

BLACK LEADERSHIP IN AMERICA: THEY STRUGGLED TO HELP ELECT A BLACK PRESIDENT, BUT WAS IT WORTH IT?

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ABSTRACT

A 2009 qualitative study focused on the ascension of Barack Obama to the country's highest office and the impact of this experience on seven African American leaders (three females, four males), between the ages of 30 and 89. Qualitative data analysis produced six themes (barriers, advancement, leadership, expectations, consequences, and cultural impact) and 11 subthemes. Without exception the participants stated disbelief that a "Black man" would become president of the United States in "[their] lifetime." Participants also expressed a renewed sense of pride in their racial identity and expressed hope that the positive role modeling of a Black president would be instrumental in challenging the social status quo and exorcising some of its existing ills. Additionally, participants proclaimed a renewed faith in a "White America" that had finally overcome the prejudicial attitudes of previous decades and centuries.

Two years later, the 2009 findings appeared at odds with national statistics indicating the numbers of hate groups operating in America increased exponentially in the last decade. Given the capricious nature of the contemporary sociopolitical landscape in the United States, additional research into the dynamics of racial identity vis-à-vis the African American community as impacted by Barack Obama was warranted and a follow up study was conducted.

The follow up study revealed that there is still racial pride but, the enthusiasm participants felt in 2009 has waned considerably. Where once there was hope, there are now challenges and an increasingly polarized political environment due in large measure to racial intolerance and prejudice.

INTRODUCTION

The central social dilemma in the United States (U.S.) has been the effort to reconcile a vast spectrum of cultures, classes, communities, and groups into a common political project called democracy (Marable, 2001). "The darkest aspects of American history have often been hidden from plain view...ignorance of our shared history sustains our parallel universes" (Marable, 2006). Indeed, the broad notion of "America" has never really included all of its residents and redefinitions notwithstanding, the term remains ambiguous (Sollors, 1994).

Compounding the struggles of cultural understanding is the historical leadership role of White males within the U.S. (Bordas, 2007). It is this leadership in particular that has left myriad cultures and subcultures feeling underrepresented and disenfranchised within their own country but of all U.S. cultures and subcultures none, perhaps, have suffered more than the African American community. The Black community in America has been marginalized, exploited, and subjugated; African Americans have endured centuries of trials and challenges and their collective history is riddled with success and failure, starts and stops, hope and despair.

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois prophesized the critical dilemma of twentieth century America would focus on the color line, but few could have anticipated the enormous devastation of adherence to racial dogma, ideologies of White supremacy, and notions of Black inferiority (Hine, 2001). White racial attitudes and other racial considerations continue to have a dramatic impact on shaping U.S. politics and public policy into the twenty-first century (Harris-Lacewell, 2003; Hu-DeHart, 2001; Stokes, Melendez, & Rhodes-Reed, 2001).

“Blacks in the United States have never been a unified, homogeneous entity or of a single mind...there have been rifts, controversies, and conflicts of a stimulating yet divisive nature” (Monk, 2002) and well into the twenty-first century the debates continue regarding; 1) the cognitive bias of prejudice, 2) the role of stereotypes in attitude development, 3) the sources of change in racial attitudes, 4) the contours of [B]lack political attitudes, and most recently, 5) the relationship between [W]hite racial attitudes and support for various public policies that disproportionately affect people of color (Harris-Lacewell, 2003). The U.S. has sustained an oppressive structure, the product of which is the strategic social and ideological deployment of racism (Lubiano, 1997; Marable, 2006).

Hajnal (2007) has concluded that race relations in America may depend in no small part on the presence and expansion of African American political representation. The most dramatic expansion of that representation in the U.S. undoubtedly has been the election of its first Black president, Barack Obama, in 2008. Although President Obama has frequently sought to avoid discussions about race in a “country with deep-seeded divisions and a troubled racial history” no doubt “race will remain a central focus of inquiry and discussion” (Fraser, 2007, p. 179).

“Barack Obama was catapulted into national prominence, in part, because of his skill at building bonds of empathy with supporters from a seemingly impossibly broad political base” (Mack & Chen, 2004, pp. 99) but perhaps that created a false sense of racial unity. However:

People of color must break through the mental racial barricades that divide America into parallel racial universes. We need to mobilize and support the election of Barack Obama not only because he is progressive and fully qualified to be president, but also because only his campaign can force all Americans to overcome the centuries-old silences about race that still create a deep chasm across this nation’s democratic life... If there is any hope for meaningful change inside U.S. electoral system in the future, it lies with progressive leaders like Barack Obama. If we can dare to dream politically, let us dream of the world as it should be (Marable, 2008).

