

# Obama will not get free pass from Blacks

By Ron Walters  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Having already suggested in print that Barack Obama should run for president of the United States, let me now address the important issue of race that has surfaced, now that he has announced his intent to put together an exploratory committee.

Barack Obama has earned considerable public notice, not for anything he has done, but substantially for who he is racially. Thus, who he is, becomes a central point in examining his popularity because this is part of the reason why the American people have gravitated toward him.

His public posture is that he is attractive personally, being even charismatic and telegenic, but he has also tentatively laid out some tantalizing aspects of his ideological position. He has said that he understands that Americans want a "new kind of leadership" but without quite defining it. Is this his way of suggesting that he is a post-racial candidate?

His novelty has meant that he presents a view of racial diversity that is attractive to Americans, the non-threatening variety. One variety of diversity comes with a compensatory edge, where Blacks are demanding compensation for the past of slavery and post-slavery racism has been rejected by the Supreme

Court, by the states of California, Washington, and more recently Michigan. There is another kind of diversity that is based on the simple proposition of the positive desire to include all people of whatever stripe in the American experiment. The latter is where Barack Obama wins his appeal from America. This is suggested by his parental background and his upbringing and now become an out-front aspect of his persona.

Black people do not live in a post-racial America. They live in the prism of police shootings in New York and Atlanta, of rabid incarceration, of employment stagnation, of the continued lack of capital, of record foreclosures and other manifestations that indicate America is still sensitive to who they are. So, why shouldn't Blacks, even Black leaders, be a little suspicious of the maddening rush to Obama by the media, when at the same time, they turn Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy into a non-threatening pose of the dreamer? The media vilifies King's followers who carry on his true legacy.

Some have suggested that Rev. Jesse Jack-



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son, Rev. Al Sharpton and Harry Belafonte are jealous of Obama because they believe that he cannot be just accepted at face value and should be watched. But it is the responsibility of Black leadership to vet anyone who presents himself or herself to the Black community as a presidential candidate.

Ask Senator Joe Lieberman. In the 2000 election cycle, he was added to the ticket of Al Gore as vice president. However, he had taken a negative position on affirmative action and Black leaders took him to the woodshed until he straightened up.

Black leaders also have another reason to be cautious. They have some attractive options and these options should be played effectively. If Rev. Sharpton runs for president in 2008, Blacks will have a direct and powerful voice in the presidential election representing issues important to Blacks that cannot be ignored. Already, one unnamed analyst reported in a major newspaper that Barack faces the danger that a Sharpton candidacy will force him to address "awkward civil rights issues, such as police brutality and racial profiling that he tends to steer clear of."

A second option is former Senator John Edwards, who launched his campaign from the 9th Ward in Katrina-ravaged New Orleans, pledging to set up his headquarters there. This important commitment cannot be pushed aside, given the importance of the issues that underlies the fight for the right of Black people to return to home and culture.

Another candidate, Hillary, is married to Bill Clinton, an 800-pound gorilla who is affectionately called the "first Black President." He has retained a lasting influence within the Black community, his former staffers and their extended contacts. Given these real live options, why jump to the untested Barack?

Sure, Barack Obama should run. But he should also be held accountable by the Black community. If he truly does not want to be held accountable on that score, he should be judged accordingly. And if he does, then he should really run and perhaps try to use his campaign to bring the rest of America along. He can't win that way, you say? Then, of what value is a Black president of the United States?

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## Rights agenda must evolve to retain power

By Marc H. Morial  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

In light of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday celebration, *USA Today* recently asked me about the future of the Civil Rights Movement half a century or so after it began. I told the paper the role of the National Urban League and other civil rights groups was evolving to cater to the younger generation, which possesses no memories of a struggle born well before they were.

Today's youth are looking for something different than did their parents and grandparents. This is evident in the giving patterns of young minorities, who are more likely to believe that the key to greater equality is greater access to financial power than political power.

According to the City University of New York's Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, they are more interested in gaining access to Wall Street than marching on Washington. They also tend to support nonprofits that emphasize individual attainment and employ a business model of operation.

