

WHY OBAMA REPRESENTS A TOTALLY NEW BREED OF BLACK POLITICIAN

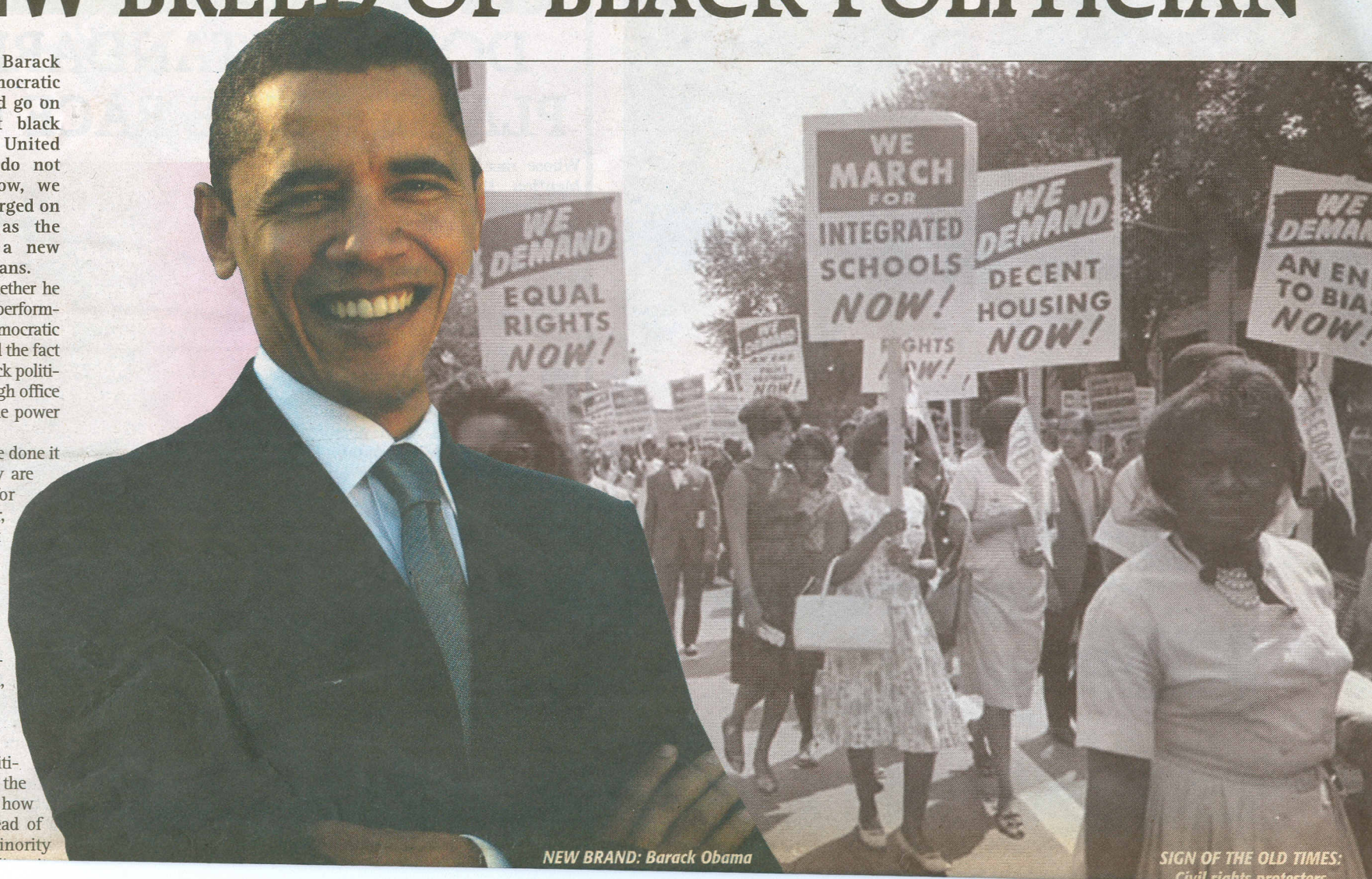
WILL SENATOR Barack Obama win the Democratic Party nomination, and go on to become the first black president of the United States? Though we do not know the answer now, we know that he has emerged on the political scene as the most prominent of a new breed of black politicians.

