacies had concrete results—Chisholm introduced the reality of a viable black candidate; Jackson won a total of fourteen primaries and caucuses in his two runs for the Democratic nomination—yet in the early twenty-first century few blacks believed that a black candidate would attract enough white votes to win the office.

The realm of popular culture, meanwhile, provided a shifting register of the attendant yearnings and anxieties. In Irving Wallace's Johnson-era best-seller, "The Man," Douglass Dilman, a black senator from the Midwest, becomes President after the incumbent, the Speaker of the House, and the Vice-President die. Dilman is full of self-doubt ("I am a black man, not yet qualified for human being, let alone for President"); he gets impeached and eventually wins acquittal by a single vote.

In the seventies, Richard Pryor, when he was hosting a variety show on network television, took on the subject as a matter of comic flight: once a black man was in office, would he be loyal to his race or to his country? Elected the fortieth President of the United States, President Pryor opens his first press conference calmly and with only a hint of racial pride. Before long, though, he allows that he will consider appointing the Black Panther leader Huey Newton as director of the F.B.I. ("He knows the ins and outs of the F.B.I., if anybody knows") and intends to get more black quarterbacks and coaches into the N.F.L. It's the same gag about black power and white anxiety that's at the center of "Putney Swope," the 1969 Robert Downey, Sr., film, in which a seemingly mild-mannered black advertising executive is elected to chair the board of a white-run firm, whereupon he throws out all but one token white guy, replaces the rest with militant blacks, and renames the firm Truth and Soul, Inc.

Before the country could realize a black Presidency, it seems, popular culture conceived it—first as comedy, then as commonplace. Morgan Freeman, as President Tom Beck, prepares the world for an all-destroying comet in "Deep Impact"; in "24," President David Palmer, played by Dennis Haysbert, wards off nuclear attack—and after he is killed, his brother becomes President. In Hollywood's imaginings, over the past decade, a black President is no longer a fantastical premise; it's an incidental plot point, a casting choice.

In 2006, David Axelrod, a former political reporter for the Chicago *Tribune* who had become a political strategist and helped run Obama's Senate campaign, began dropping hints around town. He told friends that, while "usually the politician chooses the moment, sometimes the moment chooses the politician." John Lewis, the Georgia congressman, told me how he had brought Obama to Atlanta three years ago for an event celebrating his sixty-fifth birthday, and, as they walked the streets together, blacks and whites would come up to Obama and tell him to run. "And when I introduced him that night," Lewis went on, "I said that one day this man would be President of the United States."

In November of 2006, at the offices of a Washington law firm, Obama held one of a series of secret brainstorming sessions about his chances. He had been touring the country, promoting "The Audacity of Hope," and, at each stop, he'd received encouragement. But could he overcome the charge of inexperience? Could he challenge the Clinton machine? After a while, according to the *Times*, Broderick Johnson, a prominent D.C. lawyer and lobbyist, asked, "What about race?"

Obama replied, "I believe America is ready," and little more was said on the subject. Obama could not run a campaign like Jackson's, which had relied heavily on a black base and sought a "rainbow coalition" of left-leaning ethnics, gays, and union members; instead, he would aim at a notionally limitless coalition organized around a center-left politics.

"I don't think Barack's candidacy was like any other candidacy," Axelrod said. "He was the first African-American to come along as a legitimate contender whose candidacy was viewed in the broadest terms." In his Senate race, Obama had campaigned hard and successfully in southern-Illinois towns nearer to Little Rock than to Chicago, and in white areas of northwest Chicago where Harold Washington had been booed in 1983, when he first ran for mayor. "Barack would come back from these white towns and say, 'They're just like my grandparents from Kansas,'" Axelrod said. "That's one of his gifts: there is no room he walks into where he doesn't feel comfortable and make the people feel that way. It's both his personality and his background—one contributes to the other. There's no doubt that being biracial contributes to a sense that he doesn't compartmentalize people by race or ethnicity or background."

Even black leaders who were initially wary of him came to recognize his advantages. “His background helped,” Al Sharpton said. “He had a primary understanding of peoples that we may not have had. He could meet with me and then with a representative from Kansas and understand the nuances as well as the content of both conversations.”

On January 21, 2007, Obama attended the N.F.C. championship game between the Chicago Bears and the New Orleans Saints, at Soldier Field, in Chicago. Invited to the suite of Linda Johnson Rice, the chairman and C.E.O. of *Ebony*, Obama mingled with other guests, including Mark Morial. Obama admitted that he was thinking about running for President—by then an open secret—and, when Morial asked him what his plan was, Obama said that he had to win the caucus in Iowa, an almost entirely white state. “If I do that, I’m credible,” he said.

