

PARADOX OBAMA '08

By Michael Ventura

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In Lubbock on Election Day, I saw two boys, maybe age 8 or 9, cavorting on the lawn of an elementary school – a school that was whites-only when my contemporaries were 8 or 9. One boy was black, the other white. They were pals. You could tell by their ease with each other and how they caught each other's signals. Nothing unusual about mixed-race pairings these days in this oh-so-conservative city, especially among the young, but, watching these two, I remembered a snippet of history: that the White House was built, in part, with slave labor.

And I thought: Obama will probably win today, and that black kid will go to school tomorrow feeling a kind of pride he's never felt before. Black kids all over this country, all over the world, will go to school tomorrow feeling a pride they've never felt and something more than pride: the knowledge that what had been impossible was now possible.

No matter what happens now, that fact will stand. Its importance is immeasurable – especially for the young.

And that is why, for the first time in my life, and despite my political reservations, it was a pleasure to vote for Barack Hussein Obama. Voting, for me, has always been a solemn act. This time it felt festive. Festive because I was voting for an intellectual unapologetic about his intelligence; festive because of all the vileness one rejected by voting for him; and festive because it was a vote for an African-American who could win. For all these reasons, not race alone, this election was a vote for a change in consciousness. A maturation of the American character. A deepening of what Steve Erickson would call the American imagination.

After (or was it during?) Obama's speech on election night, Ginger Varney phoned. Ginger and I could fairly be described as hard cases when it comes to politics, deeply suspicious of any who seek power (as our founders wanted us to be!) – but there we were, unable to speak for our tears, crying and happily laughing at the same time. I doubt anyone of our generation believed we'd live to see such a day.

(And I marvel yet again that Martin Luther King not only believed; he *knew*. Where did he find the love in his heart to have such faith in us?)

Ginger had been to an election-night party where a white 24-year-old said to her, "I voted for him, but I don't see what the big deal is." So she described for him a scene from her Texas childhood: how, in a department store, when she was 6, she caused shocked commotion when she drank from the "Colored" water fountain.

The 24-year-old was stunned. "They had *different* water fountains?!"

Ginger told me that when she went to Lubbock's Monterey High School, there was one "person of color," a Latino. I pass that school often now and see white, black, brown, yellow, and all sorts of mixes. Obama's election is a great political expression of that fact, that change – which is something to remember: It's not that Obama *is* the change; it's that his election is *an expression* of decades of painful, difficult, incremental changes.

We all know that Obama's election is no cure-all for racism. Still, the facts impress: "His 52 percent share of the popular vote exceeded that of any Democratic candidate since Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 – and topped Ronald Reagan's 1980 majority against Jimmy Carter" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 9, p.19). "Mr. Obama lost the white vote, it is true, by 43-55%; but he won almost exactly the same share of it as the last three (white) Democratic candidates; Bill Clinton, Al Gore and John Kerry. And he won heavily among younger white voters" (*The Economist*, Nov. 8, p.13). He "carried the white working-class vote in Indiana, one of the reddest of the red states and a onetime stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 8, p.27).

In what may spell disaster for the Republican Party's future, Obama "won 66% of people aged 18-29 and 68% of first-time voters. ... He lost whites without a college education by 18 points – only a small *improvement* [my italics] on [John Kerry's 2004] result. ... Mr. Obama won 66% of the Latino vote. ... He did better than Mr. Kerry among whites with a college education, a group that voted for Mr. Bush in 2004. ... He improved his party's performance among voters who earn more than \$200,000 a year by 17 points [!] ... [and] he beat Mr. McCain among independents" (*The Economist*, Nov. 8, p.39). Obama won 24% of white evangelicals and born-again Christians, "a gain of only three percentage points over Mr. Kerry," but "Mr. Obama doubled his support among young white evangelicals (those ages 18 to 29) compared with Mr. Kerry. The increase was almost the same for white evangelicals ages 30 to 44" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 7, p.24).

Any way you cut it, Obama's was a decisive, across-the-board triumph.

He did it with a uniquely American combination of inspiration and cash.

That's a nice but fair way to say that Obama won the election the old-fashioned, tried-and-true American way: He bought it.

Let's admit, we progressives, that this is what we'd be saying if a conservative Republican won by outspending a liberal Democrat 3 to 1 in Florida, more than 2 to 1 in Virginia, and with similar totes in all the swing states (CNN, *The Situation Room*, Nov. 5).

To emphasize the money is not to take away from the brilliance of the greatest political campaign in modern times, so let's put it in its most positive possible light:

It was Obama's genius to know that the hardened crust of American habit and prejudice could be broken. It was his genius to know what most of us did not, which is that for many Americans, the habit of prejudice and suspicion was only a crust, and, if that crust could be broken, what lay beneath was essentially good and invaluable. But the Democratic primaries taught Obama and his inner circle two things. One: that they could raise unprecedented oodles and oodles of money. Two: that it would take oodles and oodles of money to break through that hardened crust of suspicion and prejudice.

By the time he'd cinched the nomination in June, it was clear that for Obama to win, he had no choice but to break his promise of limiting himself to federal campaign financing. He wouldn't say so outright, but breaking the racial barrier would depend in equal parts on inspiration and cash, making necessary the betrayal of one promise for the fulfillment of another, older, greater promise – which brings us to the Obama paradox of 2008.

A paradox consists of at least two aspects that are opposite yet equally true. Repeat: *opposite yet equally true*. It is equally true that Obama inspired his way into the Oval Office and that he bought it. The inspiration was real. So was the cash. The inspiration was beautiful. The meeting of money and politics is never pretty. How it all will interweave in Obama's administration is, for now, mere speculation. I suspect there will be a constant and even tortured dialectic between the demands of an inspired citizenry and the demands of money and the moneyed. Obama won by the power of a paradox, and his administration, for good and for ill, will be a paradox of power.

Many accept Obama's line that his campaign was really publicly funded because of all the common folk's small donations. Hey, only \$72.8 million of his \$488.3 million came "in chunks of \$25,000 or more" (*The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, p.3). But Obama's transition team is populated by what may be called ambassadors of money, raisers of vast sums (Associated Press online, Nov. 12). So we'll see, won't we?

Yes, we will.

The inspiration of Barack Obama proved real. But we'd best remember that the story of America remains, in the words of James Big Boy Medlin, "the tale of a people in search of a country and a country that can be mighty hard on searchers."

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