

# **Race, Ideology, and the Polarization of America in the Age of the Obama Presidency**

By

**Blanchard Onanga Ndjila**

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# Acknowledgment

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# Introduction

In 2013, I defended my Ph.D. dissertation titled *Barack Obama and Civil Rights Organizations: Heritage, Tensions, Adjustments (2004-2010)*. Then, in 2024, Brandon Rottinghaus, the University of Houston Justin S. Vaughn, and Coastal Carolina University released the results of the Presidential Greatness Project Expert Survey conducted from November 15 to December 31, 2023. The main objective was to generate a ranking that covered the 46 Presidents America has known, from President George Washington to current President Joe Biden. Of all the 46 presidents surveyed, Abraham Lincoln came in first place, while President Obama ranked the seventh (7<sup>th</sup>) greatest U.S. president. Former President Obama's ranking gave me a moral ground to review the first term and some events that permeated the second term of his presidency and re-discover what it was all about. Given, on the other, that primary elections and caucuses relative to the 2024 U.S. presidential race are currently underway, Americans are trying to figure out what, why, and who to vote for as the next president between a physically old Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, and an erratic Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, both of whom are facing severe criticism from the American public, for different reasons.

These concurring and sometimes opposing instances have provided a perfect rationale for reflecting on Obama's presidency. To this end, I rewrote and examined a different theme from my original dissertation. This theme will always be relevant as long as America remains America: the polarization of America through race and ideology politics. Hence the title— *Race, Ideology, and The Polarization of America In The Age of The Obama Presidency*. In transforming my original dissertation into such a topic, I intend to demonstrate that after Two Hundred Fifty years of enslavement, a century of Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and a legacy of racial terror that includes the lynching of thousands of African Americans, Obama's first election, celebrated not just in America but worldwide, was rightly termed "historic." The

historicity nature of this election was predicated upon the fact that for centuries, African Americans' ancestors were enslaved, and that the slavery institution led to Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, as indicated, racial segregation followed by centuries of lynchings during which period Blacks and African Americans, considered second-class citizens, were socio-economically, culturally and politically marginalized, on the one hand. On the other hand, the American presidency before 2008 had always been won and held only by white men.

The 2008 and subsequent 2012 re-election of Obama were, therefore, supposed to transform America into a post-modern, post-racial, and certainly post-ideological America. I contend that this idealized vision of America turned out to be the opposite. I argue that, with the shift in the demography of America, coupled with white American conservatives and Republicans' fear of losing America to minorities, especially Blacks and African Americans, Obama's presidency failed to transform America into a post-racial nation. On the contrary, America, I contend, became even more of a racially and ideologically polarized nation. Because of identity politics, Obama's election saw an increased division in almost all aspects of American society between Liberals and Conservatives, as well as between Democrats and Republicans. This incompatible and almost unreconcilable perception of America made it nearly impossible for Obama to govern appropriately.

I contend that Obama, who campaigned on notions of change, hope, and, most specifically, on the governing principle of compromising, negotiating, and mutual understanding, was faced with an opposition party— Republican— that was not ready to compromise nor to collaborate with the First U.S. Black president. I argue that even if it could be true that the Republican opposition to President Obama's legislative initiatives was due to the Democratic and Republican parties having differing visions on politics, policies, and social issues, nonetheless, I contend that Republicans' opposition was also motivated not just by ideology principles but by black anti-sentiments and explicit hatred toward the first U.S Black president. Furthermore, I argue that,

socially, Black and White Americas became racially polarized and that subsequent racial incidents that occurred during Obama's presidency were exacerbated due to him being an African American President. I insist that the race issue was aggravated due to sharply opposing ideological views between Progressive Democrats and Conservative Republicans. I demonstrate how America was almost on the verge of losing itself. To this end, I divided the work into four Parts.

The First Part— Obama's 2008 Historic Election— has three chapters. I consider this First Part to be an introductory one. As such, it briefly reviews Obama's election as the first U.S. Black president. This brief part revisits the general election that opposed Obama to then-Senator McCain and leads the reader directly to Obama being elected the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President while examining the racial and ethnic groups that most likely voted favorably for Obama's first election and the reasons behind their choice. Even though I chose not to discuss the reasons why Obama's election was considered "historic," given that this new angle is not about his election per se, readers should take into consideration that this Part serves as the part allowing them to realize the historic nature of Obama's first election. To this end, the readers need to understand that Obama's first election was considered "historic" because before his election, as indicated, the U.S. presidency, until 2008, was held by white men. At the same time, African Americans came from a long line of enslaved ancestors, navigating through Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and segregation. Blacks and African Americans were marginalized economically, socially, culturally, and politically at the time when race theories viewed them as morally and mentally unfit to hold certain social positions. Due to this history, when in 2008 Obama was elected, a particular portion of America, represented most likely by few white conservatives and republicans, thought that by electing Obama, attitudes would change regarding, for instance, the race issue and how the binary Black/White, in particular, would reconcile their differing visions on, equality, justice, fairness, and the future of America.