Three weeks later, on the steps of the Old State Capitol building in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln began his 1858 Senate campaign, Obama announced his candidacy, admitting to “a certain audacity” in his venture. He hardly mentioned race in his speech except in the context of Lincoln and his struggle to unite a divided nation.

Axelrod, who had been the successful strategist for black mayoral candidates in Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Cleveland, became Obama’s chief strategist. Most crucial, Axelrod had been the guiding hand for Deval Patrick, who grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes housing projects, on the South Side of Chicago, and who, in 2006, won election as the first African-American governor of Massachusetts. Axelrod was not a believer in the modish talk of “post-racial” politics, but he was convinced that times had changed—“barriers were breaking down.”

In a gesture that signalled that Obama was going to be a cautious and highly disciplined candidate, not least on race, he and his advisers decided to disinvite Jeremiah Wright, his friend and pastor at the Trinity United Church of Christ, on the South Side, from delivering the invocation. Wright is a pivotal character in “Dreams from My Father,” a welcoming elder who exerted a powerful spiritual influence over Obama. He’d been essential to Obama’s education in Christianity, in social issues, in race, and in the ways of the South Side. Although few people knew yet about Wright’s penchant for incendiary rhetoric in his sermons, he had already been quoted in the press in ways that Axelrod and Obama knew might alienate voters in, say, Ames, Iowa, or Manchester, New Hampshire.

Curiously, Obama’s initial support did not come from African-Americans. There were obstacles, especially, in the black establishment. “Barack came to my kitchen,” Vernon Jordan, an attorney who had been president of the National Urban League and became a close adviser and friend to the Clintons, said. “My wife, Ann, and I gave him his first fund-raiser in D.C. when he ran for the Senate. He came to my house, and we had this long four-hour dinner, and I said, ‘Barack, I am an old Negro who believes that to everything there is a season—and I don’t think this is your season.’ I was so wrong. Anyway, I said, ‘If you do run, as I think you will, I will be with Hillary. I am too old to trade friendship for race. But, if you win, I will be with you.’ ”

In the early days of the primary campaign, Clinton led Obama among blacks by more than twenty points. “They didn’t know him, a), and, b), they thought it was a long shot,” Jesse Jackson said. “Black voters are comparatively conservative and practical.” In 1984, Jackson had struggled to get support from African-Americans who didn’t think he had a chance. “Most of my relationships and labor allies went with [Walter] Mondale,” he said.

With some exceptions, most civil-rights-era leaders and politicians, including John Lewis and Andrew Young, were lining up behind Clinton—out of loyalty and a belief that she would win. Lewis, for one, could not imagine himself spurning a Clinton. In August, 1998, after Bill Clinton went on television to explain his relationship with Monica Lewinsky—an unprecedented humiliation—Lewis invited him to Union Chapel on Martha’s Vineyard, to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the March on Washington. “He didn’t want to come, but I convinced him,” Lewis told me. “And, when the time came, I got up to introduce him and said, ‘Mr. President, I was with you in the beginning and I will be with you in the end.’ We both cried. . . . How could I abandon a friend like that?”

The Reverend Joseph Lowery, a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a leader of the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, told an audience in Atlanta in January, 2007, that “a slave mentality” still haunted those African-Americans who counselled Obama to wait his turn. He compared those who discouraged Obama to the white ministers in Birmingham who told Martin Luther King a half century ago that the time was not ripe for civil dissent. “Martin said the people who were saying ‘later’ were really saying ‘never,’” Lowery said. “The time to do right is always right now.”

The dilemma was plain. “These were people who knew Bill and Hillary and thought well of them and couldn’t quite believe this young guy with a foreign name had a chance to get elected,” the civil-rights activist Julian Bond said. “After two Jackson campaigns, after Al Sharpton’s campaign, after Shirley Chisholm, it seemed that these symbolic

racism hadn't delivered much. The promise had been that these candidates would extract some kind of benefits from the winners and the black cause would be advanced. That turned out to be less true than they had hoped."

Obama was disappointed that black leaders did not rally to him in greater numbers, but in Iowa he was engaged in a much more immediate project—to prove himself capable of winning white votes. And, as he campaigned in the state, his appeal was less like Jesse Jackson's in 1984 and more like Gary Hart's. His earliest support came from what strategists call "better-educated, upper-status whites," mainly college-educated, younger people who appreciated his outspoken opposition to the invasion of Iraq when he was still a state senator.

