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THE LEGACY OF THE OBAMA ERA: A NEW ELECTORAL MAJORITY?

By Robert L. Allen

Whether Barack Obama is regarded primarily as the first black president of the United States of America or more prosaically as an American president who happens to be black, it remains the case that he is first of all the American president at the moment. And, as with the American presidents before him, African Americans, despite being critical to his election, will not get specific attention to issues of discrimination and equity unless they unite in a social movement that compels the president and Congress to take up these issues. Whether Obama is avoiding “race” issues from a desire not to alienate white voters or he is motivated by commitment to a “colorblind” approach to policy, I argue in this chapter that African Americans will get the president’s attention only to the extent that there is an independent social movement that can bring political pressure to bear. (In the President’s lengthy State of the Union address in January there was only one sentence devoted to civil rights -- and it referred to enforcement of existing laws rather than any new initiatives.)

In his Introduction, Charles Henry highlights the fact that four periods of racial progress in American history have been associated with national crises in the form of wars. These crises, I suggest, created convergent interests between African Americans and the then U.S. President, and opportunities for interventions by African American leaders. Three occasions in U.S. history stand out as historical moments when African Americans, independently organized and mobilized, and with militant, progressive leadership, made successful interventions with U.S. presidents that resulted in major civil rights gains, and sometimes economic and political gains: Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, Franklin Roosevelt and Executive Order 8802, and the Kennedy-Johnson administration and civil rights legislation. These instances are instructive.

When Lincoln entered the Civil War he had no intention of freeing the slaves. In fact, he declared that his goal was “to save the Union, with or without slavery.” It was Frederick Douglass and other leaders of the abolitionist movement who called for freeing the slaves. Freeing the slaves also became a military necessity to win the war, as Lincoln acknowledges in the

Emancipation Proclamation itself. With emancipation the Union added almost 200,000 highly motivated freedmen as soldiers in the Union ranks, and employed another 300,000 freedpeople as laborers, stevedores, cooks and helpers to the Union army. These nearly half million former slaves - representing a significant portion of the adult African American population - were critical to the Union victory, and they played an important part in supporting Reconstruction governments in the South after the war. Without the guiding pressure from Douglass and others (and the necessities of the war) Lincoln might not have freed the slaves.

During World War II and the period immediately following, the African American population was transformed from a largely rural, southern population into a largely urban population in industrial centers throughout the country, especially the West Coast, where new black communities grew throughout California. It was jobs in the defense industries that drew tens of thousands of black migrants from the South. The jobs became available as a result of President Roosevelt issuing Executive Order 8802, which sought to end discrimination in the defense plants and shipyards. Although the executive order had no enforcement provisions, its existence spurred rural migrants to seek a better life in industry and cities. The jobs may have been temporary, but the new communities were permanent, changing the demographics and politics U.S. Executive Order 8802 would not have been issued were it not for the intervention of A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car porters union, and Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. With the outbreak of the war in Europe, Randolph saw an opportunity to intervene using his credibility as leader of a union of 10,000 black men. In 1941, he proposed to call for a massive march on Washington to demand desegregation of the military and the defense industries. Randolph got Walter White to support the effort and the two confronted Roosevelt in a famous meeting at the White House. Roosevelt was doubtful and perhaps thought Randolph was bluffing. But he also worried that a demonstration by 100,000 blacks in the capital could turn into a huge race riot which would be considered by the Germans and other Europeans, and many Americans, as a sign of division and weakness in the U.S. Roosevelt was preoccupied with the German invasion of Russia and trying to unite and bring and isolationist USA into the war against the Nazis. The last thing he wanted was a race riot in Washington. Significantly Roosevelt framed the executive order as necessary to bring all human resources available into the war effort. In effect, the president made nondiscrimination a matter of patriotic duty. The order

applied only to the defense industries, not the military. Randolph accepted this compromise, but continued his efforts and in 1948, a presidential election year. he and others got persuaded President Harry Truman, who was running for election, to order the general desegregation of all branches of the U.S. military.

The historic civil rights legislation of the 1960s was a result of pressure from the civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, along with hundreds of churches and of other organizations that considered themselves part of the movement and together had constituencies in the millions. This pressure -- intensified by the voices of Malcolm X and revolutionary black nationalists -- came at a time when the U.S. was locked in a Cold War with global Communism and seeking to position itself as the Leader of the Free World, including a Third World of mostly colored peoples of uncertain political disposition. When Lyndon Johnson became president after the assassination of President Kenney, Johnson was elevated from a Southern politician to leader of the nation and national leader of the Democratic party. Johnson realized that southern Dixiecrats were no help to the national party and no help in the global struggle with Communism. Like the Republicans after the Civil War, Johnson saw in the black vote a means of countering the Dixiecrats and gaining new voters for the national Democratic party. Pressure from the Civil Rights movement and the exigencies national and global politics converged to result in the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (and the new immigration law the same year). As Charles Henry pointed out, President Johnson was the last Democratic President to win a majority of the white vote; subsequent Democratic presidents would need the black vote to win.

The 2008 election returns revealed that Obama's victory was made possible by African Americans (95% for Obama), Latinos (67%), and Asians (62%). He won only 43% of the general white vote, but he won 54% of the white youth vote. He also won 69% of first time voters, who include many immigrants and youth of all races. This is potentially a new progressive electoral majority in formation. In recent decades we have seen this majority in formation in California, but it is now emerging in other parts of the country. The rightwing understands this phenomenon very well and will do all it can to undermine this emerging majority through divide and conquer tactics such as California's anti-immigrant Propositions

187, and anti-affirmative action Proposition 209. Enlarging the Prison Industrial Complex is another strategy the rightwing has pursued to reduce the number of black and Latino voters through criminalization and felonization of millions of black and Latino youth. The rightwing is also mobilizing a reactionary, racist movement -- the so-called Tea Party movement -- among whites fearful of the changes they see occurring.

Nevertheless, a new electoral majority, potentially progressive, is emerging in the U.S., as signaled by the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. In the face of the crises provoked by globalization, A conscious, coherent coalition of African Americans, Latinos, other marginalized communities, as well as new immigrant-citizens and progressive whites, especially youth, could set a new agenda for the U.S., at home and abroad.

There is little doubt that Barack Obama cannot win re-election without massive support from African American, Latino and new voters (youth and immigrant-citizens). This voting power represents enormous political capital. The time to use this capital is now, ahead of the 2012 presidential election, to secure programs, policies, and legislation that address specific concerns of African Americans and other racially marginalized communities. With the US confronting domestic and global crises that have resulted, among other things, in Obama facing declining support among whites, the president must shore up his support among blacks and Latinos if he expects to have a second term.

If the kind of multiracial democracy envisioned by Charles Henry and many others is to be achieved, it will require organization and mass movement by African Americans, Latinos, other marginalized communities, and progressive whites. The era of Barack Obama offers an opportunity to build and shape a movement by the emerging new electoral majority to create a multiracial democracy, a culturally "hybrid" new society in which, hopefully, inclusion, fairness, and equity are guiding principles.

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