In Chapter 2, I assess how, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama had strategically decided to almost refrain from discussing the issue of race and always remained above the fray by providing balanced answers whenever the issue of race occurred between Blacks and Whites. I specifically review the 2006 Jena Six racial incident that happened in the city of Jena, Louisiana. Reviewing this racial incident allowed me to establish a differing and tactical approach to the racial question between Obama and Black civil rights leaders by way of explaining that their opposing views on race were due to Obama running for president and wanting to embrace all the ethnic groups, keeping Blacks voters energized and enthusiastic without wishing to alienate the white race. That, having a different approach from Black civil rights leaders, put him in odd positions and aggravated racial tensions not only between Obama and the Black communities but also between the White and Black communities. In the third chapter, I pose a rhetorical question: whether, following Obama's election, America became a post-racial nation and whether racial tensions stopped occurring between blacks and whites. I contend that America is still racially polarized and that anti-black sentiments and hatred against blacks did occur instead, thus confirming that America has never been and did not become a nation where race-related issues or events suddenly stopped happening.

The Second Part, entitled — A Racially Polarized Nation— which is a continuation of the First Part, demonstrates how America became even more racially polarized following the election of Obama, thus rejecting the premature notion of America being possibly a nation where race-related issues would no longer occur. This Second Part is made up of four Chapters. Wherein before discussing Professor Henry Louis Gates's arrest, I review Shirley Sherrod's case and how the Tea Party Movement, most likely led by white male conservatives, made a controversy out of a fallacious claim and how the White House and the Obama administration were misled to believe that a racial incident had been perpetrated by a Black lady holding a leading position within the Obama Department of Agriculture and how the latter had penalized a



white farmer in the state of Georgia. I contend that the anachronism of the claim allows me to highlight how racially polarized America became following Obama's first election and how any misunderstanding between blacks and whites was quickly blown out of proportion. From this incident, I review Professor Henry Louis Gates' arrest. By reviewing this racial incident, I demonstrate how White America has always seemed to dictate the issue of race in America. Here, I show how, after reacting by asserting that Sergeant Crowley, the white police officer who arrested Harvard Professor Gates at his residence— after the latter had given all the proof and evidence that needed to be presented justifying, he was at his residence — Obama had to retract his initial statement and hold a "Beer Summit" at the White House between both protagonists and then Vice-president Biden. By reviewing this incident, I argue that even the U.S. First Black president could not express his honest view about any race-related incidents opposing the binary Black/White. A conciliatory summit was held because the White majority was unhappy with the president. Yet, in reality, America, I contend, was getting more polarized because a Black man was occupying the White House. These first two racial incidents, Shirley Sherrod's case, and Professor Gates' arrest, occurred during Obama's first term. To show that racial tensions continued to occur during the second term of his presidency, I review, in Chapters three and four, the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. By reviewing each of these killings, I contend that during the second term of Obama's presidency, the racial issue became even more aggravated, and that the nation seemed more racially polarized than ever. With Trayvon Martin's death, Obama found himself caught between the binary Black/White. I contend that the death of Trayvon Martin revealed how high racial tensions between blacks and whites had deteriorated. Politically, Conservatives and Republicans seized this death to criticize the president for expressing his views and declaring that if he had had a son, he would look like Trayvon Martin. Conservatives contended that Obama has politicized the issue by injecting himself into a case that should have been left to the justice. I

contend that the death of Trayvon Martin symbolized a moment that highlighted police brutality against unarmed young Black men, women, and children and that the recurring killing of black youth made it seem as if the American police force was intentionally killing young black men. With Trayvon Martin's death, the binary Black/White seemed forever polarized with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The President, I argue, became constrained by white America not to express his view because of fear of how they would react to his stance. In the last Chapter of this Part, I review Michael Brown's case to highlight that his death represented the moment that put America on the verge of getting racially burned. The president found himself, once again, caught up between both races. Brown's death allows me to underscore how the Ferguson police department — a white-dominated force— racially and intentionally discriminated against its Black and African American inhabitants. However, regardless of this fact, because the first Black U.S. Attorney General, Eric Holder, led the U.S. Justice Department, the subsequent investigation he launched was perceived to be racially motivated. Thus, white Conservatives and Republicans, in particular, blasted him while accusing Obama of politicizing Brown's death. Even though the examination of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown's murders are reviewed through a new angle, I essentially re-examine both cases using material from my book entitled, *Why Black Lives Matter- A Socio-Historical Contextualization of the Lives of Blacks in America, 1857-2023*.

The Third Part— A Nation Divided Ideologically— which has three Chapters, allows me to review the American progressive and democratic ideology to enable readers to understand the issues being discussed. To this end, I review the central positions that Democrats hold on socio-political issues. I therefore reviewed these issues from Obama's perspective. I highlighted Obama's central positions during the 2008 presidential election and contrasted them with then-Senator John McCain's. I then reviewed both candidates' positions on such social issues and policies related to abortion, homosexual marriage, the U.S. Supreme Court's appointment, the Second Amendment to the U.S.