Obama was extremely careful about racial politics. He spoke out on a prolonged and ugly racial conflict in Jena, Louisiana, but did not join a march. "If I were a candidate, I'd be all over Jena," Jesse Jackson said at the time. According to a South Carolina paper, Jackson thought that Obama, in his restraint, was "acting like he's white." But Sharpton, who led demonstrations in Jena, said that he came to understand Obama's thinking. "There are different traditions in the African-American community, different styles," Sharpton said. "Obama doesn't come out of the Martin Luther King or Jesse Jackson tradition of activists. Obama comes from the mainstream electoral tradition, the Doug Wilder tradition."

On January 3, 2008, Obama won Iowa. His victory speech that night was emblematic of the subtle way that he would treat race:

You know, they said this day would never come. They said our sights were set too high. They said this country was too divided, too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose. But on this January night, at this defining moment in history, you have done what the cynics said we couldn't do. . . . We are one people. And our time for change has come.

An astonishing rhetorical move: Obama calls on the familiar cadences and syntax of the black church. He gestures toward what everyone is thinking about—the launching of a campaign that could lead to the first African-American President. "This was the moment when we tore down barriers that have divided us for too long," he says. "When we rallied people of all"—wait for it—"parties and ages." The displacement is deft and effective. We know that he means racial barriers—we can *feel* it—but the invocation is more powerful for being unspoken. The key pronoun is always "we," or "us." The historical fight for equal rights comes only at the end of a peroration on national purpose:

Hope is what led a band of colonists to rise up against an empire; what led the greatest of generations to free a continent and heal a nation; what led young women and young men to sit at lunch counters and brave fire hoses and march through Selma and Montgomery for freedom's cause. Hope—hope is what led me here today.

The civil-rights struggle is deftly recast in terms not of national guilt but of national progress: the rise of the Joshua generation. What the African-American left once referred to as the "black freedom struggle" becomes, in Obama's terms, an American freedom struggle. African-Americans watched Obama's victory speech in Des Moines with a sense of wonder. Obama proved that he had a chance, and the black vote started to migrate steadily in his direction. A coalition in the Democratic Party, between antiwar whites and blacks—perhaps something even wider than that—was now conceivable.

"Iowa was amazing and I was there," Cliff Kelly, a host on WVON, Chicago's leading black talk-radio station, said, laughing. "When Barack came out onstage with his wife and two gorgeous daughters, all of them looking like they were out of central casting, there were only five black people there in the room. Them and me."

Until that moment, how many African-Americans—how many Americans—allowed themselves to believe that a black President was possible? Had the world really changed that much? Still, some African-American politicians believed that Hillary Clinton's win, five days later, in New Hampshire was proof that Iowa was little more than a freakish victory in a caucus state. In South Carolina, a black state senator, Robert Ford, told a reporter that Obama's chances of getting the nomination were "slim," and if he were to head the Democratic ticket "we'd lose the House and the Senate and the governors and everything. I'm a gambling man. I love Obama, but I'm not going to kill myself." Just three days before the vote, a Mason-Dixon poll indicated that, in the race against Clinton and John Edwards, Obama would get only ten per cent of the white vote.

Obama won overwhelmingly in South Carolina, taking about a quarter of the white vote and nearly all the black vote. African-American leaders started to reconsider their loyalties as their constituencies abandoned the Clintons. Compounding the trend, Bill Clinton offended some blacks by suggesting that Obama's victory in South Carolina was

like Jesse Jackson's. "I had an executive session with myself," John Lewis recalled. He phoned Bill and Hillary Clinton to tell them that he loved them but now he was going with Barack Obama. "I realized that I was on the wrong side of history," he said.

5

Don Rose, a Chicago political strategist who is close to David Axelrod, is sure that the Obama campaign intended to deal with race the way his client Jane Byrne dealt with gender in her campaign for mayor, in 1979. "We never once said anything about her being a woman," Rose said. "I had her dress as plainly as possible. She had bad hair, which had been dyed and dried over a lifetime, and she sometimes had it fixed twice a day. We had her wear a dowdy wig to look as plain as possible. We discouraged feminist organizations from endorsing her. I didn't want the issue of her being a woman to come up in the least. We knew that women who would identify with her, the gender-centric vote, would come our way without anyone raising it. You don't have to highlight what's already obvious."

It was not by accident that Jackson, Sharpton, and other potentially polarizing figures were seen so rarely on platforms with Obama during the campaign. "The rule was: no radioactive blacks," Rose said. "Harold Ford, fine. Jesse Jackson, Jr., fine. But Jesse, Sr., and Al Sharpton, better not." Rose noted that Obama rarely referred directly to his race in his stump speeches. "When Barack came back from Europe and he was using that line about how he didn't look like all the other Presidents on American currency, his numbers went down," Rose said. "He got whacked and the campaign noticed. You don't raise it, that's the axiom, and you let it work. The less said, the better."

