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Barack Obama and the New Black Politics

Race, Post-Black Politics, and the Democratic Presidential Candidacy of Barack Obama

Carly Fraser

On February 10, 2008, Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. As a post-black candidate, Obama did not once make reference to the historic fact that he would be the first African American to have a real chance of winning the democratic nomination during his announcement. However, race would become a recurring theme throughout the primary season, repeatedly acknowledged by the media, his opponents, his surrogates, and eventually by the candidate himself.

Keywords: Barack Obama, Bradley effect, caucus, Hillary Clinton, media, Michelle Obama, post-black politics, primary, racial identity, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, superdelegates, Super Tuesday

On February 10, 2007, Senator Barack Obama stood before supporters on the steps of the Illinois State House and announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. During the course of a stirring speech, he never acknowledged the historic nature of his candidacy as an African American. As one reporter noted, “not once did the words ‘black’ or ‘African American’ pass Mr. Obama’s lips.” Yet, as the events of his candidacy unfolded, race proved to be a recurring issue, repeatedly acknowledged by
the media, his opponents, his surrogates, and eventually by the candidate himself.

This article will trace the role of race in the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama during the Democratic primary season from February 10, 2007, through his attainment of the Democratic nomination. I will inspect the role that Obama’s background and racial identity have played in his run for office as well as his place in the phenomenon of “post-black” politics. Polling numbers, media coverage of race-related issues in the campaigns, speeches given by Obama and his opponents, and academic articles and op-ed pieces on Obama’s role as a black politician all provide evidence on how race has played a central role in the 2007–2008 primary season.

Barack Obama’s parents, Ann Dunham and Barack Obama Sr., fell in love and married in a civil ceremony while studying at the University of Hawaii in the early 1960s. Dunham, a white woman who was raised in Kansas, and Obama Sr., who was born and raised in Kenya, came from vastly different backgrounds, and married at a time in America when interracial marriages were rare. U.S. census data shows that in 1960, only .4 percent of all marriages were between men and women of different races, compared to 2.2 percent today. Shortly after the marriage, on August 4, 1961, Barack Obama Jr. was born.

When Obama was still a young child, his father left Hawaii and his family to pursue a scholarship at Harvard. In his memoir, Dreams from My Father, Obama describes his struggle with identity, growing up biracial while raised by a single white mother. Dunham made attempts to instill in her son a sense of pride in his African-American heritage by reading to him about heroic acts by African Americans in the struggle for civil rights. The stories his mother told made him feel that “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.”

Because Obama spent several years of his childhood in Indonesia, the home of his mother’s second husband, and the rest in Hawaii, he was somewhat sheltered from the experiences of being black in mainstream America. Yet, as he grew older he would grow more conscious of his differences. Growing up biracial at a time when few others shared this experience often caused anger, loneliness, and confusion for the young Obama.

Obama describes his first real reckoning with his racial identity when he came across a magazine article that told the story of a black man who had tried to alter his skin color: “When I got home that night from the embassy library, I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all of my senses and limbs seemingly intact, looking as I had
always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me.” Although he states that “this anxiety would pass” he goes on to say that his “vision had been permanently altered”: “I began to notice that Cosby never got the girl on I Spy, that the black man on Mission Impossible spent all his time underground. I noticed that there was nobody like me in the Sears, Roebuck Christmas catalog that Toots and Gramps sent us, and that Santa was a white man.”

As he approached adulthood, Obama describes a continuing struggle with his racial identity. He frequently discussed racism with African-American and biracial friends he met as a high school student on scholarship at Punahou, a prestigious Hawaiian prep school, and later as a college student at Occidental College in Los Angeles and Columbia University in New York, schools he chose in part because of their proximity to black neighborhoods. He sought out writings by Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, and other African-American figures. Dreams from My Father describes Obama’s young adulthood as a time of deep reckoning with his identity, amplified by the death of his father in Kenya in 1983.

Obama entered Harvard Law School in the late 1980s, where he would become the first African-American editor of the Harvard Law Review. This experience would give Obama the opportunity to write Dreams from My Father. It is not clear whether or not Obama had political aspirations as a law student, but his choice of topic is an interesting one for a politician of the post-black model. Obama’s autobiography centers on his search for racial identity, clearly defining himself as an African American who at times felt anger and confusion about the state of race relations in America. Yet, Obama writes in a way that emphasizes the complexities of his background and his desire to embrace all aspects of it. This message of reconciliation is one that appeals to a wide variety of readers.

It is impossible to understand the role of race in Barack Obama’s candidacy without examining the idea of “post-black” or “postracial” politics and the evolution of African-American politics. At the end of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, African-American activists began a steady move into the arena of electoral politics. The leaders who came forward at this time defined their politics through their racial experiences, often referred to as a “race-based” political model. Marable cites the fact that white Americans have been
reluctant to vote for an African-American candidate as a factor in pushing black politicians in this direction. By downplaying race and racial conflict in favor of a nonthreatening rhetoric of unity, white voters would be made more likely to vote for a black candidate. Since the publication of *Beyond Black and White* in 1995, public opinion has changed somewhat, showing that whites today are more open-minded than in the past about the race of a candidate. In 1997, a Gallup poll found that 94 percent of Americans would vote for an African-American candidate. Yet, it is still clear that many white voters are still reluctant to vote for a black candidate who does not fit into the post-black model.