Constitution, the role of the Federal government, the U.S economy, the war, and Affirmative Action, to name a few. I demonstrated that both candidates' views about these societal issues contributed to further opposing and polarizing the Republican and Democratic parties, which, in the long run, was likely to have an incidence on the American government because both parties were to a point where collaboration became almost impossible. I contend that this eventuality materialized itself once Obama was first inaugurated. In the second Chapter, I essentially review the family values associated with the Democratic party. In this vein, I revisit it from Obama's perspective. However, I demonstrate how Obama departed from the liberal perspective to speak of it conservatively. I provide a reason for such a departure. Still, I also highlight an incident that happened to him due to his conservative stance and moving far from his fundamental ideology. In the last Chapter of this Third Part, I underscore the differences between Conservative and Liberal ideologies. Again, these differences transpired during the general election when Obama opposed McCain. I examine these differences to demonstrate how the ideological difference between Republicans and Democrats was aggravated during the 2008 general election. I further demonstrate how the Obama administration encountered exceptional opposition from the Republicans. The opposition launched by conservatives and Republicans, I argue, even though it bore legitimate political and ideological grounds, was not always a principled opposition. I further argue that explicit anti-black sentiment, as well as hatred against the president for just being "Black," played a non-negligible role in the opposition and the obstruction he received from the Right.

The unprecedented Republican opposition to Obama leads to a review of the last Part of this work, entitled —Obama Administration vs. Republican Obstructionism. This Part, which has five Chapters—Barack Obama's Supreme Court Appointment, the Passage of The Matthew Shepard and James Jr. Act, The Education System Reform, The U.S Economic Recovery, and The U.S Healthcare System Reform—underscores how, during Obama's first term, the Republican Party

became the party of “No.” The party whose main feature became to say “no” to Obama, for the sake of it, sometimes. And for the sake of it, most of the time. For each of these Chapters, I demonstrate how, from a legislative point of view, the Democratic and the Republican parties became ideologically polarized. I contend that this polarization, which the Republican leadership blamed on Obama, failed to allow him to meet one of his campaign promises, which was to compromise with the Republican Party. For each legislative reform or policy initiative, I further show how the Obama administration asked for cooperation with the Republican Party leaders and how, unfortunately, the Republican party would turn down cooperating with the Obama administration. On the Republican side, I contend that the opposition to the reforms and policies initiated by Obama was led by Eric Cantor, the former senator for the seventh electoral district of Virginia and former chairman of the Republican caucus in the Senate, John Boehner, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, the chairman of the Republican caucus, and Mitch McConnell the former Republican Senate Majority leader— three powerful white men. On the Democratic side, in addition to Obama, his then-chief of staff Rham Emmanuel, Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic former Speaker of the House, and Harry Reid, the former Democratic Majority leader in the Senate, Obama was able to pass most of his reforms and policy initiatives without the Republican participating to bringing any of these to fruition. On the contrary, I argue, they spent time filibustering, obstructing, opposing, and, again, saying “no” to Obama. I further demonstrate how, with the passage of the healthcare reform, ideologies reached a high level in American politics with “zero” Republican voting for the reform. I also discuss, from another standpoint, some of the Democratic legislators who voted against the reform due to identity politics and how racialized the vote of the healthcare reform further polarized Republicans and Democrats, White conservatives, and Black liberals. Black civil rights leaders and organizations injected themselves into the fight to pass Obama’s healthcare reform. They not only defended him against Republican and Conservative critics but lobbied undecided

Democratic elected officials to vote for the reform. During the debates leading to the passage of the healthcare reform, America seemed more than ever racially and ideologically polarized.

To conduct this study, I use two perspectives: racial and ideological. For the first perspective, I examine and review five crucial racial incidents before and during the Obama presidency. While the first incident—The Jena Six— occurred before the first election of Obama, the four other incidents—Shirley Sherrod’s case, Professor Henry Louis Gate’s arrest, the death of Trayvon Martin, and the killing of Michael Brown—that occurred during Obama first and second terms are reviewed to claim that the race question continued to exist past his first election and that because of this sad reality, instead of becoming a post-racial nation, America became a more racially polarized nation mainly because, again, of the fear of having a Black president in the White House. White conservatives, in particular, felt they were and are still losing their country due to the demographic shift happening in America, which led Obama to the White House. The second perspective- the ideological one, allows me to highlight the ideological principles of the liberal ideology that I contrast with the conservative ones. To this end, I highlight Obama’s progressive stance on such social issues as Homosexuality and gay rights, the U.S Supreme Court appointment, Abortion, the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, family values, the role of the Federal government in individuals’ lives, the war in Iraq, or the Economy. For each of these societal issues, I contrast Obama’s positions to that of Republican Senator McCain, his challenger during the general 2008 presidential election. In addition, I use a sociological approach to examine most racial and ideological incidents that occurred during the Obama presidency. To this end, I use more than twenty surveys, polls, and statistics to support my main arguments. They are comforted by American public opinion views on most racial and ideological incidents polarizing America in the Age of Obama. The USA/Gallup Polls allow me to statistically examine and maintain the racial and ideological polarization between the Black/White binary while doing the same about Republicans and