Sharpton, for one, says that he understood that Obama was "trying to build a bipartisan, ecumenical coalition" and did not try to force himself on Obama. In fact, when Sharpton first encountered him, Obama was running for the Senate. They met before appearing at a session of the black caucus of the Democratic National Committee and divided up their rhetorical responsibilities. Obama said that he was making a straight policy speech that night, and Sharpton replied, "Tomorrow night, I'll take care of the brothers and sisters."

Once the Presidential campaign accelerated, Obama explicitly addressed the subject of race mainly when it was demanded of him. While he was campaigning at a town meeting in Carson City, Nevada, a woman in her late sixties named Christy Tews told him that she wanted to vote for a Democrat who would win in November.

"Let's get down to brass tacks here," she said. "We have never elected a black man in our country."

"Yes, that's a good point," Obama said, wryly. "I've noticed that."

Then Obama normalized the question, somehow, and thus normalized the prospects of his winning. "Will there be some folks who probably don't vote for me because I'm black?" he said to Tews. "Of course, just like there'd be some people who won't vote for Hillary because she's a woman or wouldn't vote for John Edwards because they don't like his accent. But the question is, can we get a majority of the American people to give us a fair hearing?"

A fair hearing became far more difficult with the release, in March, of videotapes of Jeremiah Wright in full denunciatory mode: "Not God bless America! God damn America!" Over and over they played. The Clinton campaign wondered how its own opposition-research operation had failed to uncover the tapes earlier, when, they told themselves, they could have put a quick end to the Obama campaign.

There was, of course, a context to "God damn America." Like Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, who fought the rise of Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction and told his black parishioners that they had every right to believe that God was a Negro, Wright saw himself as—and Obama understood him to be—an inheritor of the prophetic tradition, not an accommodationist, and hardly a politician. His jeremiads were meant to rouse, to accuse, to shake off dejection. At times, he called on the familiar metaphor of American blacks as modern-day equivalents of the ancient Hebrews, a people marked by terrible suffering and displacement. Wright was part of a tradition well known to millions of churchgoing African-Americans. But that would never be explained adequately on cable television. The campaign knew that voters would hear those videotapes and be encouraged to wonder about Obama's associations and allegiances. Underneath his welcoming demeanor, was he like a cartoon version of Wright, full of condemnation and loyal only to his race? Would he bring the militants to the White House like the executive in "Putney Swope"?

According to Axelrod, Obama had wanted to give a speech about race in Iowa, "but the staff said it seemed like a non sequitur." With the Clinton campaign making good use of the Wright affair, however, Obama had to act. It was

plain that damage control, in the form of sound bites and surrogate interviews, would not work. Obama decided to deliver a major address on race, to be called “A More Perfect Union,” on March 18th, at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia.

For three days, Obama campaigned by day and then dictated and wrote the speech until the early-morning hours. “I slept well, because I knew that Barack knew *exactly* what he wanted to say,” Axelrod recalled.

In his speech, Obama began by trying to broaden the country’s understanding of the Reverend Wright’s activities as pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ: he was a former marine, he said, who had built a large and passionate ministry that represented “the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gangbanger.” Obama disagreed with Wright’s most inflammatory and indefensible remarks, which represented “a profoundly distorted view of this country.” In his view, despair, the Biblically unforgivable sin, was at the heart of Wright’s mistake. But he refused to condemn him outright:

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Obama was in the midst of a high-stakes rhetorical balancing act. He empathized not only with his embittered preacher but also with the embittered white workers who have seen “their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor” and cannot understand why their children might be bused across town or why a person of color has a leg up through affirmative action “because of an injustice that they themselves never committed.” Obama signalled to all sides that he heard them, that he “got it.” A white Southerner, even Bill Clinton, could not dare to do that in a speech on race, and Jesse Jackson, whose tradition had been more about the rhetoric of grievances and recompense, never *would*. Obama’s ability to negotiate among the sharply disparate perspectives of his fellow-citizens was at the heart of his political success. Perhaps when people speak of Obama’s “distance,” they mean just this capacity to inhabit different points of view—a mastery that can seem more anthropological than political. Obama allowed that black anger about past and present wrongs was counterproductive; he also pointed to the way that American politics had been shaped since the Nixon era by the exploitation of white anger in the South and elsewhere.