It has become increasingly apparent there remains an ugly underbelly of racism, bigotry, and inequality in the U.S. (Holthouse & Potok, 2008; Pinar, 2001; Milbourn & Cuba, 1980). The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) reports the number of hate groups operating in America grew by 7.5% from 932 groups in 2009 to 1002 in 2010; the overall increase since 2000 is 66% (Potok, 2011). The SPLC (2009) posits that two new factors were introduced to the volatile hate movement in the U.S. in recent years; 1) a faltering U.S. economy and, 2) Barack Obama. SPLC investigators (2009) claim Barack Obama’s candidacy and subsequent election “inflamed racist extremists” who see it as another sign that their country is “under siege by non-[W]hites.”

METHODOLOGY

There was, as revealed in a previous study, immeasurable hope for the future of race relations born of Barack Obama’s candidacy and election (Noble, 2009). Nearly three years later, that very hope seems disproportionately at odds with the aforementioned SPLC findings and today’s volatile political and social landscape.

The influence and authority of Black leaders comes from being a part of the *community* (Bordas, 2007) thus, it was critical to secure the *community’s* involvement in the selection process. The participants (*Black leaders*) were identified and nominated by the Black community in a mid-sized city in America’s heartland. The participants (four males, three females) ranged in age from 30 to 89 and included a World War II veteran, a scholar/author, an allied healthcare professional, an attorney, a small business owner, a not-for-profit administrator, and a community activist.

In the tradition of qualitative inquiry, the results focused on rich information rather than hard replicable data (Creswell, 1994; Matkin, Forbes, Haye, & Lemberger, 2002). The central phenomenon, to provide insights into the ebb and flow of hope and anxiety within the Black community and the impact of Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy on Black leaders, could

only be told vis-à-vis qualitative inquiry as the realities of the participants are subjective and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the participants' experiences, social identities, feelings, emotions, or attitudes in meaningful ways.

The study was bound by location, participant criteria, and the interview and observation protocol which contained six research questions and was peer reviewed. The sampling was purposeful and the data collection was guided by the protocol. Data analysis centered on an open-coding system that involved fracturing data and disaggregating records from voluminous interview transcripts into well synthesized and organized ideas (themes and sub-themes) to produce a consolidated picture of the central phenomenon. The data analysis employed three verification strategies, specifically, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, and member checking.

The 2011 follow study involved the same participants (save for one female, age 81, who passed away) and utilized the same research methodology.

FINDINGS

The participants' responses from the 2009 study resulted in the emergence of six themes (barriers, advancements, leadership, expectations, consequences, and cultural impact) and 11 sub-themes. The first theme, *barriers*, revealed two distinct types of barriers, *penetrable* and *impenetrable*. Penetrable barriers, most notable perhaps, segregation, were obstacles which were overcome, or overcome in part in the esprit de corps of citizen leadership. Citizen leaders are ordinary people who are able to discern the *wrongness* of certain social constructs and based on principles and moral imperatives, do what they can to *right* them. Coalitions organized by community leaders are among the most defining approaches to social problem-solving over the last decade plus (Chavis, 2001) and this scenario continues to play out across the nation and around the globe in various situations where social injustice can be found.

As for the impenetrable barriers, they are the consequences of tragically flawed value and belief systems that produce prejudicial attitudes and result in discriminatory actions. Given these attitudes are so firmly entrenched in the human psyche of some segments of the population, they are not likely to change regardless of who is involved or who is leading the charge to surmount the seemingly insurmountable.

The second theme to emerge was that of *advancements*, which focused on the just cause of civil rights and the related changes in municipal, state, and federal legislation. Each of the participants was able to identify specific events whereby Blacks were able to shake the invisible chains of oppression that limited them historically thus allowing them to focus on what could be done in the future. Even so, the legacy of slavery and the serried workings of racism and prejudice have led even the most optimistic of Black Americans to acknowledge the crystallized schisms, social injustice, and the wide gulf between America's promises and her practices (Fabre & O'Meally, 1994).

