

Obama to Black America: All in this together

By Hazel Trice Edney
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BALTIMORE (NNPA)

— Then Future First Lady Michelle Obama, standing behind a little boy inside the Baltimore War Memorial, placed her hands on the child's shoulders and guided him toward her husband.

"I want you to meet my new friend," she gleefully told then President-elect Barack Obama. Looking down at the approximately 7-year-old boy, Obama broke into his trademark broad smile. His hands replaced hers on the boy's shoulders.

"Yes, I know," he said, looking down into his face. "And, he's got ears just like mine."

The child beamed with pride. Returning the broad smile, he boldly asked for an autograph.

"Children are really drawn to him," whispered Jen Psaki, an Obama aid. She observed the warm exchange only a few feet away, sitting beside this reporter, who was among members of the press traveling aboard Obama's historic "Whistle Stop" tour train on Saturday.

Moments later, the mode switched. Obama was whisked by stone-faced Se-

cret Service men into a small room inside the vast Baltimore War Memorial.

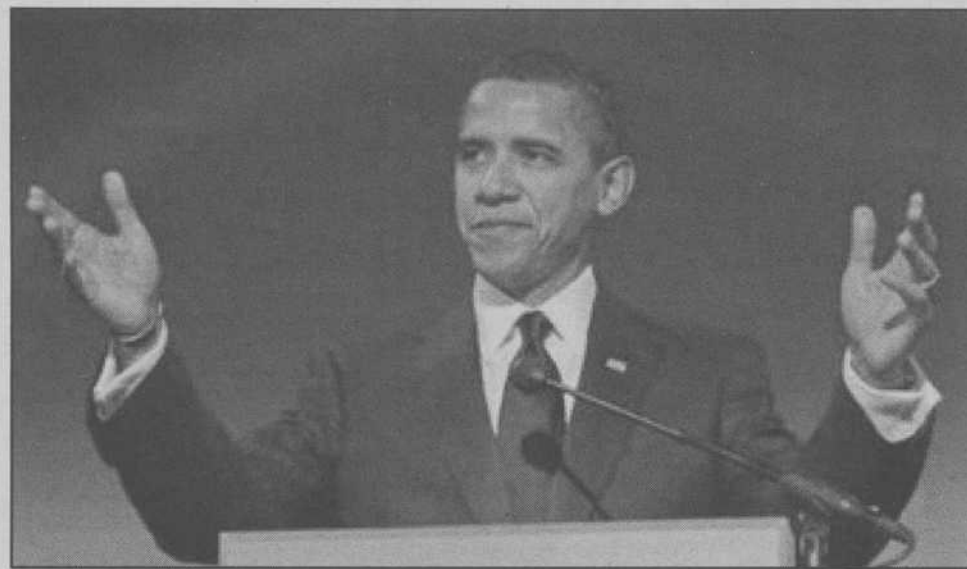
"Okay, let's go," said Psaki, whisking this reporter into the room behind him.

There, Obama sat and engaged in a 10-minute, exclusive interview with the NNPA News Service, the Black Press of America.

Still wearing his dark, cashmere coat after speaking to a Baltimore audience of 40,000 in bone-chilling temperatures during the Amtrak train tour from Philadelphia to Baltimore, he described plans to use his presidential "bully pulpit" to challenge the Black community to strengthen itself from within, while also pushing public policies to deal with inequities that have long plagued African-Americans from without.

"In terms of the African-American community, one of the things that I want to make sure that everybody's clear about is — to paraphrase JFK — 'Don't ask just what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for yourself.'"

He was responding to a question about how his administration will address social and economic ills that



have historically and disparately plagued Black Americans.

He continues, "I want fathers to start being part of their children's lives. I want our children to stop spending so much time watching television and hit the books. There are a lot of things under our control that can make our communities stronger and can open up opportunities for all of us. And I want to make sure that I'm using the bully pulpit to send that message loud and clear throughout my presidency."

Nevertheless, Obama, a civil rights lawyer, who made 100 percent on all NAACP Civil Rights Report Cards as

a U. S. senator, recognizes that systemic racism and White supremacy have caused the African-American jobless rate to remain nearly twice that of the national average.

"Because African-Americans and Latinos are often the last hired, it also means they're the first fired," he said.

"That's why getting the economy moving for everybody is so important because they're disproportionately impacted going up and going down."

One way to address the economic woes of America's general population while specifically improving the

employment rates of Blacks and Hispanics would be to focus on jobs in urban communities, Obama said. More than three-fourths of African-Americans live in inner city or urban communities.

"I do think that we've got to focus on economic development in our urban areas... That's not a race-based program. That's a recognition that, 'Cities and suburbs, we're all in it together.' And we can't just deal with one without dealing with the other," he said.

Obama reminded that his economic recovery plan, now before Congress, calls for special training at community colleges to help

people obtain so-called "new energy" or "green" jobs. Illustrating, he said, high school drop outs could be trained at a community college to help weatherize Baltimore homes.

"We think that we could have a big affect on our unemployment rates for all people."

Obama says his administration will maintain an open door to African-American organizations and community groups that desire to influence public policy, but who are also willing to make progress through service outside of government.

"We want to have an inclusive administration where all voices are heard," he said.

"It will be constantly accessible to groups outside the White House and we want to make sure that every voice is heard in this process," he said.

