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Transcending Race

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Barack Obama's historic win will not cure America's racial ills, but offers a divided country a chance to heal racial wounds and renew a national dialogue on race, say two University of Dayton experts in race relations.

"By electing him, Americans focused on 'the content of his character,' and not on the 'color of his skin,'" says Julius Amin, professor and chair of the history department, who teaches courses in African-American history. "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 on the brink of economic collapse, one in which the legacy of slavery and its institutions are deeply entrenched in its cultural landscape."

Leslie Picca, assistant professor of sociology, cautions people not to interpret Obama's win as a signal that racial discrimination has ended.

"He cannot erase all of our historical pains. It's an exciting time in terms of history, but if you look at inequities in structures such as the health care and legal systems, this will not solve our racial issues," says Picca, co-author of the 2007 book, Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage.

As part of her research for the book, Picca surveyed hundreds of white college students nationwide and discovered that racist language is common banter between them, but not typically used when they're part of a diverse group.

"According to my research, racism is hidden," she says. "Obama's election may bring it more out in the open. It could be good for a national dialogue, but it will take more than a few conversations to fix institutional racism."

Obama opened the conversation earlier this year when he denounced his former pastor's racist remarks. Amin calls Obama's reaction to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's sermons as "a defining moment" in the campaign.

"Obama's speech was an admission of America's racism and a call to action," Amin says. "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."

Political pundits say that Obama won over Americans, regardless of race and from all socio-economic walks of life, with an inspirational message and a charisma that's been compared to John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. "His appeal and message transcended racial and class boundaries," Amin observes.

Still, both Amin and Picca believe racism is too firmly entrenched in American society to lead to overnight changes in attitudes and behaviors, though Obama's win offers hope for racial reconciliation.

"I would warn us not to be overly confident, to feel like the work has been done," Picca says.