Leadership was the third theme identified. It is thought that the crisis in Black leadership is the failure of Black leaders to carry on a tradition of leadership that was at once aggressive and inspirational. One reason for this failure is the slow disintegration and deterioration of personal, familial, and communal relationships among African Americans (Steinberg, 1997).

Regardless of a presupposed deterioration of Black leadership, it has been historically rooted in two protest or resistance traditions; Martin Luther King's *integrationism*, and Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X's *nationalism* (Cone, 1992). These men and those who shared their sentiments were intimately aware of the disunity among African Americans but they had very different ideas and approaches in terms of how to rectify it.

For decades the integrationist conception of racial equality dominated the nationalist alternative but even so millions of Blacks were (and continue to be) excluded from many aspects of American life due to a segregated existence (Rivers, 2002) and the lack of full and equal access to education, housing, healthcare, employment, and political representation. "There were important differences of opinion within the ranks [of the integrationists], but they all could agree

that a color-blind society was their immediate goal (Marable, 2011, p. 92). While the “Black middle class” may have held tight to the dream of integration and sharing neighborhoods, schools, and working side-by-side with White America in reality, it proved irrelevant for poor Blacks living in predominately poor communities (Rivers, 2002, p. 234).

“Confronting the integrationists were their ideological rivals, the [B]lack nationalists, who bitterly rejected integration as a political and cultural hoax designed to deepen the levels of exploitation and economic oppression. They were suspicious of alliances with [W]hites and preferred the development of political linkages to nationalists in Africa and the Caribbean” (Marable, 2011, p. 92). The radicalized approaches of some representatives of Black nationalism were off-putting to certain segments of the population and, indeed, they have been accused of being “cynically anti-Semitic, mean-spirited, and simply incompetent...[and] are all demagoguery, uniforms, bow ties, and theater...they lack programmatic and policy substance...” (Rivers, 2002, p. 233) but they nonetheless drew attention to very real and very serious matters of concern within the Black community and gave voice to those who were tired of being silenced.

Despite the disparate opinions and view of the two approaches, Malcolm X and Dr. King saw one another as “fellow justice fighter[s], struggling against the same evil---racism---and for the same goal--- freedom for African Americans” (Cone, 1992).

Cosby & Poussaint (2007) offer that Black America must recognize that the iron shackles that physically bound previous generations can evolve dangerously into psychological binds for current and future generations. The fourth theme, *expectations*, addressed the need for positive role modeling within the Black community and the reconstruction of previously held assumptions. The nature of Black leadership, according to Walters & Smith (1999), is oriented toward changing the status of Black America and conforms to the precepts of transformational leadership; the problem, however, is that along with the rest of the nation, Black America has been exposed to negative images of Black people for so long that it has become increasingly difficult to overcome and/or transform harmful stereotypes and images.

Idea inspiring messages and strong images of Black productivity are often missing in contemporary society and the possibility of empowering mutually favored values is frequently muted (Banfield, 2004; Willis, 1994). Banfield (2004) is disturbed by how the value of Black America is measured with limited images and condemns Black Entertainment Television (BET) as a “televised festival of ignorance, a sexual minstrel show where [B]lack men are being constructed as the commodity of anger and [B]lack women are diminished...” Accordingly, the deterrents to present-day success for young Black people is a lack of inspirational models of excellence, image, and identity (Banfield, 2004); the hope is that Barack Obama will alter the perceptions and change the expectations for Black role modeling.

There are positive and negative *consequences* (theme five) of an Obama presidency for Black America. Among the positive consequences, according to study participants, are increased hope that the past racial tensions will be relieved and relationships among various segments of the population will improve.

Negative consequences of an Obama presidency are related to the hardening of the bigotry that lingers. Overcoming the negative consequences of bigotry will undoubtedly require new ways of thinking and behaving and will likely distort existing patterns of action (Quinn, 1996). Exceeding the expectations of transformational leadership in terms of helping others to realize their own full potential (Greenleaf 1970, 1977, 1998) is perhaps the only hope for overcoming the negative consequences associated with Barack Obama’s presidency. The feat, however, will prove difficult as Madison would note in No. 10 (Federalist Papers) as cited in Hacker (1973, p. 78):

...the reason of man is an imperfect instrument, citizens tend to be myopic, wrongly perceiving their own interests as identical with the common good. As each person is anxious to promote his own well-being, the political opinions in society are distorted in their perception of reality and divisive in their impact.

