

Research in Race and Ethnic Relations
Volume 16

Race in the Age of Obama

Donald Cunnigen
Marino A. Bruce
Editors



RACE IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

RESEARCH IN RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

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RESEARCH IN RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS
VOLUME 16

RACE IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

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*To my aunt, Evelyn Griffin Scott (1909–1988)
and
my cousin, Dorothy Gordon Gray (1908–2008)
Women of hope, strength, and courage.
Donald Cunnigen*

*To my heroes who have long departed this earth
but left an indelible impression upon me that inspires me today,
My late mother, Annie Mae Bruce
and
My late grandfather, Paul Bruce
Marino A. Bruce*

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INTRODUCTION

On a brisk day in Springfield, Illinois, an attractive African-American family stood on the steps of the Illinois Old State Capitol waving to a rapturous and diverse audience of Americans following the family's patriarch's announcement that he would run for the presidency of the United States of America. Standing in the shadows of the legislative building where he worked and the adopted hometown of President Abraham Lincoln who was known as the "Great Emancipator" of the slaves, the symbolism was lost on no one. By announcing his candidacy, he was entering one of the most competitive and diverse fields of presidential candidates in the history of the nation, including its first female and first Latino candidates. When the freshman Illinois senator, Barack Hussein Obama decided to make a bid for the presidency, many Americans were surprised and fascinated with the possibility of its first African-American leader. Older Americans, especially African Americans, had clear knowledge and some personal memories of the national history replete with the vestiges of slavery, the Civil War, and a failed Reconstruction Era in the forms of de jure segregation in the South and de facto segregation throughout the rest of the country. Despite the progress made as a result of the legislation emanating from the activism of the 1960s civil rights movement, this history created a socio-cultural narrative rife with prejudice, racism, and discrimination. Consequently, the nation's race relations narrative was fraught with the tensions between its majority and minorities.

For Obama, the racial tensions were more than the lived experiences of many Americans in their own private racial worlds. His biracial heritage made his racial experiences very different from many others. He traveled many roads on the path to his historic electoral victory in November 2008, including living abroad in Indonesia; spending his growing years in multiracial Hawaii; retracing his African ancestral history in Kenya; serving as a community organizer in urban inner city communities; and scaling the academic heights of elite American institutions. In the eyes of some individuals, Barack Obama represented the best of American life. They viewed him as the epitome of the American Dream. Despite his many accomplishments, the American racial narrative made his candidacy appear as the "Impossible Dream." For others who cleaved to the maintenance of

the old racial status quo in politics, his candidacy appeared as the “American Nightmare.”

Throughout the nation’s history, many African Americans had been less serious candidates for a host of third parties. Shirley Chisholm, a New York Congresswoman had the special distinction of being the first African-American female to make a bid for the nomination of a modern day “mainstream” political party. However, the Obama announcement was different because of the recent history established by another candidate. Obama was not the first African American to make a serious bid for the presidency. Jesse Jackson, a former 1960s civil rights activist and director of the Chicago-based grassroots organization of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Operation Breadbasket, won victories in several primaries during the 1980’s. The successes during the Jackson Campaign provided evidence that an African American could be a viable presidential candidate; however, his ultimate losses in 1984 and 1988 suggested that the general American public was still not ready for a substantial shift in the racial political narrative.

Even though large swaths of the country still lacked racial diversity, the charismatic personality of Obama appeared surprisingly transcendent. As his scintillating 2004 Democratic Convention address noted, America had the potential of being one nation. He used his personal background as an example of how national unity could become a realization by American citizens with faith and hope. Using the campaign slogan, “Yes We Can,” he proved that the racial narrative did not have to remain fixed. His victory in the Iowa Caucus demonstrated that an African American could be the candidate of choice for a predominantly white voting population. It gave a tremendous boost to his political campaign and gave many skeptics a reason to consider this young and impressive political candidate. In the parlance of the political pundits, Obama had the big “MO” (momentum).

The national stage of a presidential campaign provided an opportunity for Obama to demonstrate his exuberance through fiery stump speeches and grassroots organization as well as his savvy through innovative fundraising. He appeared lucid and well informed in the marathon of presidential debates. In running an effective campaign, he outpaced his nemesis Hillary Clinton, the New York Senator who entered the campaign with a huge financial war chest, her husband’s former grassroots organizational support, and the endorsements of most of the political establishment, including many prominent African-American politicians. With his final victory on election night in November 2008, the world responded positively to the election of America’s first African American president. In the African-American

community, the tears of coeds at the Atlanta, Georgia-based historically African-American women's liberal arts college, Spelman College, revealed the powerful emotional, social, and political significance of his election. His election was seen as bringing change to American politics. For some Americans, it was seen as the nation's racial epiphany. Obama's international sophistication and the warm receptions he received in European capitals before and after his election have suggested that his election may have been viewed as bringing change to European relations. Clearly, it was a refreshing change for some European leaders after his predecessor's engagement with "Old Europe." In fact, his polling numbers in Europe continue to be higher than his American poll numbers. The election of Obama to the presidency and the reaction to President Obama provide an interesting topic for sociological research.