Just as important as the message was the tone of the messenger. Obama’s distinctively cool personality continued to serve him and his candidacy. The civil-rights-era activist Bob Moses told me, “His confidence in himself—and his peacefulness with himself—came through in a way that can’t be faked. You are under too much pressure to actually adopt a persona. You can’t do it under that pressure and not have it blown away. People said he couldn’t afford to be the angry black candidate, but the point is that he is not angry. If he were angry, it would have come out.” Indeed, in the sixties, Moses, as he led voter-registration drives in Mississippi, was himself known for those same qualities—his intelligence and even temper.

“The speech helped stanch a real frenzy,” Axelrod said. “Barack turned a moment of great vulnerability into a moment of triumph. He said, ‘I may lose, but I will have done something valuable.’ He was utterly calm while everyone was freaking out. He said, ‘Either they will accept it or they won’t and I won’t be President.’ It was probably the most important moment of the whole campaign.”

Studs Terkel, who compiled oral histories about race and the Depression and was, at ninety-six, a Chicago institution, spoke to me a week before his death. Terkel said that Obama’s political guile under pressure reminded him of Gene Tunney, the heavyweight champion of the mid-nineteen-twenties, who used craft, more than brawn, to defeat Jack Dempsey twice. “The guys on the street, the mechanics and shoe clerks, saw Tunney as an intellectual, but he won,” Terkel said. “Obama is like that. He’s one cool fighter.”

The speech in Philadelphia did more than change the subject. It was daring in its ambition, as it not only contextualized the Reverend Wright—at least, for those who were willing to be persuaded—but also posed Obama himself as the break with history, the focal point of a new era, embracing America itself for all its tribes, for all its historical enmities and possibilities. In effect, it congratulated the country for getting behind him. Wright, Jackson—they were leaders of the old vanguard. Obama would lead the new vanguard, the Joshua generation.

6

Obama has proved to be not only a skilled campaigner but a lucky one—a requirement for victory. In July, good fortune, in the person of Jesse Jackson, handed him an incident that would provide him some useful distance from the past.

According to black leaders who know both men well, Jackson resented that a younger, more moderate politician, a man with no experience of the civil-rights struggle and with an unusual entry into African-American life, was heading toward the office that he had twice failed to reach. That month, Jackson was preparing to appear on Fox television when he was recorded on an open mike criticizing Obama for his “faith-based” comments about the need in some black families for greater personal responsibility. Speaking sotto voce to another guest, Jackson also said that Obama had been “talking down to black people.” He made a slicing gesture with his hand and said, “I wanna cut his nuts out.”

Obama’s talk about responsibility was the kind of thing that black preachers across the country spoke of on Sunday mornings. What seemed to irritate Jackson was the double discourse, the way that Obama’s rhetoric was, by design, being overheard by white audiences that might understand it not as brotherly sympathy but, rather, as lofty reproach.

“Barack would go to various groups and spell out public policy,” Jackson told me. “He’d go to Latino groups and the conversation would be about the road to citizenship and immigration policy. He’d go to women and talk about women’s rights, *Roe v. Wade*. But he’d gone to several black groups, talking about responsibility, which is an important virtue that should be broadly applied, but, given our crisis, we need government policy, too. African-Americans are No. 1 in voting for him, because he excited people. But we’re also No. 1 in infant mortality, No. 1 in shortness of life expectancy, No. 1 in homicide victims.”

Fox played the tape on the air, and Jackson had to apologize. This, in turn, allowed Obama to accept the apology. Jackson looked petty and jealous, Obama looked magnanimous.

“I was shocked by the language, but I knew Jesse had the feeling that Obama played to white Americans by criticizing black Americans, for not doing enough to help ourselves,” Julian Bond told me. “Whether he intended it, I don’t know, but I am sure Jesse provided Obama that sort of Sister Souljah moment.”

Even many of Obama’s early critics acquired a grudging respect for his strategic sense. The broadcaster and author Tavis Smiley, who has a huge African-American audience, had persistently criticized Obama for “pivoting” on issues like gun control and the death penalty and had warned him against “selling his soul or surrendering his soul” to get elected. And yet, Smiley told me, “Each time Obama and I talked during the campaign, maybe a half-dozen times on the phone, we aired our positions and differences, but it always ended with him saying, ‘Tavis, I gotta do what I gotta do and I respect the fact that you have to do what you have to.’ We confirm our love for each other and then we hang up.” Obama did not represent the prophetic tradition: he was not Frederick Douglass or Bishop Turner, Martin or Malcolm. He was a pragmatist, a politician.