Democrats. The US Census Bureau provides me with demographics for 2008 while discussing figures for fifteen American states. I use one investigative Report by the US Justice Department to underscore how the Ferguson Police Department has been abusing its power to discriminate against its Black and African American population, thus exacerbating racial relations between white police officers and Blacks, which ultimately led to the killing of Michael Brown. I use the Pew Research Center's statistics to reveal how American public opinions remained racially and ideologically polarized when it came to the not-guilty verdicts rendered by the Grand Jury, both in Eric Garner and Michael Brown's deaths. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) provides me with most figures used to examine the U.S. Recovery Plan.

I contend that due to differing party ideologies, Obama failed, once he became president, to efficiently collaborate with the Republican Party and leaders whose sole objective was to make him a one-term president. Thus revealing themselves to become known as the party of 'NO' that would end up opposing the Obama administration legislative reforms. During the passage of the healthcare reform, America became more racially and ideologically polarized between Blacks/Whites, Republicans/Democrats, and Conservatives and Liberals. Obama's Democratic party majority in Congress, during half of his first term, was forced to pass some of his major legislative reforms without Republicans voting favorably.

In this study, even though I differentiate Democrats from progressives, liberals, centrists, and conservative Democrats on the one hand and Republicans from conservatives, centrists, or right-wingers on the other, I use interchangeably Democrat, progressive, and liberal to suggest left-wing Democrats. On the other hand, I use interchangeably Republican, conservative, and Right-wing to suggest Republicans.

I contend that the purpose of this book appears to be twofold: to educate and underscore that regardless of electing Obama the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. First

Black President, America did not become a post-racial, post-ideological nation, and that, instead, America became more racially and ideologically polarized. Due to this polarization, Obama failed to collaborate with the Republican Party efficiently.

One unique feature of this book (as was the case with the original dissertation, upon which this book is based) that distinguishes it from others would be that I conducted fieldwork in the United States. During my stay, I researched and interviewed several experts in American politics from both ideologies and political parties. I interviewed civil rights experts, university professors, African American literature professors, and experts on American culture. These original interviews are incorporated into the present work. I have kept them because they made my dissertation as valuable as it will be for this book. It also indicates that I researched and experienced what I have written about. Considering that, as a young Ph.D. student enrolled in a European university, as already indicated, I had to live in America (residency requirement, so to speak) to experience the 2008 and 2012 election of Obama as the first U.S. Black President. Most of the racial and ideological polarizing incidents examined herein occurred during my fieldwork in America. Therefore, as with my original dissertation, this book represents more than a compilation of quotes and analyses from experts' books. Instead, it is an empirical-research-based book, thanks to the various personal enriching interviews and information I gathered while residing in America for my initial research.

I became an interdisciplinary scholar of American culture in 2013 after defending the Ph.D. dissertation, which has produced the book you hold. While I was doing fieldwork on the ground, I traveled across America. In anticipation of writing my Ph.D. dissertation, on which this book is based, in 2005, I traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, where I visited Dr. King Center for Non-Violence Social Change and learned about the Civil Rights Movement from some activists who were part of that Movement. Between 2008 and 2010, I traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, toured the Lorraine Motel, and learned about the moment that led to

the assassination of Dr. King on April 4, 1968. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2012, I traveled to Chicago, Illinois. I went to the Rainbow Push Coalition Headquarters, where I briefly met with the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who recommended me to his Assistant, Dr. Jannette Wilson, with whom I conducted an interview related to Jesse Jackson's place in American politics. I also traveled to Kansas City, Missouri, in 2010 and attended the NAACP 101<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention, where I took the opportunity to conduct interviews with the organization's members. Still, during that same period, I traveled to Iowa. I went to the University of Iowa and William Penn University. I interviewed Professor Horace Porter and Dr. Charles Klink on the 2008 election of Barack Obama and his presidency. While conducting fieldwork in the U.S., I researched Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, and John McCain at the State Historical Society of Iowa. Furthermore, while in the State of Iowa, I visited the African American Museum in Cedar Rapids. I studied and researched the impact of Reverend Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential runs on African Americans and America. All the information gathered from my fieldwork research was incorporated into the original dissertation, and I have also used some of it for the present book.

