What Obama's Victory Means for Racial Politics

By JUAN WILLIAMS

Barack Obama's election is both an astounding political victory -- and the end of an era for black politics.

It is not even 50 years since a group of civil-rights workers challenged racial segregation on interstate bus travel. In 1961, a scared group of young Freedom Riders got on a Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C., to take a trip through Virginia and into the South. In Alabama the bus was bombed, its riders beaten so badly that some suffered brain damage. Attorney General Robert Kennedy worried that racial tensions could spark a second Civil War.

What happened next was the starting point for a uniquely American political movement that led directly to Mr. Obama's success. Bobby Kennedy proposed to his brother, President John F. Kennedy, that the civil-rights movement be redirected from violent confrontations with segregationists to voter-registration drives. The Kennedys feared sending voting-rights legislation to Congress, given opposition from Southern Democrats. But the Kennedys reasoned more blacks registered to vote would force Southern Democrats to change their segregationist attitudes.

Kennedy got foundations to support a group called the Voter Education Project. That effort put money into civil-rights groups that worked on voter registration. Young people such as James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman went into small black towns in the South and challenged the white segregationist political structure by encouraging blacks to defy intimidation by racist sheriffs, employers and banks and fill out a voter registration card.

Those three young men were killed by segregationists. Others, such as Medgar Evers of the NAACP and Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper, carried on. Evers was killed. Hamer was beaten so badly that she "couldn't feel my arms." But she became a voice for a group of black Mississippians who challenged the seating of an all-white, segregationist delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention.

Hamer's efforts led to more voter registration drives to register blacks in the South, including in Selma, Ala. It was in Selma that Nobel Peace Prize winner Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested; he'd defied court orders by staging protests calling for federal laws protecting blacks trying to register.
In a letter he wrote in 1963 from a Birmingham jail, King had stated: "Give us the ballot." Now in a Selma jail he wrote: "Why are we in jail? Have you ever been required to answer 100 questions on government, some abstruse even to a political science specialist, merely to vote . . . this is Selma, Alabama, where there are more Negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls."

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It led to increased black political power, and to political appointees such as Solicitor General [and later Supreme Court Justice] Thurgood Marshall. The first black mayor of a major American city, Carl Stokes, was elected in Cleveland in 1967. The 1970s and '80s saw black politics emerge as a stable base for the growth of a large black American middle class with higher levels of education and income. Later barrier breakers included chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

And now comes Barack Obama, the son of a black Kenyan who came here as a scholarship student and his white American wife. There is no other nation in the world where a 75% majority electorate has elected as their supreme leader a man who identifies as one of that nation's historically oppressed minorities.

The idea of black politics now tilts away from leadership based on voicing grievance, and identity politics based on victimization and anger. In its place is an era in which it is assumed that talented, tough people of any background will find a way to their rightful seat of power in mainstream political life.

The Jesse Jacksons, Al Sharptons and Rev. Jeremiah Wrights remain. But their influence and power fade to a form of nostalgia in a world of larger political agendas, such as a common American vision of setting the nation on a steady economic course and dealing with terrorists. The market has irrevocably shrunk for Sharpton-style tirades against "the man" and "the system." The emphasis on racial threats and extortion-like demands -- all aimed at maximizing white guilt as leverage for getting government and corporate money -- has lost its moment. How does anyone waste time on racial fantasies like reparations for slavery when there is a black man who earned his way into the White House?

Make no mistake, there is still discrimination against people of color in America. And inside black America, there is still disproportionate poverty, school dropouts, criminal activity, incarceration and single motherhood. But with the example of Mr. Obama's achievements, from Harvard Law to the state legislature, U.S. Senate and the White House, the focus of discussion now is how the child of even the most oppressed of racial minorities can maximize his or her strengths and overcome negative stereotypes through achievement.

The onus now falls on individuals to take advantage of opportunities. That begins with keeping families together and taking responsibility for the twisted "gangsta" culture that celebrates jail time instead of schooling. With Mr. Obama as the head of government, discussion of racial problems now comes in the form of pragmatic discourse for how to best give all Americans opportunity, for example, how to improve schools.
The change in black politics has been slowly coming with the growing black middle-class. It now accelerates with Mr. Obama's victory. As King said at the end of the 1965 march for voting rights in Alabama -- when he reached the state capital in Montgomery -- the result of black political participation is a "society that can live with its conscience." There are no quick solutions, he added, but no matter how difficult or frustrating there will be success because "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice."

In terms of racial politics, the arc of justice took a breathtaking leap.

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