7

In 1995, Colin Powell, after his reputation was burnished by the first Gulf War—and long before his reputation was tarnished by the second—was uniquely positioned to become the first African-American President. His reputation as a soldier and as an adviser to Presidents had been unimpeachable, and his life story, as he described it in his autobiography, “My American Journey,” was no less appealing, if less tortured, than Obama’s in “Dreams from My Father.” Powell put himself forward in the old-fashioned way: the man of accomplishment “who just happens to be black.”

For a few weeks, as his book sat atop the best-seller list, Powell discussed a run for the 1996 Republican nomination with his family and his inner circle of aides and friends. Bill Clinton, political tacticians told them, lacked Powell’s particular strengths: his maturity, his solidity in foreign affairs; in a center-right country, the scenario went, Powell might beat the incumbent.

“Some in my family, in my circle of acquaintances, were concerned that, as a black person running for office, you’re probably at greater personal risk than you might be if you were a white person,” Powell told me. “But I’ve been

at risk many times in my life, and I've been shot at, even." Powell thought about the question for a few weeks and then, he said, he realized, "What are you doing? This is not you. It had nothing to do with race. It had to do with who I am, a professional soldier, who really has no instinct or gut passion for political life. The determining factor was I never woke up a single morning saying, 'Gee, I want to go to Iowa.' It was that simple. So the race thing was there, and I would've been the first prominent African-American candidate, but the reality is that the whole family, but especially me, had to look in the mirror and say, 'Is this what you really think you would be good at? And do you really want to do it?' And the answer was no."

Since leaving the Administration of George W. Bush, in 2005, after serving as Secretary of State, Powell has showed his political hand with care, sometimes through background interviews with favored journalists, sometimes through former aides. But in the past year he could hardly avoid mention of the Presidential race. Powell said that he had watched the campaign closely and met with both Obama and John McCain within a week of each other, in June. "I told them the concerns I had with each of their campaigns," Powell recalled, "and I told them what I liked about them. I said, 'I'm going to be watching.' "

Over the summer, Powell saw the campaign unfold and, increasingly, he was dismayed by the ugly rhetoric on the Republican side. "It wasn't just John," Powell said. "Frankly, very often it wasn't John; it was some sheriff in Florida introducing—I can't remember who the guy was introducing, whether it was Governor Palin or John—who said, 'Barack *Hussein* Obama.' That's all code words. I know what he's saying: he's a Muslim, and he's black." Powell chose to accept a standing invitation from Tom Brokaw and, on October 19th, he appeared on "Meet the Press."

"John knew what my concerns were with respect to the Party and with respect to continuing, without much change, the policies of the Administration," Powell said. His endorsement of Obama—precise, eloquent—came as no surprise to McCain. "He knew all of my concerns," Powell said. The endorsement was, for some conservatives, like Kenneth Duberstein, Ronald Reagan's last chief of staff, "the *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval."

In the days that followed, the calls, letters, and e-mails that Powell received were mostly positive. The Pakistanis in his local supermarket appreciated what he had to say about the use of "Arab" or "Muslim" as a pejorative. Some critics said that his endorsement of Obama was an act of "disloyalty and dishonor." Rush Limbaugh was only the loudest of the right-wing voices to denounce him. Limbaugh felt no compunction about saying that Powell's only reason for endorsing Obama was race. "The Rush Limbaugh attacks and other attacks from the far right generate a lot of heat but not much light," Powell said. The racist letters he's received are generally unsigned and with no return address. "But I've faced this in just about everything I've ever done in my public life," Powell said. "It's there in America, and it can't be denied that there are people like this."

Powell said that Obama had run a completely new kind of campaign when it came to race. "Shirley [Chisholm] was a wonderful woman, and I admire Jesse [Jackson] and all of my other friends in the black community," he said, "but I think Obama should not be just—well, 'They were black, and he's black, therefore they're his predecessor.'"

"Here's the difference in a nutshell, and it's an expression that I've used throughout my career—first black national-security adviser, first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs, first black Secretary of State. What Obama did, he's run as an American who is black, not as a black American. There's a difference. People would say to me, 'Gee, it's great to be the black Secretary of State,' and I would blink and laugh and say, 'Is there a white one somewhere? I am the Secretary of State, who happens to be black.' Make sure you understand where you put that descriptor, because it makes a difference. And I faced that throughout my career. You know, 'You're the best black lieutenant I've ever seen.' 'Thank you very much, sir, but I want to be the best lieutenant you've ever seen, not the best black lieutenant you've ever seen.' Obama has not shrunk from his heritage, his culture, his background, and the fact that he's black, as other blacks have. He ran honestly on the basis of who he is and what he is and his background, which is a fascinating background, but he didn't run just to appeal to black people or to say a black person could do it. He's running as an American."