It does not matter whether he wins or not, because his performance to date in the Democratic primaries has highlighted the fact that there are several black politicians who are holding high office in America, and have the power to change things.

Like Obama, they have done it in a different way. They are not seeking justice for black people with anger, or protest. They are not expressing grievance about the state of race equality, or complaining about victimisation, or making symbolic gestures for, whilst seeking endorsement from, the black community.

APPEAL

This new type of politician appeals directly to the mainstream, which is how elections are won. Instead of taking on narrow minority



NEW BRAND: Barack Obama


SIGN OF THE OLD TIMES:
Civil rights protesters

issues, they take on diversity issues. This new brand of politician does not need to stand in mainly black constituencies or wards in order to win, but uses the party organisation to advocate policies that benefit all their constituents.

This new brand of politi-

helped to make today's changes.

ADE SAWYER ARGUES THAT THE SUCCESS OF BARACK OBAMA LIES IN A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN HOW BLACK PEOPLE GAIN POWER





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cian, who happen to be black, are gradually replacing the traditional black politician, who cut their teeth on the protest movement, and see themselves as representatives of, and advocates for, the black community. Gradually, the politics of confrontation is being replaced by the politics of compromise and inclusion, and the politics of symbolism is being converted into the politics of substance.

This new type of politician may have benefited from the 1960s Civil Rights movement and affirmative action, but they may also have grown up in suburban neighbourhoods, and studied with white folks in top mainstream universities, so they will not allow themselves to be defined by their colour and the need to advocate only for their own community.

ACCEPTANCE

They have moved away from concerning themselves with narrow interest groups and seek to unite and deliver for all the community. They have embraced diversity in such a refreshing way, that their appeal transcends race; invariably, they are increasingly acceptable as representatives in white

communities.

So, if 50 years after the defining moments of the Civil Rights movement, we now have black congressmen, black senators, black governors, have produced a black UN representative, black National Security Advisers, and two black Secretaries of State who knows? America may already be ready for a black president – they are probably just waiting for the right person to emerge.

Commentators are busy comparing and contrasting the effectiveness of the different types – the acid test is the extent to which they deliver the things that the black community needs. Cynics point to the fact that politicians end up with higher profiles, and do not necessarily seek to primarily satisfy the black community.

Though there are still poor black people in America, the fact that this new breed of politicians exists at all is a testament to the changes that have taken place. Many black people need good housing, schools, jobs, health care, and other benefits of a wealthy state, but they are also doing well and are ambitious enough to run for political office – despite the racism that still exists.

They are aspiring because they have role models who are changing the face of politics, by improving the representation of black people in yet another arena where they were previously underrepresented.

The fact that Barack Obama is running for president as a credible candidate, and even managed to defeat the front runner, Hilary Clinton, in Iowa, a predominantly white state, says something about how effective this new type of post-civil rights, post-segregation black politician, can be.

As with most things, those of us on this side of the Atlantic have adopted and adapted strategies for advancement employed in America. We may now start inviting these politicians to come and inspire the black community here, and share with us the alternative paths that they have used for mainstream political advancement.

IMPLICATIONS

Is this the time for black people in this country to also accept that there are alternative entry points into politics, and we are entering into a new 'post-black-sections' type of politics? Post-

Brixton, post-Handsworth, post-Moss Side riots.

Will the new brand of politics be more acceptable in raising the profile of African/Caribbean and Asian politicians in this country, and make them better representatives for us all?

Obama may have lost in New Hampshire because of the 'Bradley effect', where politicians who are black often underperform at the polls. This shows that race is still a big issue in politics in the western world, and the 'black penalty' in politics still exists.

But, will such upsets stop him and the others who come after him?

When will we have our own Obama in Britain?

– Ade Sawyerr is partner in Equinox Consulting, a management consultancy that provides consultancy, training and research services and focuses on formulating strategies for African, Caribbean, Asian and minority ethnic, disadvantaged and socially excluded communities. He also comments on political, economic, social, and development issues. He can be contacted through www.equinoxconsulting.net, or by email at ades@equinoxconsulting.net.