African-American candidates in recent years have adopted the post-black model to political success. The roots of the postracial model can be seen in the campaign and politics of Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor. Elected in 1983, Washington was a charismatic leader who was able to build a coalition of African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, Jewish, low-income, and liberal white voters to usurp the power of the Cook County Democratic Party machine, led by boss Eddie Vrdolyak. Washington passed away from a heart attack while in office, and unfortunately, the Cook County machine returned to power shortly thereafter. Yet, before his death, Washington promoted a message of progressive reform and racial unity, as a young Barack Obama working as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side took note. Bearing witness to Washington’s administration and use of post-black rhetoric undoubtedly had an effect on the aspiring young politician.

More recently, younger black politicians have adopted the post-black or postracial model. Cory Booker, the thirty-eight-year-old mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and Deval Patrick, who won the 2006 Massachusetts gubernatorial campaign by an overwhelming margin, have, like Obama, been classified as being a “part of an emerging generation of politicians who came up after the major battles of the civil rights movement and say they have outgrown its approach.”

Early on, Obama saw the positive reaction he received from whites when he presented himself as non-threatening. In *Dreams from My Father* he describes the tactic he learned to use as a teenager: “People were satisfied so 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.”

This early realization may have molded the kind of politician Obama would become. The idea of racial reconciliation over racial anger has been key to his political career. The black-white breach in public opinion when it comes to matters of race is a key factor in this choice of message, for Obama and other post-black politicians. Polling has consistently shown that white Americans are more
likely to think that the United States is largely beyond racial inequality and discrimination than black Americans, and are therefore less perceptive to rhetoric on race-based inequality.\textsuperscript{12} Although Obama has described how the words of Malcolm X resonated with him as a young man, for him to emulate Malcolm’s anger would be to distance himself from many mainstream white voters—because this breach exists.\textsuperscript{13} As Ama Mazama stated in a guest editorial in the \textit{Journal of Black Studies}, “Obama’s appeal among white Americans, it seems, rests on his perceived ability to transcend race—that is, not to be a Black candidate but simply an American one.”\textsuperscript{14}

In 2004, Obama positioned himself as a postracial candidate on the national stage during his speech at the Democratic National Convention, where he famously ended his remarks with the words, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America—there’s the United States of America. There’s not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.”\textsuperscript{15} Yet, Obama has been careful not to imply that his message of unity means that America has overcome racial division, as he wrote in his 2006 book \textit{The Audacity of Hope}:

> When I hear commentators interpreting my speech to mean that we have arrived at a “postracial politics” or that we already live in a colorblind society, I have to offer a word of caution. To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters—that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country and largely self-inflicted. We know the statistics: On almost every single socioeconomic indicator, from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership, black and Latino Americans in particular continue to lag far behind their white counterparts. In corporate boardrooms across America, minorities are grossly underrepresented; in the United States Senate, there are only three Latinos and two Asian members…and as I write today I am the chamber’s sole African American. To suggest that our racial attitudes play no part in these disparities is to turn a blind eye to both our history and our experience—and to relieve ourselves of the responsibility to make things right.

These words of caution are important because they make it clear that Obama has a profound commitment to the African-American community, despite that fact that racial issues are not central to his political message.

Obama’s non-race-based rhetoric gained him early support among liberal whites; however, black Americans were less willing to immediately support his candidacy when he announced that he would be running for president. African-American political leaders initially hesitated in endorsing Obama, due in part to the generational division in political philosophy between the race-based politics grounded in the civil rights movement and Obama’s role as a postracial candidate. Reverend Al Sharpton, for example, was skeptical of Obama’s ability to understand the needs of black voters. Shortly after Obama’s
announcement, Sharpton stated, “Just because you are our color doesn’t make you our kind... It’s not about his genealogy, it’s about his policies... What is it that you’re going to represent?”

Scholar Cornel West also called on Obama to speak out more forcefully on issues of race. Former presidential candidate Jesse Jackson criticized Obama publicly for not calling more attention to the Jena 6, a group of young black men arrested on attempted murder charges in Jena, Louisiana for the beating of a white student after three nooses were hung from a tree on their school’s grounds in 2006. Obama had released a statement stating that he felt that the charges were inappropriate, but did not have any extended response to the arrests. One South Carolina newspaper reported that Jackson accused Obama of “acting like he’s white” regarding the incident; Jackson later said he did not recall making the statement.

Mainstream African-American voters were also reluctant to support the candidate. One question raised frequently was whether or not Obama was “black enough” to win the support of African-American voters. Obama’s white mother, Hawaiian and Indonesian upbringing, and Ivy League education made many African Americans skeptical about his ability to represent their needs. Obama himself has stated he was “rooted in the black community, but not defined by it.” In November of 2007, only 50 percent of black Americans felt that Obama “shared their values,” while only 41 percent of blacks with a high-school education or less saw Obama “as a part of the black community.” Many questioned if Obama could truly understand the needs of black Americans, given that his father had been a voluntary immigrant to the United States, rather than a descendant of the involuntary migration of the transatlantic slave trade.

The popularity of former President Bill Clinton among many African Americans posed another challenge for Obama in gaining the support of black voters. Often referred to as America’s “first black president” (a name bestowed on him by African-American Nobel and Pulitzer Prize–winning writer Toni Morrison), Bill Clinton enjoyed high approval ratings among black Americans due to the appointment of several African Americans to government positions, his support of affirmative action, and his launch of a race initiative during the second term of his presidency to create a national dialogue.