I asked Powell if Obama's election would signal the rise of a "post-racial" period in American history. "No!" he said. "It just means that we have moved farther along the continuum that the Founding Fathers laid out for us two hundred and thirty-odd years ago. With each passing year, with each passing generation, with each passing figure, we move closer and closer to what America can be. But, no matter what happens in the case of Senator Obama, there are still a lot of black kids who don't see that dream there for them."

A few weeks before Election Day, as Obama widened his lead over McCain, I visited New Orleans. The last time I was there, the city had been underwater. Since then, Katrina had obliterated what remained of George Bush's reputation and promised to shadow the Presidential race of 2008.

Obama had pledged to run a fifty-state campaign, but even his enormous war chest would not pay for futility. Louisiana is rarely a scene of Presidential campaigning, and the state went for Bush in 2000 and 2004. Nevertheless, African-Americans in New Orleans—in Treme, in Mid-City, in the Lower Ninth—watched Obama's campaign obsessively. They were listening to Tom Joyner, on WYLD; Michael Baisden, on KMEZ; Jamie Foxx, on Sirius. On Canal Street, vendors sold the same Obama T-shirts that I'd seen on 125th Street in Harlem. The most popular paired Obama and Martin Luther King. Kids who normally would be wearing oversized throwback sports jerseys wore Obama shirts instead. There were Obama signs in the windows of barbershops, seafood and po'boy joints, and people's homes.

One night, I went out for a beer with Wendell Pierce, a New Orleanian who made his name as an actor playing the homicide cop Bunk Moreland on the HBO series "The Wire." Pierce is in his mid-forties. His parents' neighborhood, Pontchartrain Park, was washed away in Katrina, and he has spent months trying to redevelop the area. Pierce picked me up on Canal Street: he is built like a fireplug and has a double-bass voice. We drove to Bullet's, a working-class bar on A. P. Tureaud Avenue, in the Seventh Ward. There we met Mike Dauphin, a Vietnam veteran, who sat at our table for a long time talking about his childhood in Jim Crow New Orleans, riding in the back of the bus and going to segregated schools and working at American Can and U.S. Steel. When Katrina came, he was sheltered first at a hospice and then, with thousands of others, at the Convention Center, downtown, "where we had almost no water or food for five days." He could hardly wait to vote, and he was talking in the same terms as so many older people around town: "I never dreamed in my lifetime that I would see a black man as President of the United States. I was a kid growing up under Jim Crow. We couldn't drink out of the same water faucet—but now it seems that America has changed."

Yet you also heard from many people a great wariness, a kind of defense against white self-congratulation or the impression that somehow Obama's election would automatically transform the conditions of New Orleans and the country. In Treme, a neighborhood adjacent to the French Quarter and arguably the oldest black community in the country, I met Jerome Smith, a veteran of the Freedom Rides in Alabama and Mississippi. These days, Smith runs youth programs at Treme Community Center. On a sunny fall afternoon, we sat on the steps of a former funeral home on St. Claude Avenue that was now operating as the Backstreet Cultural Museum, an apartment-size collection of artifacts from the black bands that played Mardi Gras and second-line parades.

"Obama winning the Presidency breaks a historical rhythm, but it does not mean everything," Smith said. "His minister did not lie when he said that the controlling power in this country was rich white men. Rich white men were responsible for slavery. They are responsible for unbreakable levels of poverty for African-Americans. Look at this bailout today, which is all about us bailing out rich white men. And there are thousands of children from this city who have gone missing from New Orleans. Who will speak for them? Obama?"

"Obama is the recipient of something, but he did not stand in the Senate after he was elected and say that there is a significant *absence* in this chamber, that he was the only African-American and this is wrong. He is no Martin Luther King, he is no Fannie Lou Hamer"—who helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, in 1964. "He is a man who can be accommodated by America, but he is not my hero, because a politician, by nature, has to surrender. Where the problems that afflict African-Americans are concerned, Obama can't go for broke. And the white people—good, decent white people—who voted for him just can't understand. They don't have to walk through the same misery as our children do."

Smith was angry but, as an activist contemplating a mainstream leader, not entirely misguided. It's inevitable that euphoria will fade. The commemorations will fade. And what will remain is a cresting worldwide recession, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a crumbling infrastructure, a rickety, unjust health-care system, melting polar ice caps—to say nothing of the crisis that comes from out of nowhere.

Colin Powell said that, after a prolonged period in which American prestige abroad has dwindled, Obama would have a "honeymoon period," which will give him an opportunity to "move forward on a number of foreign-policy

fronts.