The sixth theme to emerge, *cultural impact*, is squarely centered on the juxtaposition of race and the validation of social identity. In terms of the juxtaposition of race, what it means to be Black is defined not only by Black people but by a social process in a divided world; given the hegemony of a *Euro* centric culture as opposed to an *African* centric culture, a great deal of what it means to be Black is based on the assumptions, attitudes, and expectancies of White America. When an African American child, for example, discovers his or her own *blackness* it is often the discovery of a *socially constructed blackness*. Ergo, it is near impossible for Black citizens to be just *Americans* in the same sense that *Whites* are just *Americans*. Black Americans remain invisibly “hyphenated” Americans, seemingly and unfairly subaltern and subordinate in the social order whether they wish it to be or not (Gaines & Reed, 1995).

Most poignant among the study findings, perhaps, is that none of the participants thought they would bear witness to a Black U.S. president in their lifetime. That day has come and with it came a renewed sense of cultural identity, a resurgence of Black pride, and new ideals for Black leadership. For a race of people who struggled to find their collective way in a hostile world, the presidential election of Barack Obama brought with it new hope, new dreams, and a yet to be defined future. It will not be a future without hardship, but it is a future filled with pride and yes, vindication.

“Every four to eight years hope emerges on the American political landscape. U.S. citizens invariably believe that possibility for change and improvement exists through its political process. Whether that hope is naïve, misplaced or wrong-headed, it still exists” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 35). While race and gender consciousness may have typified the 2008 presidential election, it was further complicated by the collision of events and by the perception of pending social and cultural changes (Edwards, 2010). The follow up study of 2011 finds little change in the attitudes and beliefs of the participants as it relates to Barack Obama’s impact on Black leadership except in terms of Black political representation.

“For a nation that had, only a half century earlier, refused to enforce the voting rights and constitutional liberties of people of African descent, to elevate a [B]lack American as its chief executive, was a stunning reversal of history” (Marable, 2011, p. 232). Indeed, the participants in this study felt the same way but the enthusiasm they initially felt with the election of the nation’s first Black president has waned. Their collective lack of exuberance currently is multifaceted. There is, on some level, disappointment that the president has not been as forceful as he appeared on the campaign trail and has in some ways, allowed the Republican Party to dominate the national political agenda.

The participants in the study, all affiliated with the Democratic party, are struggling to reconcile their frustrations in light of the unified voice that was at once, a call to action to mobilize and support the election of Barack Obama. He was presented to the electorate as a progressive, forward thinking, aptly qualified candidate. Further he was propped up as the potential force for Americans to heal “the centuries-old silences about race that still create a deep chasm across this nation’s democratic life” (Marable, 2008). If indeed, there was hope for meaningful change within the electoral system in the United States for those who dared to dream politically, it was Barack Obama (Marable, 2008).

What has happened in the years since Barack Obama’s election, according to study participants, is an escalation in “anti-Black political representation” and an “increase in the nasty rhetoric coming from the right.” Targeting a particular group during the ebb and flow of a nation’s maturation, however, is not a new phenomenon; “It happened to the Irish of the 1850s, the Germans during WWI, the Japanese during WWII, the Mexicans during Operation Wetback, and the Russians during the Cold War. In fact, the very definition of what and who is an ‘American’ has shifted as different ‘out groups’ become ‘in groups’ when the situation and historical circumstances change” (López, 2002, p. 198).

In all, participants’ responses in this study tend to conform with national data whereby Black “respondents indicate that despite the progress that the country has made in wake of the

Obama candidacy, African Americans are considerably less likely than whites or Latinos to see racial equality being accomplished in their lifetimes. Only 11 percent of [B]lacks reported that the nation has achieved racial equality compared to 39 percent of [W]hites and 25 percent of Hispanics. A larger percentage of [B]lacks felt optimistic about the prospects of the country achieving racial equality in the immediate future. Forty-one percent of [B]lacks compared to 36 percent of [W]hites and 41 percent of Hispanics think that racial equality in the United States will happen soon. However, a substantial core of the [B]lack population is skeptical about the prospects of the country achieving racial equality -- 44 percent believe that racial equality will not be achieved in their lifetimes or will never be achieved. A smaller proportion of [W]hites (20 percent) and Hispanics (25 percent) are pessimistic about the prospects of the nation achieving racial equality compared to blacks” (Harris, 2009. p. 69).