However, the actual positive impact of President Clinton’s policies on black Americans is debatable. Scholars like Monty Pillawsky have accused Clinton’s gestures toward African Americans as purely symbolic and have criticized his attempts at centrist triangulation, which resulted in a crime bill and welfare reform that did more to hurt than to help black Americans, particularly those most in need. Nevertheless, when Hillary Rodham Clinton, the former first lady and senator...
from New York, entered the Democratic race, it was evident that much of her husband’s popularity among African Americans also applied to her. Early polling showed that African-American voters favored Clinton 60 percent to Obama’s 20 percent.21

While Obama’s background may have been difficult for many black voters to identify with, his wife Michelle’s more conventional background made her a key voice in speaking to African-American communities. Born Michelle Robinson, the candidate’s wife was raised on the predominantly African-American South Side of Chicago by working-class parents. As an undergraduate she attended Princeton, a predominantly white Ivy League school, where her white freshman year roommate’s parents were so “horrified” at the idea of having a black roommate they tried to have their daughter’s room reassigned. Michelle went on to major in sociology with a minor in African-American studies.22 In her senior thesis, “Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community,” Michelle wrote of the challenges facing black American college students: “I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my white professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong. Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be black first and a student second.”23

Her choice of thesis topic shows that issues of race were very much a part of Michelle Robinson’s consciousness. Her experiences as the wife of a politician have been no different. When Obama had to minimize race to fit into the postracial model, it was Michelle who spoke to black audiences about how her husband would be the best candidate to represent their needs. Campaigning in Atlanta in January 2008, Michelle Obama spoke to a crowd of African Americans, addressing the issue of race head-on: “I know that the life I’m living is still out of reach for too many women. Too many little black girls. I don’t have to tell you this. We know the disparities that exist across this country, in our schools, in our hospitals, at our jobs and on our streets…. If my husband were here, he’d tell you that inequality isn’t a burden we have to accept, but a challenge to overcome.”24 Michelle Obama’s straightforward, no-nonsense approach to campaigning for her husband was crucial in gaining support for her husband’s candidacy in primary states with large black electorates.25

Soon after the announcement of his candidacy, Barack Obama would be in a position to address black voters on March 4, 2007, the forty-second anniversary of the Selma Voting Rights March. The media presented this event as a “battle” or “showdown” for the African-American vote, since Obama would be making a speech to commemorate the event at Selma’s Brown Chapel AME Church and
Hillary Clinton would be giving a speech at the nearby First Baptist Church, with husband Bill at her side.²⁶

Obama used this opportunity to relate his experience to that of the African Americans in his audience:

> A lot of people been asking, well, you know, your father was from Africa, your mother, she’s a white woman from Kansas. I’m not sure that you have the same experience. And I tried to explain, you don’t understand. You see, my Grandfather was a cook to the British in Kenya. Grew up in a small village and all his life, that’s all he was—a cook and a house boy. And that’s what they called him, even when he was 60 years old. They called him a house boy. They wouldn’t call him by his last name. Sound familiar?²⁷

The words of the candidate’s speech and the ease with which he addressed his audience helped to diminish some of the speculation over Obama’s “blackness.” The image of an African-American presidential candidate speaking on the historic site and his call to black voters to take action presented Obama as a politician who had an investment in the black community. Although his opponent’s parallel speech was well received, there was some speculation over whether or not Clinton’s words pandered to the African-American audience, as she at times affected a southern accent and described going to hear Martin Luther King Jr. as a teenager, although in her autobiography she described her support for Goldwater’s run for president in 1964, a candidate who opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act.²⁸ The combination of these factors contributed to Obama’s rise in the polls among African-American voters. The momentum had begun before the Selma appearance, with polls showing Obama over Clinton 44 to 33 percent among African-American voters in the week before, but the upcoming primary states would show support for Obama grow even stronger.²⁹

The election season’s first caucus was held on January 3, 2008, in Iowa. With a predominantly white population (93 percent), Iowa would be a test of how Obama’s message of change and post-black rhetoric had played with white voters. Entrance polling demographics showed that Obama won 33 percent of the white vote in Iowa, over Clinton’s 27 percent and Edwards’s 24 percent. Polling also showed that most black voters in Iowa were willing to support Obama over the other candidates. Seventy-two percent of African-American caucus-goers supported Obama, while Clinton only received 16 percent and Edwards 8 percent.³⁰ Iowa was a significant turning point for the candidate, for it showed that he had the ability to attract white voters in Middle America in large numbers over two well-known and popular white candidates.

Between the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries, comments made by Hillary Clinton would serve to further damage her popularity among African-American voters. Obama’s charismatic rhetorical style, youth, and message of unity had drawn comparisons to
Dr. King, as well as to President Kennedy. A frustrated Clinton responded to the comparisons in a January 7 Fox News interview, saying: “Dr. King’s dream began to be realized when President Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act . . . . It took a president to get it done.”

Although it was unstated, the implication appeared to be that Clinton was to Johnson as Obama was to King; as she used it to reinforce her charge that Obama was merely a speechmaker while she was an action-taker. There was much debate over whether or not Clinton’s comments diminished the legacy of Dr. King. The media focused heavily on Clinton’s comments, and Obama called it “an unfortunate remark” that he believed offended many people. Historical evidence does show that President Johnson was instrumental in passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet, as John Nichols pointed out in an online article in *The Nation*, “her comment came across as precisely the sort of crude and self-serving interpretation of history that Americans expect from the lesser of our leaders. And that it was. By so casually referencing the complex role that civil rights agitation played in forging racial progress, she invited the firestorm that has come.” As more African-American voters began to support Obama, Clinton’s comments regarding President Johnson and Dr. King resonated negatively with those black voters (and voters of other races as well) who were still undecided, increasing Obama’s momentum in the polls.