“That is also something that will perish or diminish over time, as he faces problems and crises,” Powell continued. “If the excitement of the first black President is great, it’ll diminish if he doesn’t do something about the economy, or the economy worsens, or if we suddenly find ourselves in a crisis. As Joe Biden inarticulately said the other day, ‘Something’s coming along.’ No one knows what it is. . . . The next President will be challenged, and how the President responds to that challenge will be more important than what his race happens to be at that moment. But, for the initial period of an Obama Presidency, there will be an excitement, an electricity around the world that he can use.”

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Forty-nine years ago, a young woman named Charlayne Hunter graduated third in her class from Henry McNeal Turner High School, in those days the most prestigious high school for African-Americans in Atlanta. Charlayne wanted to be a journalist. The University of Georgia had the strongest journalism program in the state, but the university did not accept blacks. Segregation was not something that teen-agers thought to battle in 1959, so Charlayne started making other plans, applying to schools in the Midwest. Yet something was happening in the South: sparked by incidents like Rosa Parks’s historic refusal in Montgomery and the rise of young preachers like Martin Luther King in Atlanta, a movement was developing. And so, at the urging of some black leaders in town, Charlayne and Turner High School’s valedictorian, Hamilton Holmes, challenged segregation at the University of Georgia by sending in applications for admission. Their applications were soon rejected. Then a legal team led by the N.A.A.C.P.’s Constance Baker Motley, and including such young lawyers as Vernon Jordan, championed their case, and, two years later, a U.S. District Court judge ruled that Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes were indeed qualified for admission to the University of Georgia and must be allowed to matriculate without delay. They started school in Athens in the winter of 1961. For months, they heard racist taunts as they walked to class. Charlayne had bricks hurled through her windows. But she and Holmes stayed on and they studied and made many friends, and their case became yet another landmark of the civil-rights movement, along with the marches in Selma and Montgomery—and the church bombings and the beatings, and the murders of Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King still to come.

Over the past four decades, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, as she has been known for many years, has worked at this magazine, at the *Times*, for PBS, and for NPR, for which she is now a reporter living in Johannesburg. She is sixty-six. When it was becoming clear a few weeks ago that Barack Obama was on his way to winning the Presidency, we had a series of exchanges about the election. Hunter-Gault was especially impressed by the young Senator’s calm when the political and personal attacks came; she said that it reminded her of what her own family, and the families of so many activists in the civil-rights movement, had instilled in their children as a code of behavior. “Try as I can, I am unable to separate my civil-rights past from my present as a journalist because both of my lives converge at this moment,” she wrote in one note, “because without the movement I wouldn’t be where I am today, and neither would Barack Obama. But because of the movement I was not one of those who thought, Not in my lifetime, not least because I had seen and felt the power of young people, with only their convictions as weapons, tear down the walls of the decades-long system of segregation. And for the first time since the movement I saw a new generation of young people fighting in the same way for change that would bring back the idealism that fuelled our struggles in the streets.” Her sense of triumph, though, was not without anxiety. “Anyone who lived through the civil-rights movement with the threats we were exposed to (in my case, mobs outside my otherwise all-white dormitory shouting ‘Kill the nigger’), and with the losses we suffered—Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and then the ultimate loss, our leader, Martin Luther King—and now to hear reports of people in Republican audiences responding to political attacks on Obama with words like ‘Kill him’: we would be living on another planet not to worry for the young husband, father, and new President of the United States. But, like King, who warned us that ‘I may not be there with you,’ we have to know that we cannot be prisoners of our fears.”

Just a few minutes before eleven last Tuesday night, when Barack and Michelle Obama and their daughters walked out on the stage at Grant Park, and everyone around was screaming, chanting, and waving flags, the long campaign came to an end. Joy was in the faces of the people all around me, there was crying and shouting, but Obama seemed to bear a certain gravity, his voice infused not with jubilation but with a sense of the historical moment.

“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer,” he began.

Obama had done it one last time. Having cast himself in Selma twenty months ago as one who stood on the “shoulders of giants,” as the leader of the Joshua generation, he hardly had to mention race. It was the thing always present, the thing so rarely named. He had simultaneously celebrated identity and pushed it into the background. “Change has come to America,” Obama declared, and everyone in a park remembered until now as the place where, forty summers ago, police did outrageous battle with antiwar protesters knew what change had come, and that—how long? *too* long—it was about damned time. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN RITTER, AFTER JAMES ROSENQUIST, “PRESIDENT ELECT” (1960-61); PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEFT: STEVE SCHAPIRO, AP, BRUCE DAVIDSON/MAGNUM, EVE ARNOLD/MAGNUM, PLATON

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