DISCUSSION: RACE, STIGMA, PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Race relations have long plagued the American people and prejudice and discrimination are unmitigated evils (Fein, 2001) but it does appear that the nation has matured, particularly in the years following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many of the evils that have consumed much of the past, while still present, are becoming less prevalent. While making it no less tragic, history suggests that racism, tribalism, and nativism will always be with us (Meacham, 2009), but one element, stigmatization, is particularly disturbing and is illustrative of the chasm between races.

Stigmatization, calls into question one’s own humanity but because stigma is largely a social construction, a particular characteristic may be stigmatizing at one historical moment, but not another (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Stigma and prejudice are closely related mental concepts (Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008) and still exist in the U.S., but the country no longer lives with legal segregation and affirmative action has opened doors for many Blacks.

The apparent White delusion of racial superiority has insulated itself against refutation as the result of a White epistemology of ignorance that has safeguarded it (Mills, 2007). Ignorance suggests a deficiency of information, an accidental omission, a gap in knowledge, but once recognized, such oversights should be easily remedied (Bailey, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Social ignorance, left unchallenged, however, can lead to situations of oppression.

One of the key features of oppressive societies is that they do not necessarily acknowledge themselves as oppressive. In any oppressive society there is a dominant view about the general nature of the society that represents its particular forms of inequality and of exploitation as basically fair and just (Alcoff, 2007). Sadly it seems, there is an “animated fear and loathing of Obama by some terrified [W]hites [which is a] recognition that America is fundamentally changing ethnically and racially...the [W]hite majority population is rapidly vanishing. Latinos, [B]lacks, Asians, and Native Americans combined, will outnumber Americans of European descent by 2042, earlier than predicted. By 2050, racialized groups will account for 54%. Already, in cities, like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, [W]hites have been a “minority group” for years but they still have exercised decisive power, especially in government and economically” (Marable, 2009, p. 7).

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Illuminating the conundrum of race (Hine, 2001; Stokes, Melendez, Rhodes-Reed, 2001) are those factors associated with social identity. Social identity, as described by Abrams & Hogg (in Slay, 2003) is an individual’s knowledge of belonging to certain social groups and an emotional and valued significance that comes with that membership (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Social identity centers on social comparisons (Hogg & Terry, 2000) and according to Tajfel & Turner (1979), people have multiple social identities corresponding to different group memberships and the salience of different identities varies according to context. When one’s identity with a particular group is salient, self-esteem associated with membership in that group as well as in-group favoritism result.

It is the various groups to which people belong that form their social identity or “self conception as a group member.” While people share a social group categorization with others--race, for example--there are within that categorization members with divergent views politically, socially, religiously, etc. The beauty of social identification, however, comes when the group as a whole unites itself in special moments and feels a sense of pride within those moments.

A more encompassing aspect of “self” however, is the level at which the identities are defined. Identities can be made at the individual, interpersonal, or collective level and there are different implications for leadership at each. When, for example, identities are salient, the traits that differentiate one from others (intelligence, attractiveness, wealth, etc.) should be strong inputs that constrain leadership perceptions. At the interpersonal level, when self is defined (e.g., leader and follower), role relations should constrain leadership perceptions. When collective identities are salient, traits that show an orientation toward the entire group should define leadership, self-sacrifice and cooperation (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Rosalie, 2001).

Given the argument that the focus of self-identity is centered on the two intervening mechanisms of values and self-concepts (Lord & Brown, 2001), it should come as no surprise that the participants and much of Black America, feel an elevated sense of pride that a Black man has ascended to the highest office in the nation thus setting a new standard for expected potential.

For Black America, group identity has been a struggle due in large measure to the marked racial tensions and in-group and out-group polarization (Slay, 2003). Membership in any in-group or out-group is, of course, defined by the principals of the group but, nonetheless, in-groups are those members who meet certain criteria to claim the group as part of their social identity. Membership in an out-group simply refers to “others” who do not meet those same criteria (Franzoi, 1996).