Comments made by Bill Clinton on the morning of the New Hampshire primary were also criticized as being racially charged. Visually upset over the fact that television pundits were overwhelmingly predicting that Obama would shortly become the Democratic nominee and that Hillary Clinton’s presidential run, after a third-place finish in Iowa, was coming to an end, Clinton railed against what he classified as Obama’s negative tactics and the consistency of his position against the war. He went on to state, “Give me a break. This whole thing is the biggest fairytale I’ve ever seen.” Coming immediately after Hillary Clinton’s comments on Dr. King and President Johnson, the issue of race was ignited once again as commentators asked whether Clinton’s comments implied that Obama’s historic candidacy was a “fairytale.” Clinton denied that interpretation of his words, stating that he was only referring to Obama’s stance on Iraq, but these comments once again raised questions about the Clintons’ relationship to the black community.

Heading into the New Hampshire primary on January 8, 2008, following his success in Iowa, Obama was favored to win in most polls. The Rasmussen poll showed Obama leading Clinton 37 percent to 30 percent. Like Iowa, New Hampshire was another state where the majority of voters were whites (the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 95.8 percent of the population of the state is white, while African Americans make up only 1.1 percent). In the media, Obama was
predicted to not only win the state primary, but also the entire Democratic nomination. Yet, once the votes were counted in New Hampshire, Clinton won the state with 39.1 percent of the vote over Obama’s 36.5 percent and Edwards’s 16.9 percent.38

One explanation for the discrepancy between the polling and the actual result is what is known as the Bradley effect. In 1982, Tom Bradley ran for governor of California. If he won, he would become the first African-American governor of the state, and polls showed that he was favored to do so by overwhelming margins. Bradley’s white opponent, George Deukmejian, trailed him by double digits. Yet, on Election Day, Bradley lost. Similar trends presented themselves in the 1989 mayoral race between David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani (Dinkins would win, but by far less of a margin than polls predicted), the Virginia gubernatorial race between Douglas Marshall and Douglas Coleman that same year, and the North Carolina senatorial race between Harvey Gantt and Jesse Helms. A look at polling returns in these cases showed that those voters who had identified as “undecided” voted overwhelmingly for the white candidate, suggesting that these voters were unwilling to tell pollsters that they supported the white candidate, for fear of appearing racist, or they felt that both candidates were equally capable, but in the privacy of the voting booth could not bring themselves to vote for the black candidate.39

The recent elections of Cory Booker in Newark and Deval Patrick in Massachusetts seemed to suggest that the Bradley effect has diminished in recent years, owing to an increasingly progressive white electorate. However, the results of the 2008 New Hampshire primary call into question if the effect was at play in the state. It is possible that undecided white voters, once they entered the voting booth, were influenced by underlying prejudices that prevented them from voting for Obama—a factor that would have been less of an issue in the more public caucus process in Iowa, where fellow community members may question their racial open-mindedness. Alternatively, it may have been the fact that women turned out in unexpected numbers, motivated by the prospect of losing their chance to elect the nation’s first female president.40 There is also speculation that the negativity toward Clinton by the media, the moment of emotion she showed at a public event in the state, and the sexism exhibited by men at a Clinton appearance shouting “iron my shirt” also played a role in increasing sympathetic female turnout for Clinton at the polls. This combination of factors should be taken into account when analyzing the disparity between the New Hampshire polling and election returns.

New Hampshire proved that the road to the nomination would be neither short nor easy for Obama, yet he had a chance to make a strong showing in the upcoming South Carolina primary. That
elevation, on January 26, 2008, would be the first time in the primary season that a state with a substantial African-American population would go to the polls. Demographically, the primary voters were 55 percent black and 43 percent white. With both Obama and his wife Michelle campaigning heavily in the state, Obama won the primary with 55.5 percent of the vote, over Clinton by almost 30 percentage points. An overwhelming 78 percent of black voters chose Obama over Clinton and Edwards.

Once it was clear that Obama had the support of the majority of black voters over Clinton, his opponents shifted their rhetoric from portraying him as “not black enough” to portraying him as “too black.” This process began with comments made by Bill Clinton. After Obama’s sweeping win in the state, Clinton spoke to reporters after a rally, saying, “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina in ’84 and ’88. Jackson ran a good campaign. And Obama ran a good campaign here.” The comments were largely criticized, since they appeared to minimize Obama’s win as a consequence of the high percentage of African Americans in the state. Connecting Obama with Jackson presented him as a race-based candidate rather than a post-racial candidate. While Jesse Jackson stated publicly that he had no problem with the comparison, Obama spoke out against the statement, calling it a “certain brand of politics” where “anything is fair game.” Whether or not Clinton’s comments should be considered racist for diminishing the importance of states with large black populations, the message of divisiveness was clear, and it would become more prominent as the race continued.

The Super Tuesday primaries on February 5, 2008, would present a different kind of racial challenge for Obama. Several states voting that day, among them California, New Mexico, New York, and New Jersey, have high Latino populations, raising questions over whether Obama would have trouble courting Hispanic votes due to the popularly held view on the existence of a black–brown divide in American politics. The actual existence of this divide has been debated. Political scientist Fernando Guerra has argued against this view, saying, “It’s one of those unqualified stereotypes about Latinos that people embrace even though there’s not a bit of data to support it… In Los Angeles, all three black members of Congress represent heavily Latino districts and couldn’t survive without significant Latino support.” Yet, other scholars have argued otherwise. Author Earl Hutchinson has argued that “tensions between blacks and Latinos and negative perceptions that have marred relations between these groups for so long unfortunately still resonate,” predicting shortly before Super Tuesday that “there will still be reluctance among many Latinos to vote for an African American candidate.”
Although results from Super Tuesday showed that Clinton did win much of the Hispanic vote, the results were more nuanced than most media reports would indicate. Obama showed strong support among Hispanic voters in Connecticut and New Mexico.\textsuperscript{48} These complexities make sense, as the term “Hispanic,” created by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 1970s, encompasses a wide range of Americans with Spanish surnames who do not necessarily share similar values, nationalities, or experiences. However, the fact that many Latino voters supported Clinton helped her to remain in the race. Super Tuesday ended with Obama in the lead in the delegate count, yet Clinton was close enough to justify her continued presence in the race.\textsuperscript{49}

