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ONE JOURNEY ENDS

By ABIGAIL THERNSTROM

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WE have come to the end of one extraordinary American journey - even while, as our new president noted yesterday, the larger journey continues. It's a moment to celebrate, whatever your politics. We live in the most decent nation on earth. No contest.

A black man as president: Not so long ago, the majority of blacks did not believe it possible. Until the Iowa caucuses a year ago, in fact, most rejected Barack Obama in favor of Hillary Clinton - the Democrat who could win.

The Illinois senator was the stuff of dreams; Clinton was the reality in a world in which blacks were always expected to take what they could get - which was always too little.

In a 2006 CNN poll, 40 percent of blacks said they believed "many" or "almost all" white people disliked blacks. As the primary and caucus season began two years later, those pessimistic views were undoubtedly still in place.

Yet almost 60 percent of Obama's vote on Election Day came from whites. In 16 states, the majority of whites cast their ballots for an African-American. Did they ignore his color? Of course not. That's not possible in our still racially conscious society. In fact, the number of white voters who saw Obama's race as a plus outnumbered those who harbored racial doubts, exit surveys suggested.

Perhaps it's an American strength that we so easily forget the past; in countries like Iraq, ancient wrongs are seemingly never forgotten. But we cannot understand the present without hindsight.

Just half a century ago, a striking 55 percent of all African-Americans had incomes below the poverty line; the most recent figure is 25 percent. Back then, a mere 3 percent of blacks had graduated from college; today, it's one out of five. And only 14 percent of African-Americans considered themselves "middle class" then; now it's close to half.

And let us not forget the speed of political change. Indeed, when President Obama proudly and patriotically noted that "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath," he was understating the case.

In 1961, the year Obama was born, most southern blacks were still disfranchised. Even 10 years after the Supreme Court signaled the end of Jim Crow with its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the majority of blacks in almost every southern state remained unable to cast a ballot.

Legal barriers prevented black voter registration, but economic and social coercion directed at "uppity" blacks kept politics as a white privilege. African-Americans bold enough to insist on exercising their right to register might find themselves without a job or credit at the store. Or they might end up murdered by the Klan.

Black electoral exclusion had made all other forms of racial subordination in the Jim Crow South possible. Mississippi was the worst of southern states, with fewer than 7 percent of blacks allowed to register to vote. Today, the state has more than 900 black elected officials. Blacks serve on school boards and county councils, in the state Legislature and the US House delegation.

The Rev. Joseph Lowery yesterday was a reminder of just how far we have come. He was a leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, a colleague of Martin Luther King. Today, he is the voice of yesterday - still

depicting blacks being told to go to the back of the bus, whites still not ready to "embrace what is right."

Most blacks today see an altered nation. A recent CNN poll found that 69 percent of blacks believe that the vision of which Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech has been fulfilled. In a similar poll taken just last March, only 34 percent of blacks expressed such a belief. Black spirits have been rising at a remarkable pace.

There is still much work to do on the road to racial equality. But, by unleashing imagination and energy, dreams come true. Already, Barack Obama is changing black America.

Abigail Thernstrom is the co-author of "America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible" and "No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning."

[Home](#)

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