Realizing the powerful changes in American and international politics that were wrought by the unprecedented election of Obama, this volume provides an in-depth analysis of various sociological themes. The contributors to this volume attempt to shed light on the critical issues facing the Obama administration in the ever changing world. The volume is divided into six sections that highlight traditional sociological themes including the African Diaspora, gender, family, class, education, and social justice as well as examining the continuing challenges to Obama from an opposition that is tinged heavily with racial/racist overtones.

The first section focuses on Obama's foreign policy with emphasis on Africa. With an examination of African foreign policy, Robert Washington provides an engaging description and analysis of the limitations imposed on Obama by the historical tradition and bureaucratic structure of the American Department of State as an institution dominated by personalities who have shaped its policy. His chapter contextualizes the Obama approach to African policy by viewing it from the perspective of important contemporary events that have influenced Obama's relationship with Africa, especially his speech in Ghana. As the first American president whose father was a direct descendant of Africa, the approach of this president has received singular attention within international circles. Washington suggests the expectations of Africans, African Americans, and others should be tempered by a reasonable assessment of the restrictions that confront the new president.

African foreign policy has been placed on the diplomatic backburner by many American presidential administrations. The Middle East and Europe received most of the country's attention in the 20th century. Asian and Latin American issues surfaced as a result of America's military engagements

and/or the destabilization of governments. Despite the glaring pattern of ignoring a continent that was the ancestral home of many Americans, Obama's election was viewed by some as offering the possibility of finally looking at African foreign policy with more than a superficial focus. Washington's chapter discusses why and how the Obama Administration's policies on Africa will continue to maintain certain historical patterns. Although he provides some hope, Washington does not expect radical shifts in the nation's African policies.

The second section of the volume focuses on the Obama Family and its impact on the American perception of the First Family. The African heritage of the First Family has created an interesting cultural dynamic for the American people. In the 1980s, American popular culture was influenced by its first nationwide television situation comedy on a major commercial network that featured a professional African-American couple with their upper-middle-class children, the *Cosby Show*. For many Americans, especially white Americans, it was an exposure to a very unfamiliar world. The presence of such a couple in residence at the White House has created an interest in the role of the First Family regarding their historical place in American cultural constructions of family and family life. At the center of much of this interest has been the First Lady, Michelle Obama. Despite some difficult times during the campaign, she has received continuously high public opinion poll ratings as the First Lady. Thus, her unique role has contributed to the discussion of race in the age of Obama.

The chapters by Thornton, King, and Gilkes assess Michelle Obama's role as First Lady from various original sociological perspectives. Obama's ascendancy to the American presidential office brought a new look to the White House. For the very first time in the nation's history, the executive mansion was inhabited by an African-American family. The presence of an African American First Lady created an interesting cultural phenomenon never experienced by Americans. Michelle Obama's presence was examined by three authors. Michael Thornton explored her reception and coverage by the African-American press. He conducted content analysis of leading African-American newspapers' coverage of Michelle Obama. Offering African-American newspapers as a gauge of how the community views the First Lady, he suggests the African American reporting acknowledged her unique contributions as a modern-day African-American female who respects the family and contributes to society.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes provides a fascinating description of First Lady Michelle Obama. By placing her in juxtaposition to former First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, she suggests the two women shared a

special relationship with the American public due to their “outsider” status, that is, African American and Roman Catholic. Like Obama, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, as a Roman Catholic became the very first non-Protestant to serve as President. For many in the American mainstream, the change was an important shift in the country’s political perspective. Despite those fears, the Kennedy White House through Jacqueline Kennedy became a popular and well-respected part of 1960s American culture. Jacqueline Kennedy’s sense of high fashion style and cultured background has become iconic representations of 1960s America. Similarly, Michelle Obama’s fashion style and cultural influences on the White House scene have captured the attention of America and the world. Gilkes augurs that Michelle Obama has attained a similar popularity, if not respect, for very different reasons. According to Gilkes, she has presented a new style and perspective to her White House service.

Deborah King’s chapter builds on the Thornton and Gilkes chapters by performing a close examination of Michelle Obama’s role in the campaign as well as her contemporary role as First Lady. On the campaign trail, King reports that Obama had to construct a personal narrative that white America found nonthreatening. This narrative was carried into her role as the First Lady. The discussion includes a look at how she has changed the conventional perspectives of the First Lady in dramatic ways such as the introduction of nonconventional cultural events. Simultaneously, she engaged the community in the very conventional patterns of previous First Ladies through special projects addressing issues such as obesity, veterans’ families, and educational programs in the nation’s capital. King’s “othermothering” discussion provides a different window for viewing Michelle Obama’s role as mother and First Lady. Using the works of Patricia Hill Collins and others to describe the techniques used by contemporary middle-class African-American mothers to utilize family members and others to insure their proper nurturing and the fulfillment of familial commitments, King provided a clear and cogent description of Michelle Obama’s relationships with her parents, Fraser and Marian Robinson as well as her children, Malia and Sasha. The discussion places the relationships in the context of a modern presidency by looking at the special role of Michelle Obama in changing the views of Americans about the African-American family and the role of the First Lady. The new perspectives on the First Lady coincide with other changes in American perspectives on racial themes, including the sociological community.