With a nominee still unselected after the Super Tuesday primaries, the MSNBC televised debate moderated by journalist Tim Russert on February 26 was highly anticipated as the two remaining candidates both tried to position themselves as the presumptive nominee. Halfway into the debate, Obama was asked to account for the fact that Louis Farrakhan, the controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, had recently endorsed him in his bid for the presidency. Russert first asked Obama if he accepted the support of Farrakhan, to which Obama responded, “I have been very clear in my denunciation of Minister Farrakhan’s anti-Semitic comments. I think they are unacceptable and reprehensible. I did not solicit this support. He expressed pride in an African American who seems to be bringing the country together. I obviously can’t censor him, but it is not support that I sought.”

After this response, Russert pressed further, asking Obama if he rejected Farrakhan’s support. When Obama again failed to use the word “reject,” Russert again brought up Farrakhan’s record of anti-Semitism. Clinton then interjected to suggest that Obama should “reject” rather than simply “denounce.” Obama handled the situation by turning it into a question of semantics, stating that he did not see any real difference between the words “reject” and “denounce,” “but if the word ‘reject’ Senator Clinton feels is stronger than the word ‘denounce,’ then I’m happy to concede the point, and I would reject and denounce.”\textsuperscript{50}

The idea that black political figures must publicly denounce black controversial figures like Farrakhan has been prominent for several years, and has no equivalent in white electoral politics. Marjorie Valbrun provided a possible answer to why the “Farrakhan Litmus Test” has become so prominent: “Maybe it’s because some white people will always need black leaders to denounce controversial (read: threatening) figures in order to feel comfortable with the very notion of black leadership…. Maybe black people have a hard time denouncing—at the command of whites—other black people, especially those who despite their worst characteristics, have also done some good for the larger black community.”\textsuperscript{51}
The double standard in calling for Obama to denounce Farrakhan was made clear on February 27, when Republican candidate John McCain received the endorsement of evangelist John Hagee, who had made public statements claiming that Hurricane Katrina was God’s punishment for sin in New Orleans (specifically homosexuality), that the Quran has a clear “mandate” to kill Christians, and that women should “submit” to the lead of their husbands. Yet, on his Sunday morning political program, *Meet the Press*, Russert, who had pressed Obama on the Farrakhan issue at the debate just days before, ignored a reference made about the Hagee endorsement.

In early March, race would again be injected into the media dialogue on the Democratic race with comments made by former Democratic vice presidential candidate and Clinton supporter Geraldine Ferraro. In a newspaper interview with a small California newspaper Ferraro stated, “If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman [of any color] he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And the country is caught up in the concept.”

The implication that Obama was only enjoying electoral success because he is black struck many as ridiculous and shocking, particularly coming from such a prominent leader of the Democratic Party. Ferraro stepped down from her role as an advisor to the Clinton campaign, and Clinton publicly stated that she “did not agree” with Ferraro. Yet Ferraro continued to defend her comments, insisting on their validity. *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Mary Mitchell responded by writing that “if being black is the magic ingredient for a successful ‘historic’ campaign, then Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Carol Moseley-Braun and Dick Gregory” would have been much more successful in their presidential runs.

The historic occurrence of having a woman and an African American as viable candidates for the American presidency sparked considerable dialogue concerning both gender and race in politics. With election returns showing Clinton with much of the female vote, and Obama with much of the African-American vote, it often appeared that the two historically disenfranchised groups were pitted against one another. In a campaign where there are few policy differences between the candidates, identity became for many voters a major factor in choosing which candidate to support. There was also debate over whether female or black candidates faced more prejudices in running for office. Psychological studies have shown that gender stereotyping is more common than racial stereotyping, yet racial stereotypes are more commonly associated with negative opinions. As one article on the topic notes, “male chauvinists don’t dislike
women, they just have particular ideas about their capabilities and how they should behave—but with race, stereotypes tend to go hand-in-hand with prejudice." As this historic Democratic primary unfolded, racist and sexist stereotypes and prejudices were apparent. It was impossible for anyone to judge whether it is “more difficult” to be a black politician or a female politician, as both face challenges, have been historically disenfranchised, and still today women and African Americans (as well as Latinos, Asians, non-Christians, and other groups) are drastically underrepresented in political life.

Besides race and gender, prejudices revolving around religious identity would also play a prominent role in the Democratic primary. Obama's identity as a man of African heritage with an African Muslim name would cause suspicion among many voters. Although all non-white, non-male, and non-Protestant political figures have faced significant hurdles in running for office, in post-9/11 America, Muslim Americans may face the greatest challenge. While recent polls have shown that over 90 percent of American voters could vote for a black candidate and 88 percent for a woman candidate, a 2006 poll showed that only 34 percent of Americans would vote for a Muslim candidate.

Although speculation about Obama's connection to Islam made many voters wary, it would be a news cycle concerning his relationship with his Christian pastor that would prove to be most problematic for him. Since the announcement of his candidacy, Obama's opponents and conservative news networks had been trying to stir the issue of his relationship with his outspoken pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and to portray his church, Chicago's predominately black Trinity United Church of Christ, as dangerously radical. Then, in early March 2008, video clips of Wright surfaced, drawing immediate and overwhelming attention from the media. The clips showed Wright making statements implying that the U.S. was to blame for 9/11 because of its foreign policy and that the U.S. government was involved in spreading the AIDS virus. Perhaps the most replayed clip from the Wright sermons was one in which the pastor proclaimed that instead of singing “God Bless America,” black Americans should sing “God Damn America.”

