

CHAPTER 4 COMMENTARY

As American as Barack Obama

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By early March, 2008, Arizona Senator John McCain had wrapped up the Republican nomination for president. At the end of the month, he launched his first campaign ads of the general election featuring the slogan: "The American President Americans have been waiting for." On the one hand, the ad could be viewed as politics as usual. Appeals to patriotism are often a prominent element of Republican political rhetoric. On the other hand, the slogan took on a deeper, implicit cultural meaning. It seemed to raise a question about whether the leading contender for the then undecided Democratic presidential nomination, Illinois Senator Barack Obama, really counted as an "American." Some commentators viewed the ad, in fact, as another sophisticated manipulation of the "race card," in a subtle way activating latent racial bias against a Black candidate. *Mother Jones* magazine's blog went so far as to denounce the ad as "vulgar and creepy" in the way it seemed to question not just Obama's patriotism but his fundamental "Americanness."

Of course, this particular McCain ad was but one of many ways that racial misunderstanding, tension, and division emerged during the campaign and after Obama's election as the 44th President and first African-American President of the United States. One hardly knows where to begin. Obama was variously characterized as no different than Jesse Jackson in successfully winning the South Carolina campaign, mounting a "fairy tale" effort to secure the presidency, unprepared to answer the phone in the White House at "3 a.m. in the morning," giving good speeches like Martin Luther King but not able to legislate like an LBJ, nothing more than an affirmative action candidate, and as tied to a hopelessly anti-White minister in the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. And, bear in mind, all of these variously racialized digs at Obama came from the camp of his main Democratic challenger! The deluge of racist imagery we have seen since he took the Oath of Office, from postcards featuring watermelons on the White House lawn, through a cartoon of police officers shooting a berserk chimp and leaving a nation in need of "Someone else to write the next stimulus bill," to pictures of Obama as a loin-cloth-clad witch doctor with

a bone through his nose promoting "Obama Care: Coming Soon to a Clinic Near You," underscores the enduring power of overt anti-black racial stereotypes in America.

If we raise our sights beyond the specifics of the campaign itself and more recent legislative debates, three larger and arguably nested questions suggest themselves: First, how should we understand Obama's electoral success in the light of still apparently widespread negative perceptions about African-Americans and their loyalty to the United States; second, will African-Americans, like Obama, ever be seen as fully American by their White fellow citizens; and third, does the election of Obama signal the arrival, or at least the near-term onset, of a post-racial America?

Dasgupta and Yogeeswaran review and specify how their research as well as that of others on racial attitudes shed light on Obama's victory, the challenges he currently faces, and the likelihood that his presidency will fundamentally redefine conceptions of who is American. Although they give us few absolute answers to these key questions, they illuminate well how research on implicit beliefs factor into the modern politics of race.

Among the first points Dasgupta and Yogeeswaran establish is that Blacks are not at the top of the list of those who are viewed at present as constituting the image of a patriotic American. Indeed, despite growing talk of diversity and a rhetoric of multiculturalism, they point to numerous ways in which America is understood first and foremost as White. Rather than embracing an understanding of Americanness that reflects a fusion or a mosaic of peoples and cultures, the common assumption, they suggest, is that people become American by undergoing, in the language of sociologists, a process of Anglo-conformity.

This assumption about who is American, when viewed in light of the persistence of negative stereotypes about African-Americans, they argue, suggests that candidate Obama had a very high and distinct set of challenges to overcome. In effect, they suggest, Obama faced special pressure to escape both specific negative images of Blacks and an expectation that Blacks are less patriotic than White Americans. Given these conditions, the mechanism or strategy for success, they argue, is to allay voter doubts on stereotype relevant dimensions and to outperform one's rivals. In numerous ways, in hindsight, we can now say that the Obama campaign cleared these hurdles.

Perhaps the most provocative part of Dasgupta and Yogeeswaran's essay comes in their speculations on whether Obama's election will produce a broadened conception of who is American. They take a somewhat ambivalent position. At one level, they suggest that the malleability of stereotypes and the re-framing power of counterstereotypical examples like Obama point to a meaningful potential for substantial positive change. At another level,

however, they are acutely mindful of the potential for, to borrow Gordon W. Allport's phrase for it, "fence mending." That is, to the extent Obama is successful and seen as rising above the stereotypes, he may come to be seen as the exception that proves the rule. He is allowed to "escape" through a hole in the fence of anti-Black racial stereotypes, a hole that is swiftly and neatly repaired once Obama, the individual case, is allowed through to the other side.

At this stage I still believe, to borrow a phrase, in the audacity of hope. In the historic Philadelphia speech on race, Obama said: "I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy." Change is a process and Obama's electoral success has not only crystallized the potential for racial progress extant in a particular moment (i.e., electing a Black president) but has nudged us a little farther down the road of deeper racial healing (i.e., broadening the definition of who fundamentally is understood as American).

To be sure, as the review by Dasgupta and Yogeewaran reminds us, at present it is unclear whether Obama's success will permanently broaden who is seen as truly American or whether he will come to be seen as a quite special exception, with little bearing on the deeper cultural and social roots of racial division in America. My own inclination is to suggest that we eschew the most cynical and pessimistic analyses in favor of guarded optimism. We do have a uniquely propitious confluence of circumstances at present. Enormous positive change in racial attitudes and relations has occurred in the United States, and these are not superficial changes. There are ample grounds—particularly in the light of his intelligence, skill, and character—to expect Obama will prove to be an adroit politician able to sustain a high level of voter support. Thus, despite today's evidence of quite real racial division and tension and of other short-term political setbacks of the moment, I still think it fair to say that Obama's America remains pointed in the direction of laying down the burdens of race, although we have a long, long way yet to go.