As an interdisciplinary scholar, I have taught French, English, American Studies, and Communication Studies at several Universities, namely, Omar Bongo University, the University of Iowa, and William Penn University. I am the lead instructor for AP English Language and Composition, Pre-AP African American, and the AP- African American offered at Rivermont Collegiate. I have authored, so far, four published books: *Why Black Lives Matter- A Socio-Historical Contextualization of the Lives of Blacks In America, 1857-2023*, (2024), a scholarly book; *Grief & Glee- Seasonal Storytelling Poetry* (2023), a poetry book; *Nkani-An African Prophecy* (2021), a fictionalized novel; and - *Onkere-An African Boy's Story of Struggle, Resilience, and Determination* (2019), a fictionalized memoir based on the author's life. I have written and published a few scholarly articles. I still have several non-published articles, among which- "*Dolly Parton's Lyrics As Embodiment Of The American Working-*



*Class Values*” or *“The UN Failure To Stop The Ukrainian Invasion, and Why Africa Must be Conferred Permanent Membership on A Reformed Security Council”* etc. As indicated, my interdisciplinary Ph.D. (2013) focuses on the Civil Rights movement’s historical contribution to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election of Barack Obama. My scholarly interests are in the intersection of American politics, the Civil Rights Movement, Obama’s presidency, African American studies, American political institutions, and the issues of race and racism in America. I am also a former diplomat who worked at the United Nations in New York City. During my tenure, I delivered several speeches on minorities, eliminating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, related intolerance, social development, the Advancement of Women, Human Rights issues, and many more. Most of my speeches can be accessed by following this link (<https://digitallibrary.un.org>) and typing my name into the search engine.

This book should appeal to specialists as well as general readers. This book could appeal to anyone interested in the Obama presidency, the question of race in America, or the American political party’s ideologies. The book is most likely intended for American History and Politics college students. This book is also designed for scholars of American studies and any researcher interested in the racial and ideology questions in twenty-first-century America, primarily if these issues are related to the Obama Presidency. This book would also appeal to American scholars working on racism and police brutality in America.

## **PART I: Obama's 2008 Historic Election**

# Chapter 1

## Obama Elected 44<sup>th</sup> US President

On November 4, 2008, after more than four months of campaigning for the general election, Barack Obama won the U.S. presidential election, winning nearly three hundred and sixty-five electoral votes, or a total of 52.9% of the popular vote, against only one hundred and seventy-three electoral votes for John McCain, representing 45.7% of the popular vote. Senator Obama became the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President but the first African-American to hold the Office of President, hence the historic nature of his election. While it is true that he owes this election first and foremost to the American people as a whole, the fact remains that he owes it primarily to two coalitions, namely African Americans and young people. These two coalitions are mentioned in these two polls comparing the final 2004 and 2008 election results:

2008		Obama	McCain	2004	Kerry	Bush
Race	Total			Total		
Whites	74 %	43 %	55 %	77 %	41 %	58 %
Blacks	13 %	95 %	4 %	11 %	88 %	11 %
Hispanics	9 %	67 %	31 %	8 %	60 %	40 %

Source: Chuck Todd & Sheldon Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, p.29.

These final results, which differentiate between the coalitions formed to elect Obama, show that in 2008, the percentage indicating the participation of African Americans in the electoral process was 13%. In contrast, this percentage was 11% in 2004. In other words, there was a 2% increase in turnout among black Americans. It should be noted that Obama received 95 percent compared to 88 percent by Senator Kerry in 2004. This implies a 7% increase in African Americans who voted for Obama compared to those who voted in 2004 for Democrat Kerry. This increase resulted from the efforts of both Obama and the civil rights

organizations that gave him their platforms between 2004 and 2008 so that he could deliver speeches and encourage African-American youth to participate more in the electoral process in the United States. Finally, as already pointed out, Obama was elected thanks to the exceptional participation of American youth, who had never actively participated in a presidential election until 2008. Young people were among the most registered voters, as this poll shows:

2008		Obama	McCain	2004	Kerry	Bush
Age	Total			Total		
18-29	18	66 %	32 %	17 %	54 %	45 %
30-44	29	52 %	46 %	29 %	46 %	53 %
45-64	37	50 %	49 %	38 %	47 %	52 %
65+	16	45 %	53 %	16 %	47 %	52 %

Source: Chuck Todd & Gawiser Sheldon, *How Barack Obama Won*, p.31.

One of the differences between the 2008 and 2004 presidential elections was the involvement of American youth. The 2008 election highlighted the growing gap between the elderly and the young. President Obama was elected at 47 as the first African-American president and was among the youngest presidents the United States has ever known. It is undoubtedly because of this fact that he had beaten Senators Kerry, McCain, and former President Bush in all groups except those aged 65 and over, where Kerry, McCain, and Bush will have beaten him with 47%, 53%, and 52% to 45% each. Youth participation in the electoral process also increased by 1 percent, from 17 percent in 2004 to 18 percent in 2008. This may seem like a small percentage in real terms. However, it represents a 12 percent increase when subtracted from Kerry's youth vote in 2004 to Obama's 2008 youth vote. The generational gap is more evident in McCain's performance than Obama's. With a youth vote of 66 percent to McCain's 32 percent, young people voted twice for Obama than Senator McCain, with a 34-point differential. Given the U.S. ethnic stratification, 30 percent of white

youth, 18 percent of African American youth, and 14 percent of Hispanic youth, respectively, voted for Senator Obama. One question seems to deserve attention here, as one may ponder over how African-American conservatives viewed the election of the first U.S. Black President. One might also wonder to what extent Obama's election may have been a positive element for race relations in America. In other words, one may ask the question of whether America became a post-racial nation with the election of her first African-American president. This implicit question will be answered in chapter three of this First Part. But first, it appears essential to discuss Obama's stance when he faced the race issue.