The media and the public immediately questioned why Obama would have such a close relationship with a man who had these views, and why he would be a member of his church for so many years. Obama had first started attending Trinity while working as a community organizer in Chicago, where he found the connection to an African-American community he had sought growing up. Reverend Wright would officiate the Obamas’s wedding and baptize their two children, Sasha and Malia. Obama also used the title of one of Reverend Wright’s...
sermons as the title of his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*. Trinity was, and still is, one of Chicago’s most prominent churches, boasting a congregation of “Chicago’s influential thinkers and leaders,” including, at one time, Oprah Winfrey. In an article on Trinity and Obama’s membership, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that “for someone thinking of running for mayor, governor, senator or any statewide office, being part of Trinity would likely be an asset.”

Yet, once he entered the national stage, Obama foresaw Wright’s potential as a political liability, particularly in an election where appealing to white, working-class voters was crucial to winning the nomination and the general election. Wright, having come of age during the civil rights era, preached messages that were more race-based than postracial. Although Wright had retired as pastor of Trinity, conservative blogs and programs questioned Obama’s relationship with his pastor early on. In response, Obama asked Wright to step down from his role of giving the invocation at the announcement of his candidacy, a move that was criticized by Reverend Al Sharpton.

Yet, Obama’s initial attempts to distance himself from Wright proved insufficient to avoid controversy. The clips of Wright’s sermons were played nearly constantly on cable news and became a subject of national discussion. The March release of the clips would pose a significant test for Obama as a post-black political figure. While Obama had sought to present himself as a uniting leader, avoiding discussion of racial divisions, the Wright controversy brought race to the forefront. In the days following the release of the clips, Obama denounced Wright’s words, but the media and the American public continued to question Obama’s relationship with Wright. This response showed that it was not enough for Obama as a post-black politician to avoid showing anger over issues of racial inequality himself; he also could not have relationships with African Americans who were publicly angry about the state of race relations in America. The clips also highlighted the black–white breach in public opinion. A poll taken by the Pew Research Center showed that 58 percent of white Americans were personally offended by Wright’s sermons, compared with 29 percent of black Americans.

The media firestorm and reaction from the American public made it clear that Obama would need to make a statement regarding his relationship with Reverend Wright. Obama chose to do this through a speech given on March 18, 2008, in Philadelphia, entitled “A More Perfect Union,” a speech that would address the state of race relations in America. Not only would crafting this speech present the challenge of addressing race as a postracial candidate, but addressing it in a
way which would speak to white and black voters of varying backgrounds and attitudes.

He began the speech by recognizing the importance of the American Constitution as well as its “original sin”—slavery. He described his patriotism and desire to build unity despite this fundamental flaw, citing the way his campaign had built a coalition of voters from all racial backgrounds. In addressing Reverend Wright, Obama made clear that he disagreed with his words, particularly their divisive message, but that he would not disown a man who has “been like family” to him. He went on to recognize the good works Wright had done for his community and to say that he could “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 by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

These phrases made it clear that many in the black community, particularly those like Wright who experienced a time before the civil rights movement, are angry about the state of race relations in America. They also made clear that stereotypes and prejudices still exist, and cannot be ignored. While addressing this reality, the ultimate message of Obama’s speech was one of hope that the union described in the Constitution could be strengthened. While to many academics and liberals the issues Obama raised were not ground-breaking, the speech was remarkable in its ability to speak to those white voters in Middle America, who may not have given serious thought to racial inequalities before, while maintaining his post-racial message of unity.

The reaction to Obama’s handling of the situation was largely positive. A poll by the Pew Research Center shows that 51 percent of voters familiar with the Wright controversy rated his handling of the situation as “excellent” or “good.” Sixty-six percent of Democrats, 48 percent of white voters, and 75 percent of black voters also gave his response a positive rating. Even one-third of Republicans felt that he handled the situation well. Yet, there was media speculation whether Obama had done enough to distance himself from Wright.

Up until the speech, the Clinton campaign had remained largely quiet concerning the Wright controversy (presumably because it was doing enough to challenge Obama’s reputation among white voters without their comment). Clinton did tell the Pittsburgh Tribune Review that “he would not have been my pastor . . . you don’t choose your family, but you choose what church you want to attend.”
The Obama campaign accused Clinton of making these statements in order to draw attention away from a controversy she herself was negotiating, concerning overstatement of the danger she faced during a trip to Bosnia as first lady.\(^61\) Regardless of her motivations in making this statement, the continuation of the Wright controversy could only benefit the Clinton campaign, particularly when experts were judging her chances of winning the nomination at 10 percent. In order to gain enough delegates to win the nomination, she would need the Obama campaign to experience a significant setback, which the Wright story had the potential to be.\(^62\)

The true test of whether Obama successfully weathered the Wright controversy would be his performance in the Pennsylvania state primary on April 22, 2008, a state with a large white, working-class electorate. As polls predicted, Clinton won the state over Obama 56.6 to 45.4 percent, with 60 percent of the white vote but only 8 percent of the black vote.\(^63\) Although Obama had made gains in the state (early 2008 polling, before the Wright controversy broke, showed Clinton over Obama by 20 percentage points), the win justified the continuation of the Clinton campaign.\(^64\)