It is because of the very existence of in-groups and out-groups as defined by the numerically dominant White U.S. population, that Black community members appear to learn very early in their lives how to move between juxtaposed worlds. There is the Black world with its culture, history, and traditions that shape members’ social identity and the White world that has, historically, defined the order and purpose that all people, regardless of race, must navigate. James A. Joseph, a former U.S. ambassador to South Africa, declared that Black Americans have “understood there was a world to which they were moving, and could move, that was different from the world they currently experienced” (Chambers & Lucas, 2003). While the movements both toward and away from the comforts of self-defined racial identity are occurring simultaneously, there remains a noticeably common thread between yesterday and today.

BLACK LEADERSHIP AND ITS POLITICAL RELEVANCE

Abraham Lincoln suggested that American political leaders would always live in the shadow of the country’s founding fathers, yet there has been much democratic glory won in transforming their essentially aristocratic order into a more egalitarian, inclusive, and democratic polity (Miroff, 2000). The American political tradition upholds more complex and more democratic conceptions of leadership than were once available and it is no easy task to define with absolute clarity either leadership or democracy in twenty-first century America.

Leaders, while possessing special attributes, are also the products of their environments. The various cultural practices to which one is exposed bear tangible political effects such as the forging of communities, the reproduction of inequalities, the vindication of exclusions, as well as providing the very means by which those same effects are challenged (Moore, Kosek, & Pandian, 2003). The Black community, for the most part, has been an alienated political minority in the U.S. and as such has had limited political impact. “Democracies promise electoral minorities that, through persuasion, they can become part of a majority. This promise seems to help electoral losers accept their defeat but racial status is beyond persuasion. Therefore, racial domination makes [Black Americans] permanent electoral losers” and they are “chronically alienated politically” (Merelman, 1995).

The objective of fundamentally transforming Black America has not yet been realized. The majority of Blacks still do not have meaningful access to the political, economic, and cultural resources of the country and although the Black movement introduced the agenda of multiculturalism, the struggle for cultural identity and multicultural democracy has not yet reached its desired goals (Jalata, 2002). Multicultural democracy “means that the leadership within our society should reflect the richness, colors and diversity of our people. Multicultural democracy demands new types of power sharing and the reallocation of resources, to create [economic] and social development for those who have been most oppressed...” (Marable, 2011, p. 257). The lack of complete membership in the democratic process for Black America is due in large measure to the efforts of segments of the White establishment, its institutions, and its collaborators to prevent such engagement (Jalata, 2002). This Eurocentric paradigm has created myriad obstacles that continue to prohibit Black success in a multitude of arenas, not the least of which is the political arena.

“Black leadership is the product of an intellectual and political journey toward an understanding of the political culture of [B]lack America” (Marable, 1998) and it is critical at this juncture for Black leadership to not just consider broadening its political base on local, regional, national, and international levels, but to actually implement such an effort built upon the principles of popular democracy and multiculturalism while forming alliances with antiracist, anticolonial, and progressive forces in order to expose and remove obstacles to social justice, popular development, and self-determination.

There have been formidable impediments to realizing the full democratization of American life and “a revival of American political leadership requires the restoration of honor to an American political realm currently mired in cynicism and alienation” (Miroff, 2000). Many see the beginnings of a new generation of leaders; those who share the attributes of leaders who brought down the Berlin Wall, dismantled communism, and put a stop to apartheid and it is these kinds of leaders who seek and need power so they may disperse it, not dominate it. It is these leaders that need to be identified and supported inasmuch as it is their efforts that will enable others to change the nature of current, yet outdated political processes and practices (Chambers & Lucas, 2003).

It is anticipated that, as the years tick by, more members of the Black community will be fulfilling the unique leadership roles such as “public leadership” positions. Public leadership, as a matter of course, refers to individuals and institutions that are dedicated to governance and public policy (Kellerman & Webster, 2001). Black community objectives are defined by abstract or generalized ideas such as freedom, justice, and equality which are then elaborated by more concrete policy objectives such as affirmative action, education reform, and so on.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Black community is once again at a crossroads; there has been a decline of democratic authority over the years and Americans have grown dissatisfied with the ways political life has been managed; there is a lack of familiarity with key political issues as well as an overriding disenchantment with the quality of political leaders (Kellerman & Webster, 2001; Block, 2007). There are also commentators that claim that the 2008 election is evidence that the country has moved beyond race while others argue racism remains as entrenched as it ever was (Park & Rachlinksi, 2009). Indeed, electing a Black candidate to the nation’s “highest office may offer a formula for Black political power, but it cannot substitute for the enactment of substantive policies that respond to the long overdue calls for racial justice” (Crayton, 2009, p. 206).

