

Barack Obama's historic selection as Democratic candidate in the US elections puts the presidency within the grasp of a Black man for the first time. But his views on race are having an impact far beyond the shores of the US, as Ade Sawyerr explains



White House

Barack Obama at United States Senate

BLACKENING THE **WHITE HOUSE**

On January 20 2017, a new US president will be sworn in to replace Barack Obama, who will have completed two successful terms as elected leader of the most powerful country in the world.

President Obama's successor will be another Democrat because he will have used his presidency to deliver on health, education, jobs and the economy – the concerns of ordinary people all over America. The new president will probably be a woman, and like Obama, a mould-breaker.

Through his historic achievement in becoming Democratic nominee for the US presidential elections, Barack Obama has attained heights that were not achievable for Black men in America just 50 years ago. Then African Americans were, in the main, excluded from politics. They were allowed to vote – but their only option was to vote for white men.

Obama's predecessors, the African Americans who aspired to the highest office in America – Carol Moseley Braun, Al Sharpton, Alan Keyes, Lenora Fulani, Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, Eldridge Cleaver and Dick Gregory – were not perceived as mainstream or credible candidates. High-flying African American men and women such as Andrew Young, US ambassador to the UN, Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice have been appointed to high office to do the bidding of their elected presidents.

Now the situation is very different. Obama leads the field as a new breed of mainstream African American politicians to assert themselves. Men like Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts, Adrian Fenty of Washington DC and Cory Booker of Newark have benefited from affirmative action, attended good mainstream universities and graduate schools and see no reason why they must be pigeon-holed as Black politicians unable to rise above issues of race. Like Obama, they reach out to the whole of America.

Many of the old type African American politician cut their teeth campaigning against racial injustices that in many ways left them being perceived as one-dimensional candidates, unable to appeal to a wider audience. The Obama

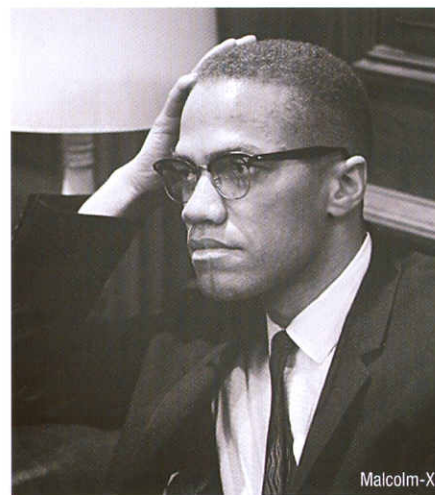
generation is different. It is a catalyst for change – and for the empowerment of people to demand and implement that change.

In championing this new brand of politics, Obama is helping to change the parameters of politics from adversarial issues of different interest groups to a consensus of the majority. This is refreshing not only for America, but for the world. So when Obama says that there is only one America, what we hear echoing around the world is an assertion that there is no Black world or white world, there is no capitalist or socialist world and there is no poor or rich world. There is only one world!

THE OBAMA GENERATION IS DIFFERENT. IT IS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE – AND FOR EMPOWERMENT



Jesse Jackson



Malcolm-X

Is this idealism, or perhaps a fairy tale which we should know better than to believe? America needs a message of hope that is devoid of all the cynicism that has consumed it in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. America must refocus on fixing the ills of America before it can attempt to fix the ills of the world.

If Obama fixes the economy for all America, if Obama is able to fix health care and provide sound education and good jobs, he will also have fixed things for the millions of Black people in America who have waited so long for a messiah. It would mean that he had been true to his word in helping America on its journey towards the 'perfect union' that he spoke about in his groundbreaking speech on race in Philadelphia in March.

"I have asserted a firm conviction," he said, "a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people – that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more 'perfect union'."

In that speech he signalled the start of post-racial politics in America and extended the way in which race should be seen. Race, according to Obama, is no longer simply about guilty white people and victimised Black people. It is now about a coming-together to cure the "birth defect" to which Condoleezza Rice referred in her response to the Obama speech.

"Descendants of slaves did not get much of a head start," she said, "and I think you continue to see some of the effects of that. That particular birth defect makes it hard for us to confront it, hard for us to talk about it, and hard for us to realize that it has continuing relevance for who we are today."

It is not only America that needs this message of hope. Obama's message is needed by the whole world and he will be judged by how deftly he is able to build a consensus to deal with its trouble spots. We need a new approach to the problems of poverty, terrorism and the environment.

The earth needs "healing", as Obama puts it, and who better to do that than someone whose message is one of

looking forward into the future with hope and confidence.

Obama has built a movement that will also impact on the way that America looks at, and engages with, foreign policy.

America can lead the world, but it must not take the moral high ground, assert that America is better than other countries and unilaterally determine what is good for the world. This is the mindset that led to the ill-judged invasion of Iraq.

Obama will be embraced by the whole world if he shows that America is a friend to the whole of the world. It is by doing this that he will send a strong signal to all that America is prepared to come down from its lofty heights to discuss with other nations what is good for the whole world. Obama will represent principled leadership. Where coercion has resulted in rejection of American values, persuasion is likely to yield better results as we move towards the one-world concept that Obama embraces.

The Obama effect signals that a newer breed of politicians is needed in the UK, too. Politics in Britain is no longer about protest, campaigning or bargaining, it is not about healing now or "postponement". It is about Black people moving away from the margins and the fringes into the mainstream of politics, prepared to prove that they can bring a mainstream attitude to tackling issues that affect us all – educational underachievement, health inequalities, jobs, housing and crime – so that all can share in the wealth created in this country.

Those who did not live through the battles of Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth, Moss Side and Broadwater Farm should not be shackled to viewing the future through the eyes of those who struggled so that they will reap the benefits of a better, more equal future for all. They cannot be held back if they start championing all causes; a determination to integrate will reap greater benefits for all.

Obama did not simply follow the route taken by Malcolm X, a protester and campaigner, and Martin Luther-King, a bargainer. He sought to fulfil the legacy of both these men by reshaping their message into one of relevance for these modern times.

Obama will be an inspiration to all young people wherever they are white, Black, rich, poor, ideologue, pragmatist,



Condoleezza Rice

OBAMA DID NOT SIMPLY FOLLOW THE ROUTE TAKEN BY MALCOLM X AND LUTHER-KING... HE HAS RESHAPED THEIR MESSAGE

they will be able to achieve their dream of engaging in the struggle to make this country a better place. He is charging them to be confident enough to want to represent all. It is in this way that we can implement a new approach to resolving what at one time seemed to be the intractable problems of race inequality.

The effect of Obama on young African, Caribbean and Asian people of this country must not be underestimated. It will propel millions of Britons to think about politics, and that is certainly a good thing for citizenship in this country and the rest of the world. ✕

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