As the Obama campaign looked ahead to the upcoming primaries in Indiana and North Carolina and tried to put the Reverend Wright media cycle behind them, the controversy would resurface as Wright made public statements to the media at the end of April. In an interview on PBS, Wright stated that Obama said “what he [had] to say as a politician,” insinuating that the candidate did not truly disagree with the opinions expressed in the clips.\(^65\) The next day, in a press conference at the National Press Club, Wright made comments about Louis Farrakhan, 9/11, and the sins of the American government that echoed the divisiveness Obama had rejected from the earlier clips of Wright’s sermons.\(^66\)

Obama reacted by publicly severing ties with Wright in a press conference on April 29, 2008.\(^67\) Again, there was speculation over the effectiveness of Obama’s handling of the situation. Would Reverend Wright’s most recent comments lead voters to believe that Obama shared his pastor’s views? Would the complete severing of the relationship reassure voters? It may be that those who believed that Obama shared his pastor’s views would not have voted for him ultimately anyway. A New York Times/CBS poll, taken immediately after Obama’s most recent press conference on Wright, showed that Obama’s connection to Wright had not effected their opinion of him for most voters, but that they thought that the Wright controversy would affect Obama in the general election.\(^68\)

As in Pennsylvania, the May 6 primaries in Indiana and North Carolina were a litmus test for how well Obama weathered the more
recent comments of Reverend Wright—and whether the delayed rejection of his pastor was seen as sufficient to a skeptical electorate. Obama was largely expected to win in North Carolina, because of the state’s large African-American population (33 percent). Indiana, with its largely white and working-class population, was in question. As the results came in Tuesday night, Obama proved that he had been able to weather Wright’s incendiary comments. Election results showed that Obama won North Carolina with 56 percent of the vote and Indiana brought essentially a split decision, with Clinton winning by a margin of one percent.69

The next contests in West Virginia and Kentucky would prove to be a bigger challenge for Obama. Demographically, both states favored Clinton, with their largely white, working-class populations. On May 13, Clinton won West Virginia with 67 percent of the vote, and on May 20, she won Kentucky with 65 percent.70 Following her landslide victories in West Virginia and Kentucky, Clinton sought the support of superdelegates by making the case that she was more electable than Obama in important states against John McCain. Racially, this proved to be a problematic argument. Exit pollsters in West Virginia and Kentucky asked voters whether race was an important factor in deciding their vote. Twenty-two percent of voters in West Virginia said that race was an important factor, and 8 percent said that it was the “single most important factor.” Twenty-one percent of voters in Kentucky cited race as an important factor, with 7 percent citing it as the “single most important factor.”71 In both states, voters who answered in the affirmative voted overwhelmingly for Clinton. These comparatively high percentages were more alarming when one considers the trend evidenced in the Bradley effect in which white voters who hold prejudices are often reluctant to express them, meaning that the actual percentage of voters who felt that race was an important factor might be higher.

Several newspaper opinion writers and television pundits questioned why Clinton would not denounce the prejudices of her supporters, which would undoubtedly be an ethical but politically complicated action. Clinton instead chose to emphasize her high regard for these voters. In an interview with USA Today, Clinton stated that, “Senator Obama’s support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans, is weakening again, and how whites in both states who had not completed college were supporting me.”72

Many commentators felt that these comments, while praising those voters who admitted to racial prejudices, also seemed to suggest that Obama would be unable to win in the general election because white Americans were not ready to elect an African-American president. Suggesting this struck many as shocking, particularly coming from a democratic candidate.
As the Democratic primary season came close to an end and Senator Obama maintained a consistent but close lead over Senator Clinton, it became clear that decisions made prior to the primary season regarding Michigan and Florida would need to be addressed again, particularly as the two states would be important in the general election. Because the two states held their primaries before February 5, 2008, the date set by the Democratic National Committee (DNC), Michigan and Florida had been stripped of their delegates. The primaries were still held, although the candidates signed a pledge not to campaign, and Obama, along with John Edwards, Bill Richardson, and Joe Biden, took his name off the ballot in Michigan. Under these circumstances, Clinton won in both states. Voters in Florida and Michigan, who were not responsible for moving the dates, could not be completely disenfranchised, particularly in such a close and historic primary race. Neither could the votes be fully counted in the primaries as they were held, for Clinton had a vast advantage in both states because none of the candidates campaigned there (and she was far better known as a former first lady) and in Michigan because voters did not have the option of voting for any of the other main contenders.

On May 31, 2008, the DNC Rules and Bylaws Committee met to make a decision on how to seat the Michigan and Florida delegations. Representatives from both states and both campaigns presented their proposals. Clinton surrogates who spoke at the meeting called for the full seating of the delegations, based on the primaries that had taken place, borrowing from civil rights–era rhetoric to make their case. In the days leading up to the Rules and Bylaws meeting, Senator Clinton traveled to Florida to make her case for counting the votes in Florida and Michigan as they were placed, in a speech in which she evoked the struggles of “the men and women who knew their Constitutional right to vote meant little when poll taxes and literacy tests, violence and intimidation made it impossible to exercise their right, so they marched and protested, faced dogs and tear gas, knelt down on that bridge in Selma to pray and were beaten within an inch of their lives.”

Certainly, taking away the votes of two states would be a significant breach of civil rights. The problem with Clinton’s use of civil rights rhetoric to support her view of seating all of the delegates is that this action would be equally in opposition to civil rights, and would effectively be using unconstitutional elections to, in the eyes of many Americans, “take” the nomination from the first African-American nominee to a major political party. Furthermore, Clinton herself had supported the repeal of voting rights in these states at the outset of the primary season, when she signed the pledge to not campaign in Florida or Michigan. Therefore, the use of this rhetoric
caused anger among some commentators, as Ben Smith wrote on Politico.com: “It’s not just that she’s convinced herself it’s okay to try to steal the nomination, she has also appropriated the most sacred legacies of liberalism for her effort to do so.” Following a long and impassioned televised meeting on May 31, 2008, the DNC’s Rules and Bylaws Committee, a group containing supporters of both candidates, decided to assign each delegate in Florida and Michigan half a vote.