Instead of fighting for basic rights guaranteed to Americans, we are now fighting for our economic future. There is no doubt that African-Americans have made great progress

in surmounting past challenges and thriving in the 21st century: Our quality of life has improved, as has our future.

In 1960, 20.1 percent of Blacks graduated from high school, which was a little less than half the percentage of Whites. Now, 81.1 percent hold high-school degrees or higher, compared to 86 percent of Whites. High school dropout rates have fallen to nearly half of what they were in 1975 — 27.3 percent to 15.1 percent in 2004, narrowing the gap with Whites of 13.4 percentage points to three. Since 1970, African-Americans' life expectancy has risen 11.4 years, while that of Whites has increased 7 years.

In "The State of Black America 2006," the National Urban League found the overall status of Blacks to be at 73 percent of Whites. In terms of health, education and social justice, Blacks' status ranged between 74 to 78 percent of Whites and even surpassed Whites in civic engagement. However, economically, Blacks lagged substan-



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tially behind at just 56 percent.

Unfortunately, despite educational improvements, the gap in salaries has actually widened since 1960, when median income of Black households was roughly \$14,000 less than Whites (in 2004 dollars). Now, that difference has expanded to \$21,372 despite a nearly doubling of household income.

When it comes to personal wealth, Whites still outperform Blacks—and by 10 times over.

As I said in my keynote address at our annual conference last July, the idea of expanding the American dream and table to everyone is still as relevant now as it was in the 1960s. The fight to sit at the lunch counter was an important one. But what's the use of winning the right to eat at the lunch counter if you cannot afford the meal?

Today, the civil rights struggle is more a fight of not only being able to afford lunch but also being able to purchase the lunch counter.

There was a time when African-Americans were denied the right to own property. In 2004, home ownership among Blacks hit an all-time high of nearly 50 percent.

For the African-American community to achieve economic equality with Whites and be competitive in the global marketplace, it is not enough just to own property — though it's a very good start. We must also be able to maintain and secure that ownership for generations to come.

And it is not enough for our children to just graduate high school. To obtain the jobs of the future, they will need to go to college, at the very least, to acquire the skills of the future and gain the financial freedom we desire for them.

In 1967, at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pondered the ques-

tion, "Where do we go from here?"

He also realized that the movement he helped create was an evolving entity. To grow and flourish, it couldn't just concentrate on securing basic liberties for minorities. It had to expand into something bigger — not only for the sake of the future generations, but also for the legacy of those who gave their lives to the cause.

A decade after the birth of the SCLC, Dr. King realized that to keep the movement alive he needed to begin to expand its scope to issues standing in the way of greater equality, such as poverty and the Vietnam War, causing consternation within the Johnson administration.

After all, it wasn't just about guaranteeing basic inalienable rights to African-Americans in the South — even back in the 1960s. It was becoming less a struggle for the rights of Blacks to vote and operate freely within American society. The inner-city ghettos in northern cities emerged out of poor economic conditions, not necessarily out of political circumstance. The riots of the late 1960s occurred in areas whose residents had the right to vote for years and where the first Blacks after Reconstruction won elections.

"We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us. We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. We gained manhood in the nation that had always called us 'boy,'" Dr. King said before the SCLC's 11th Convention.

"But in spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower."

Dr. King realized that economic, as well  
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shouldn't shamelessly hop in bed with the right-wing Fox network and be an accessory to the crime of misinforming the public.

We need to know what the candidates propose to do about preserving affirmative action, especially in view of what happened in Michigan. We need to know if they favor repealing the Bush tax breaks given mostly to the wealthy. We need to know if the Democratic nominee is willing to move beyond favoring a reduction of the interest rates on student loans to shifting back to need-based direct grants for poor students to attend college. What initiatives do they have for build-

ing more affordable housing? Are they willing to cut off funding for the war? If the Party's nominee can't provide satisfactory answers to these and similar questions, it doesn't matter if he is the first Black or that she is the first woman to capture the Democratic Party's nomination.

At best, it would be a pyrrhic victory for the nominee to be a different color or a different gender yet support the same regressive policies of the past. We need a diversity of action, not appearance.

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