## Chapter 2

# Obama and the Race Issue

Obama's attitude toward race before and during the presidential campaign should be reviewed in the following lines to underscore that he remained a politician who had resolutely sought to distance himself from this racial issue. Compared to the leaders of civil rights organizations, he sought to take a rather inclusive stance whenever he could speak out on the race issue. This was the case in the Jena Six incident, in the sense that he instead blamed the American justice system and refused to call the judicial authorities of the city of Jena racists. In his statement, he did not limit himself to merely criticizing or incriminating the young whites involved in the incident but instead addressed the problem in a general way. He argued that this kind of act concerned all Americans. He also felt that the type of actions taken by these young whites was not a problem specific to them. There was, one might contend, a distancing from the approaches of the leaders of civil rights organizations on this issue in Obama's vision. While the latter had organized marches and were ready to confront the judicial authorities of the city of Jena, Senator Obama adopted a more conciliatory approach. He presented himself as a unifier, not someone whose rhetoric would divide races. However, being a race conciliator did not mean that he was unaware of an injustice when it occurred, as Jesse Jackson would have Americans believe. Despite the criticism he received from the latter, Obama expressed his willingness to support the efforts of the Black leaders. Just a few weeks after the incident, he asserted his heart went to the Americans who had stood up to demand justice. He also encouraged the 100 demonstrators who had come to demand justice for the six young African Americans. He argued that the demonstrators were continuing the struggle begun by activists of Dr. King's generation.

Candidate Obama's stance leads us to ask the following question: why did Jesse Jackson continue to denigrate him? This could be because Senator Obama adopted an inclusive approach toward the race issue, as already indicated. During his speeches, the idea of a coalition of races, religions, and ideologies was the theme through which he showed his opinion on the race question. He did not call anyone a racist. Unlike the leaders of civil rights organizations, he was willing to involve all sections of the American population in his political action. Candidate Obama's inclusive vision stemmed from his intention to involve and invite all justice believers, whether they were Black Americans, Whites, Hispanics, Arab Americans, or Native Americans, to denounce any form of injustice wherever it occurred. Obama's desire to make the Jena Six incident a case of a dysfunctional American judiciary system was reiterated during the 2007 debate between Democratic candidates at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. During the debate, moderator Tim Russert<sup>1</sup> addressed the misunderstanding between Barack Obama and Jesse Jackson. Asked if he deserved the criticism he received from the latter, Senator Obama replied negatively. He felt he did not deserve this criticism, which was unfounded because he was in Washington, D.C. when this incident occurred to find a solution to the Iraq war. Candidate Obama also indicated that this incident was not a conflict between blacks and whites. From his point of view, the most exciting thing was to make sure that politicians and all Americans knew the need for justice to be applied to all impartially. Compared to the leaders of civil rights organizations who sought by all means to pit one race against another or to denounce racism on all sides, Obama seemed to pit not races but rather principles against each other. His strategy was to contrast the notions of good and evil, justice and injustice. There are numerous reasons for Obama's adopted strategy. The complex and sensitive issue of race in American politics meant that by placing himself above the antagonistic races involved in the incident and by not taking any clear-

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<sup>1</sup> He was an American journalist and former host of the NBC political show Meet The Press.

cut position, he shielded himself from criticism from the white majority. It would, indeed, have been detrimental on a purely political and strategic level for Obama to give in, we believe, to the pressure exerted on him by Reverend Jackson or any other African-American leader to visit the city of Jena. Barack Obama was aware that if he went to the city of Jena to denounce the verdict handed down by prosecutor Walters Reed alongside other African-American leaders, white Americans could have disapproved of his position and voted against him. It is certainly partly because of this political reality that he felt it was inappropriate to cooperate genuinely with African-American leaders on this incident. We have noted that he is part of the generation of African-American leaders of the post-civil rights era. This new generation of African-American leaders includes figures such as Deval Patrick, the former governor of the state of Massachusetts; Jesse Jackson Jr., the former congressman of the second electoral district of the state of Illinois; Harold E. Ford Jr., the former congressman of the ninth electoral district of the state of Tennessee, Adrian Fenty, the former mayor of Washington DC, Cory Booker, the former mayor of Newark and current Senator of the state of New Jersey, and Michael Steele, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee, to name a few. These new African-American leaders, led by Barack Obama, have a progressive and inclusive vision regarding race-related matters. They try to be open, tolerant, and understanding in their dealings with other ethnic groups. In this context, candidate Obama's refusal to go to the city of Jena was part of this progressive vision. Yet, one is entitled to wonder about the part played by his genetic makeup, his biracial identity.