With Michigan and Florida resolved and a seemingly insurmountable lead, Obama was now widely seen as the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party. On June 3, 2008, the day of the South Dakota and Montana primaries, a steady stream of superdelegates publicly endorsed the Illinois senator throughout the day. By the early evening, Obama had reached 2,118 delegates, the number needed to secure the Democratic nomination. In announcing this achievement, media outlets paid great attention to the historic fact that Americans had selected the first African American to be the nominee of any major political party.

Yet, in his speech that night to a large crowd of supporters in St. Paul, Minnesota, Obama did not make reference to the historic fact that he was the first African American to be selected as the nominee of any major political party, reflective of his February 10, 2007, candidacy announcement. He again emphasized the post-black message, dedicating the speech to his white grandmother and highlighting the diversity of his coalition, saying, “There are young people, and African-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans, and women of all ages who have voted in numbers that have broken records and inspired a nation.”

Senator Obama was not alone in failing to mention the historic significance of the moment. The night he received the amount of delegates needed to secure the nomination, Senator Clinton also gave a much-anticipated speech. Although the Associated Press had reported that Clinton would be conceding, Clinton declared before supporters in Manhattan that she “would not be making any decisions” that night. Yet to many who were moved by the fact that the country had elected its first African-American nominee, it was not the fact that Senator Clinton chose not to concede that they found disturbing, but the fact that she refused to acknowledge that fact that her opponent had achieved this historic goal. When asked by a reporter about the fact that Obama supporters may have been angered by the speech, Clinton campaign chairman Terry McAuliffe exclaimed, “Tonight was Hillary’s night!”

Following Clinton’s speech on June 3, the Democratic leadership, including many of her own supporters, called for her to suspend her
campaign, since Obama had reached the number of delegates needed for the nomination and there was an eagerness to unite a party that had become deeply divided between the two candidates. The speech ending her campaign was held on Saturday, June 7, at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. Given the long and passionate campaign, Clinton knew that it was important to express her unequivocal support for Senator Obama to urge her numerous supporters, many of whom told pollsters that they would vote for McCain over Obama in the general election.

With the nomination finally secured, Obama’s victory brought increased optimism to a large number of African Americans, many of whom doubted that they would see a black nominee in their lifetimes. Given that most of the voters who elected Obama as the nominee of the Democratic Party were white, African Americans interviewed for a *New York Times* article expressed feelings of hope, particularly for the opportunities this would provide for their children. As one women stated, “When she’s out in, God knows where, some small town in rural America, they’ll think, ‘Oh, I know someone like you. Our president is like you..... That just opens minds for people, to have someone to relate to. And that makes me feel better, as a mom.”

Pop culture reflected this sentiment, as shown in the lyrics of a song released by rapper Nas in the week Senator Obama received the nomination. Nas raps:

- But on a positive side, I think Obama provides
- Hope—and challenges minds
- Of all races and colors to erase the hate
- And try to love one another, so many political snakes
- We in need of a break, I'm thinkin' I can trust this brotha

Despite this positive message, Nas also puts forward questions and fears about an Obama presidency, most notably the threat of assassination and whether or not Obama will be committed to the issues facing African-American communities. These questions would highlight the struggle that lay ahead as Senator Obama campaigned for the general election.

As the nominee of the Democratic Party, Senator Obama certainly faced more challenges because of his race in the general election against John McCain. As the two candidates entered the general elections, there was some speculation over whether or not the McCain campaign would engage in race-baiting tactics, as his family had been a victim of them in the past. While running for the Republican nomination in 2000, anonymous opponents assumed to be supporters of his main opponent, George W. Bush, used push polls to suggest that Senator McCain’s eight-year-old, dark-skinned daughter, who was
adopted from Bangladesh, was instead an illegitimate black child. These rumors proliferated on the Internet and were even addressed by the mainstream media, causing great pain to his family. To McCain’s credit, the candidate himself did not play heavily upon racial themes, but he also did not speak out in objection when his surrogates and fellow Republican party members did so.

The Republican Party also extended efforts to use race to its advantage, as was evident in smears made against Michelle Obama, painting her as an angry black radical. Republican groups tried to connect Barack Obama to controversial black leaders such as Farrakhan and revived the words of Reverend Wright in an attempt to inspire fear in white voters, even though in the final days of the Democratic primary, Obama formally withdrew his family’s membership at Trinity following the remarks of a guest speaker at the church who claimed that Senator Clinton felt entitled to the nomination because she was white.

In the end, of course, Barack Obama overcame the many obstacles put in his path, and on November 4, 2008, he won the presidency of the United States by a large margin of both the popular and the electoral vote. Using the postracial model and a message of change, Obama became the first African-American president, just as he had become the first African-American candidate with a real chance of being elected president in the first place. Although he sought to avoid focusing on issues of race, the realities of being a black presidential candidate—and then president—in a country with deep-seeded divisions and a troubled racial history has made the topic central for the last two years; race will remain a central focus of inquiry and discussion. In that regard, Barack Obama opened a much-needed racial dialogue in this country, one that he will have the opportunity to continue as president.

NOTES

5. Ibid., 52.
7. Ibid., 203.
11. Obama, Dreams from My Father, 94–95.

13. Obama, Dreams from My Father.


21. Ibid.


38. Marable, “Racializing Obama.”


40. Ibid.


70. Ibid.