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# Bridging the Racial Divide

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# NEWS

Tuesday November 4, 2008

## Bridging the Racial Divide

In an op-ed piece, Julius Amin, professor and chair of history, says Barack Obama transcended America's racial divide with his victory in the presidential election, but he has not cured the country's racial ills.

*Op-ed pieces reflect the opinion of the author and do not represent an official University of Dayton position.*

SELECT LANGUAGE

Reactions to president-elect Barack Obama reveal disconcerting attitudes of Americans toward race. To some, he is too black. To others, he's not black enough. Attackers during his presidential campaign put him in contexts of watermelons, ribs and terrorists. More subtly, he was portrayed as different or exotic, not patriotic, not "one of us."

Perhaps the most serious challenge to Obama's campaign was occasioned by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor. Wright had used the podium to vent his contempt at America for its historic wrongs against black people. Though Wright did not speak for Obama, many still declared Obama as guilty by association.

But the Wright tapes and the circumstances surrounding them turned out to be a defining moment of Obama's political career. Obama chose to confront head-on America's racial crisis. In a nationally televised speech, Obama traced the nation's troubled racial history, challenging Americans "to transcend the racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years." His speech was an admission of America's racism, a call to action, and a summons to all to join him in this journey of change.

Addressing such an explosive topic during an intense campaign was risky. But one who aspires to greatness must display the courage to do the right thing irrespective of the consequences. Obama did that. He expressed his faith in the capacity of the American people to move to greater heights.

Obama's charm, style, charisma, discipline and mannerisms appeal to millions. His childhood story and his rise to national stature stand as inspirations to his multiracial audiences. He embraces the positive, reminding audiences that America was the greatest nation in the world. He has told millions to join him on this superhighway to reverse America's drift and restore the nation's sense of purpose and direction. His appeal and message transcend racial and class boundaries. He provides a vision and hope at a very uncertain moment in history. And by electing him, Americans focused on the "content of his character," and not on the "color of [his] skin."

It is true that America "cannot escape history," but now, for the first time in its history, can strive to heal its racial wounds by building a better bridge to the future.

Yet it will be a mistake to assume that the election of Obama has cured America's racial ills. His challenges are monumental and perhaps unprecedented. He will inherit a nation at the brink of economic collapse, one in which the legacy of slavery and its institutions is deeply entrenched in its cultural landscape. A century ago, WEB Du Bois predicted America's problem to be one of the "color line," and his prophesy remains very real today. The African-American community leads in every category on the misery index: high rates of unemployment, school dropout, police brutality and incarceration as well as debilitated school systems with acute shortages of educational resources and a raft of enormous challenges. More than half a century after the Brown vs. Board of Education, a larger proportion of young blacks still attends segregated schools. Given the role of education in dismantling racial stereotypes, the symbolism is powerful. The American promise which so many marched and died for during the civil rights movement is still to be redeemed.

A master with words, Obama has inspired millions with his speeches. Equally significant is his belief that the destiny of American people is bound together by the sense of a common purpose.

Yes, words matter, but he will need much more than that to reverse the tide of the deepening racism in this country. Now is the time for bold action. With this it is the hope that Obama will institute the process of delivering on the American promise to all citizens.

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