Obama's family heritage may also explain his racial politics to some extent. Barack Obama likes to point out that he was born to an African father from Kenya and a white mother from the state of Kansas in the United States. In other words, by birth, he is the result of a mixture between the two races, black and white, which continue to tear each other apart in America as of today. This is partly why he feels called to seek to unify these two races. This moral obligation may also explain



his choice to propose a racial discourse directed towards both sides, even if some black American leaders did not always appreciate this position of the man who ended up becoming the 44<sup>th</sup> U.S. President. The Reverend Jesse Jackson criticized candidate Obama because of his racial identity in the context of the Jena Six incident. Senators Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, Democratic presidential candidates in 2008, did not receive the same treatment from the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Black political organizations criticized neither, although these two Democratic candidates did not mobilize much on this incident. Hillary Clinton expressed concern about what was happening in the city of Jena and stressed the instructive nature of the moment. She called this incident a “textbook case” for the United States. She suggested that Americans become aware of this so that this kind of incident and injustice would no longer be tolerated. She also argued that the U.S. justice system appeared to operate at two speeds. Hillary Clinton claimed the six young African Americans had, indeed, suffered an injustice. She believes that, in general, the American justice system has always been unfair to African Americans. Still, she did not go to protest alongside the leaders of civil rights organizations in the city of Jena. However, as indicated, neither the Rev. Jesse Jackson nor any other African-American leader criticized Hillary Clinton's inaction. It is for this reason that one may believe that Obama was attacked because he was the only African-American candidate in the 2008 presidential election. Former Senator John Edwards “noted” that Americans of all races had come to the city of Jena to denounce the injustice suffered by the six young African Americans. He also condemned the attitude of young whites who hang ropes from oak trees. John Edwards spoke with conviction about African Americans' problems, but he did not visit the city of Jena. He was not criticized or vilified by Rev. Jesse Jackson. Former Senator John Edwards' words were blunter. He pointed out the racist attitude of young whites and denounced their behavior. Candidate Obama certainly could not do that. Again, he would have taken a significant political risk for the above reasons. While being white, in an incident such as the Jena Six, the racial dynamic was more

flexible between Senator John Edwards and the white majority. In a situation pitting the black race against the white race, Obama, due to him being biracial, becomes what Professor Steele calls a “bound man.”<sup>2</sup> Also, whenever he takes a stand in favor of one of the parties, the other may feel betrayed or humiliated. This is why Obama is caught between a rod and a hard place. He cannot please some without disappointing others. Therefore, we believe his refusal to go to Jena was purely a political strategy. Because he knew the political cost of taking a stand, he could not express himself as clearly as former Senator John Edwards. At the time of this incident, Obama was also the elected representative of the people of Illinois. As such, he represented a diversity of communities.

The third distinguishing factor between Obama's approach to race and that of black civil rights leaders is undoubtedly that the American people “elected” him. The leaders of Black political organizations are “elected officials” of the only African-American community they represent. So, one understands that Obama could only sometimes utilize the language that these African-American leaders were using. At the time of this incident, Obama was still a senator from Illinois. As such, he represented a multi-racial electorate. He could not stand out or take sides as African American leaders would have liked. Although he identifies as a member of the African-American community, Obama was quick to point out that his African-American racial and cultural identity did not limit him to that community alone. As we've already discussed, Obama is mixed-race. This genetic and biological combination gives him a double or dual identity. This double identity

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<sup>2</sup> “Today, both blacks and whites see Barack Obama’s presidential bid as potentially a new signal from history. He makes whites hopeful for a new racial configuration in which they might get more benefit of the doubt, and he makes blacks (though primarily the black leadership) anxious at the same prospect. Already, his bright success as a bargainer suggests that white America may be sending its own signal: that it is exhausted from forty years of being challenged and is doubly grateful to blacks who approach with at least some faith in the fundamental decency of whites. And yet, apart from whatever he may portend, Obama is today a bound man who cannot serve the aspirations of one race without betraying those of the other.” (Shelby Steele, *Op.cit.*, *A Bound Man*, p.126.)

could lead him to look for the right balance in his reactions to the black and white communities in the United States:

Black politicians like Obama have to prove that they are not abandoning the African-American community when multiracial coalitions are assembled while no longer concerning themselves with just racial grievances and civil rights.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Obama is mixed-race made him almost the only American leader who could speak to both black and white communities. While the African-American community considered him one of their own, some whites nevertheless believed that he was not "all that black." Part of the white community recognized itself in him in 2008. Obama's mother, Ann Dunham, was white. From another standpoint, some whites identified with him because of the academic background most African-American leaders do not have. All these reasons could also explain his talent whenever a racial incident occurred. The political strategy Obama highlighted during the 2008 election campaign was the unification of the American people. In this sense, he put himself above the race question. For Professor Steele, Obama is not a "challenger." He believes that Obama is not a politician who questions white America's loyalty and defies established American laws and institutions. Obama is more of a conciliator, a "bargainer." He is a politician who knew that his success in this area depended on his moral, spiritual, and intellectual ability to negotiate with the white American majority. For the bargainer that he is, the anger expressed by the leaders of civil rights organizations over the Jena Six incident was neither necessary nor the best strategy to adopt. The bargainer, Barack Obama, did not feel the need to threaten or offend white America. He adopted the strategy of negotiating with white America and not calling it racist. Professor Steele believes that bargainers such as Obama grant white the innocence and moral authority they need in return for their goodwill and generosity. From a strategic point of view, the bargainer "gives" first before "asking"