“As we rejoice in Obama’s transformative victory, vigilance must be the watchword. The racial order is still in place, Obama has not transcended race, and we have not achieved postraciality” (Hill, 2009, p. 146). Hill (2009) further contends that democracy is a contested ideological commodity and as such, it requires a fierce urgency

is attached to the need to “understand that Barack Obama has arrived at this historic epoch through the crucibles of colonialism, the middle passage, slavery, racial segregation, and millions of ravaged black bodies and souls” (Hill, 2009, p. 146).

According to the Pew Research Center (2010) public trust in the federal government is at one of its lowest levels in half a century and only 22% of Americans say they trust the government to do what is “right.” Compounding the negativity are issues attendant to race and a Black president. Nearly six-in-ten African Americans (58%) say news coverage of Blacks is generally too negative while only 31% of Whites make the same claim. Kellerman & Webster (2001), expressed concern that should the public continue to ignore the crisis in authority there may be a moment in time when the “actions of free citizens and the power they create when they come together is a frozen tableaux from a lost time and place rather than an ever present possibility.”

“Despite more than fifty years of civil rights law aimed at dismantling racial subordination and a culture that purports to be more racially tolerant than ever before, ‘the elimination of Jim Crow did not really occur.’ Clearly, the United States has undergone a shift away from the formalized, official, overt racism that characterized the Jim Crow South. However, more subtle and insidious forms of racism continue to shape American culture despite post-civil rights policies that ostensibly seek egalitarianism” (Powell, 2007, p. 41) and there seems to be no end in sight.

There are a number of preexisting assumptions associated with identity politics including: 1) members of the group share common histories including their shared oppression; 2) the shared experience of the oppression is the marker for an identity that supersedes other forms of identity, and 3) group members are fierce and constant allies. Thus, identity politics is politics based upon groups who are interested in serving the interests of members of the group rather than a community in its entirety (Denton, 2010, p. x). This is problematic in and of itself as “Negotiating social identities within a liberal democracy is challenging [as is] the balancing of conflicting values...of a democratic society (Denton, 2011, 202). Identity politics, therefore, challenges some of the very fundamental principles of democracy.

Identity politics can actually hinder the social and cultural assimilation of the more pluralistic patterns of social life, restricting both the incentives and opportunities for cultural innovation. Group interests have the ability to fracture the polity and actually work against ending elements of marginalization. The difficulty with movements in certain social groups lies within their desire to gain full acceptance (and in some cases) assimilation within mainstream culture rather than continue to focus on differences that will, by their very definition, perpetuate continued social marginalization and the very real need of the same groups to maintain a serious spatial differential when it comes to *identity*. Focusing solely on those things which separates one group from another encourages a ‘tribalistic mentality’ where only differences are praised and highlighted. “Politics of distinction and difference makes it difficult to find common ground, identify core values and even pass legislation. Social polarization leads to ever more opposing social subgroups. Such polarization increases issues of inequality and social marginalization” (Denton, 2011, 204).

The various national political movements (the Tea Party, the Progressive movement, the Conservative movement, the Occupy movement, the Anti-war movement, etc.) are capitalizing on the widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate while the growing number of hate groups continues to tap into the darker side of human nature in ways previously unheard of. The national debate has soured as the rhetoric grows increasingly vile. Compounding the ugly state of affairs is

the incessant anti-Obama mantra. The challenge now is to try to cut through the hyperbole and encourage people regardless of social distinctions as it relates to race, ethnicity, gender, etc. to listen to all sides of an issue and not just the portion that makes them feel comfortable. What is comfortable is often what is familiar, and what is familiar can frequently lead to complacency and an incompleteness of knowledge. With the economic and social difficulties the people of the nation face, they can ill afford complacency or ignorance.

Given the capricious nature of the current social and political landscape in the U.S., concern is raised about whether affiliation alone can sustain Black leadership and whether an Obama presidency will prove to be too much for some segments of White America to abide. The Black leaders in this study did, in fact, struggle to elect a Black president and while it won't be easy to foster the inclusive spirit the nation is so desperately in need of at this time, the effort was, by all accounts, worth it.

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