The first African-American to hold the office of president, Obama has risen to leadership during tumultuous racial issues and incidents, including criminal justice inequities that have sparked protests over the past two years, race hate crimes, Black on Black crime, and a
(See Interview, Page 3)

Ceremony

(Continued from Page 1)

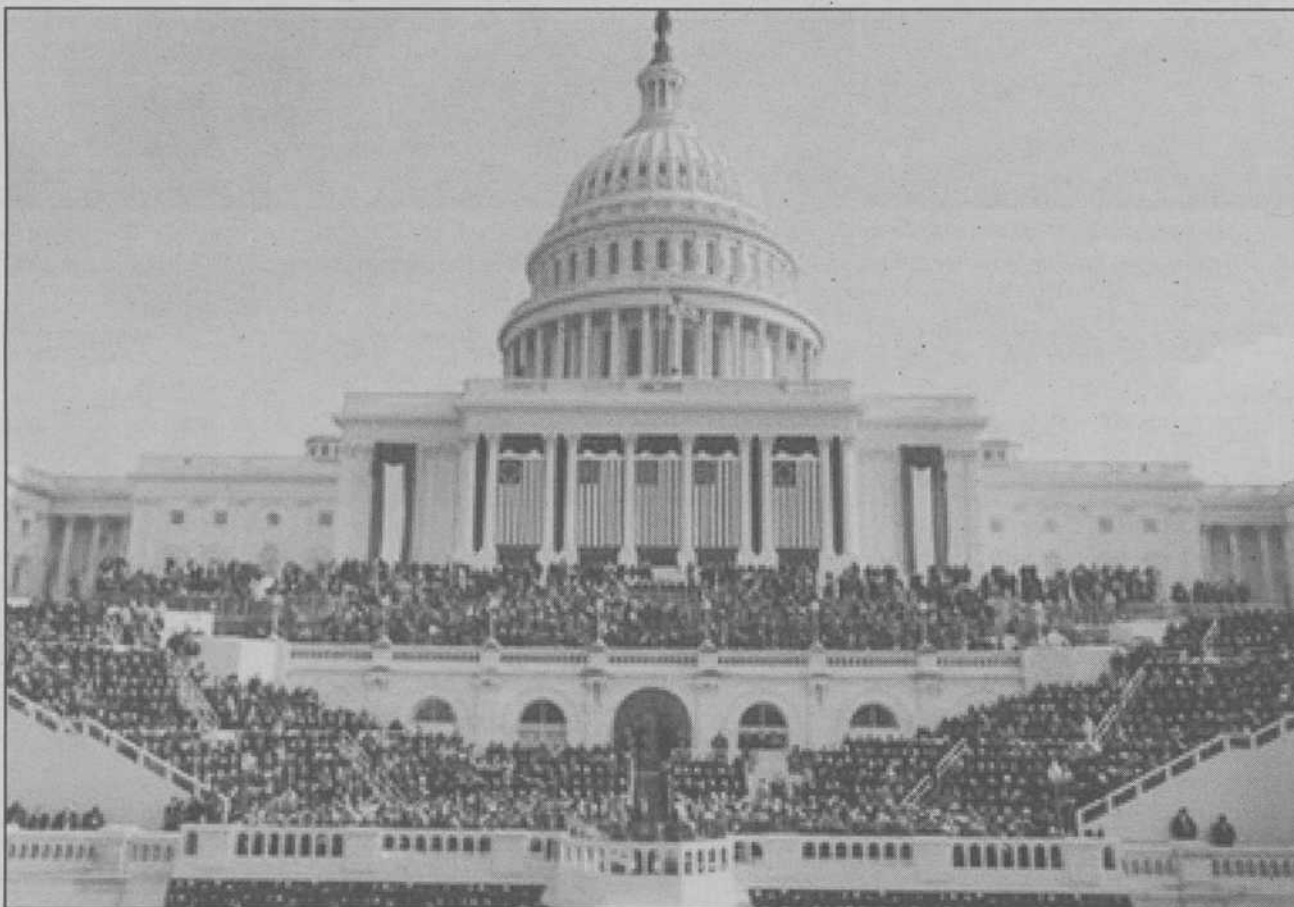
lems appears to be a salve to many, bringing hope for ultimate equality that has yet to be realized.

"We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth," says Obama, the son of a Black man from Kenya and a White woman from Kansas. "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."

Significant parts of the inaugural ceremony sent strong messages that the Obama Administration will maintain its consciousness where Black people are concerned.

The "Rosa Parks" bus rolled along in the motorcade before the Inaugural Parade, symbolizing the struggle of African-Americans who were legally forced to sit in the backs of buses in the South until Parks took a stand in 1955.

Also, among the 90 units participating in the Inaugural Parade were the Tuskegee Airmen, who flew in a segregated Army Air Corp during World War II.



The nation's most powerful lawmakers sat as Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States.

"I'm feeling ecstatic. There was never a time in my life that I would have thought there would be a Black president," said a chuckling Ed Tillman, one of the elite African-American pilots who

flew heroically in the all-Black unit.

Most notable were the prayers of Revs. Rick Warren and Joseph Lowery, both of whom blatantly referred to the racial magnitude of the

moment.

"We celebrate a hinge-point of history with the inauguration of our first African-American president of the United States," Warren prayed in his invocation. The

crowd cheered. "We are so grateful to live in this land, a land of unequalled possibility, where a son of an African immigrant can rise to the highest level of our leadership. And we know today that

Dr. King and a great cloud of witnesses are shouting in heaven."

The poem recited by Elizabeth Alexander was also straight to the point: "Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of."

But, perhaps it was the benediction of civil rights icon, Rev. Joseph Lowery, that hit closest to home. Starting with the final verse of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Black National Anthem, Lowery closed with an appeal that is yet to be realized:

"Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when Black will not be asked to get back, when Brown can stick around, when Yellow will be mellow, when the Red man can get ahead, man, and when White will embrace what is right. Let all those who do justice and love mercy say amen."