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Dupuis & Keith Boeckelman, *Op.cit.*, p.72.

in return because he knows that the principle of reciprocity will prevail since a good deed produces only a good one. Therein lay the strength of bargainer Obama. His political strength begins with kindness. This notion, “kindness” emphasized by Professor Steele, is reflected in Obama's unifying and conciliatory speech at the 2004 Democratic convention in Boston. This speech has propelled Obama onto the American political scene. In it, Barack Obama evokes the overcoming of divisions between Americans. This speech on overcoming the question of race was delivered at a time when the Republicans and some Democrats had given President Bush clearance to invade Iraq. Tension was running high between the leaders of the two political parties. Republicans vilified and sought to discredit the Democrats. They called “unpatriotic” Democrats’ allies who had distanced themselves from President Bush on the issue of the war. The tension between the American right and left came at a time when the American people, still trying to figure out the September 11, 2001, attacks, were vehemently supporting their president. Labeling the Democratic Party and some of its members as “unpatriotic” could have serious political consequences for the party. On the Republican side, this political tactic was not only adopted by conservative commentators such as Rush Limbaugh but these methods, called “swift boating tactics,” were masterfully implemented by the guru and strategist of American politics, Karl Rove.<sup>4</sup> Democrats John Kerry and John Edwards, nominated for the 2004 presidential election, were attacked from almost everywhere by Republicans. The U.S. seemed forever disunited on the issue of the war in Iraq. It was in this context of political relations between Republicans and Democrats that Obama's conciliatory and magnanimous speech took place. In this speech, he called on Americans for unity and a transcendence of political parties. He called on Americans to rise above race and not define themselves solely in terms of Democrats or

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Rove is a conservative Republican who served as Bush's presidential campaign manager in 2000 and 2004 and as his deputy chief of staff between 2000 and 2007.

Republicans, Hispanics or Arab-Americans, African-Americans, or whites:

There is not a liberal America and a conservative America—There is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and a Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America. The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states: red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. Some patriots opposed the war in Iraq, and patriots supported it. We are one people, all pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes and defending the United States of America.<sup>5</sup>

This vision of a united America is optimistic and progressive and seeks to transcend race relations. Obama acknowledged, however, that wishing for a united America did not mean that racism would disappear in the United States overnight. But he felt it was more interesting to highlight the commonalities between Americans of different backgrounds, races, and political parties than to dramatize the differences that divided them, even if those differences and socioeconomic inequalities continued and continue to exist:

Race matters, so the fight for equality has yet to be won.<sup>6</sup>

If one sticks to Obama's position, one can emphasize that America was certainly not yet a post-racial society and that, in reality, America was becoming extremely polarized, ideologically and racially. Incidents such as the Jena Six demonstrate that the racial issue still exists in twenty-first-century America. Even though racism continues to exist, the fact remains that Obama, compared to the leaders of civil rights organizations, thought that things were gradually changing for the better. He was hopeful. This is another distinguishing factor between him and the leaders of civil rights organizations who felt that relations

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<sup>5</sup> David Olive, *Op.cit.*, p.103.

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, *Op.cit.*, p.274.

between African Americans and whites seemed unchanged. Barack Obama's vision was also reinforced in his speech in Philadelphia. In his Philadelphia speech on March 18, 2008, Obama demonstrated to America that he had a moral and intellectual capacity to perceive the race issue from the perspective of African Americans and whites. In this speech, described by some American political scientists as "suicidal" — because it focused on the thorny and complex issue of racism — Obama proved that he was more comfortable speaking on this issue than any American politician. In this speech, he did not seek to condemn any race for injustices suffered by members of these groups. On the other hand, he pointed to the historical context, explaining that some African Americans could, at certain times in their lives, behave in ways that were frowned upon and often misunderstood by whites. For Obama, the social and racial inequalities that still exist today between whites and blacks were attributable to the history of each of these groups. For African Americans, their misfortunes had their origins in the slavery of their ancestors. This heritage, passed down from generation to generation, explains why the majority of African Americans languish in poverty. Slavery, followed by racial segregation, during which racism was institutionalized in schools and public administration, had severe consequences for black Americans. Therefore, their demands were legitimate and should lead whites to be more understanding of them:

But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African American community can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools. Blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, and loans were not granted to African Americans. Blacks were excluded from unions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David Olive, *Op.cit.*, p.261.