The third section of the volume focuses on sociological approaches to the study of race and ethnic relations in the age of Obama. For years, the

sociological experts in race relations have relied upon a set of theoretical approaches or models to explain race and ethnic relations. They were based on American racial and ethnic history. In the case of the application of the models to African Americans, the continued restrictions of African Americans from specific national institutions had a profound impact on the analytical perspectives used to discuss race and ethnic relations. John Sibley Butler reviews past sociological approaches to the study of race and ethnic relations. Beginning with an analysis of empirical studies of some of the leading historical figures in the sociological subfield of race and ethnic relations such as W. E. B. DuBois, Charles S. Johnson, Robert E. Park, and Milton Gordon, Butler explores the historical sociological figures and subsequent generations of sociologists' emphasis on creating concepts and measures to explain racial dynamics. He believes the concept of a "segregated diversity" describes aptly the contemporary theoretical approach to race and ethnic studies. Butler provides a provocative discussion that suggests America has "a racial and ethnic structure based on actions, and a false race structure." His placement of the election and presidency of Obama into such an analytical argument offers the reader an interesting as well as controversial construction of how and why certain racial dynamics functions in contemporary American society. Moreover, he challenges modern sociological race relations experts to "rethink" their views. He suggests the presence of a new presidential leader bodes well for the consideration of a new perspective for the study of race relations.

The fourth section of the volume examines Obama's educational policies for urban youth. American educational institutions have struggled with issues of diversity and access from their very beginnings. For many urban students, the isolation from mainstream educational practices and the daunting task of negotiating an often dangerous social environment that diminishes the significance of schooling make the decisions by political leaders more important. D. Crystal Byndloss presents results from a study that provides a critique of urban educational policy. Case studies, key informant interviews and focus groups provide evidence for her conclusion that educational leaders must focus their policies on specific elements that relate to the lives and experiences of the urban student. Byndloss extends her argument into the policy arena by presenting policy recommendations specifying ways that federal resources could be allocated for improving educational outcomes among inner city students.

The fifth section of the volume focuses on Obama's response to civil rights and social justice issues in American society. The public reaction to any policies by the Obama Administration whether educational or foreign policy

will often be reflected in the public's views of the president, especially those policies related to social justice. Melvin E. Thomas, Cedric Herring, and Hayward D. Horton used survey data to examine contemporary perspectives on race relations. The purpose of their study was to discover whether changes have occurred in the attitudes of Americans as a result of the election of President Barack Obama. The Thomas, Herring, and Horton chapter examines the perception of racial equality in the Obama era by looking at data culled from the American National Elections Study (1986–2008). Their findings suggest the views of African Americans and whites vary in the Obama era. In fact, African Americans' views reflected similarities across socioeconomic and educational levels. Just as significant as their finding of the similarities among all segments of the African-American population's attitudes, their finding that racial inequality and justice attitudes persist as important determinants of outlooks provides an interesting read on American race relations.

Wornie Reed's chapter looks at social justice by examining how racism continues to function as a part of American society. Using the concept of institutionalized thought structures (ITS), Reed discusses racism and race as distorted issues that have had an impact on the society and should be addressed by the Obama Administration. According to Reed, ITS is prevalent throughout white America. He suggests ITS helps to maintain a common belief that individual racism was merely personal acts of racial prejudice. While they may be aware that racism exists, they fail to understand and appreciate the complex relationship of individual racism with institutional racism. Without this understanding, Reed believes efforts to achieve social justice must attack systemic racism. He explores how racism operates by highlighting examples from the American criminal justice system and the racist implications of how a governmental agency responded to accusations by white conservative media personalities about a respected member of the civil rights who was employed in the agency. The chapter offers a description of methods that the Obama Administration may use in a movement toward greater social justice.

Yvonne Newsome's chapter discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the Obama Administration's early years regarding issues of race, gender, class, and social justice. Newsome reports Obama's creation of the White House Council on Women and Girls as a positive contribution to the area of gender and social justice. Although his support of certain legislation such as the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 indicates a degree of commitment of social justice issues related to women, she believes the Obama Administration has failed to address critical issues regarding women's rights, gay rights, and race.

For Newsome, those issues include his cautious coding of race as civil rights and urban policies in a way that marginalizes the interests and needs of men and women of color; and his administration's failure to eliminate the antihomosexual military policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Like many political observers, she suggested the unfairness of the Shirley Sherrod dismissal case highlighted another example of the presidential office viewing women of color's issues in a superficial light.

The sixth and final section of the volume examines the 2008 Obama Presidential Campaign and the public reaction to his presidency. Nadia Y. Kim discusses her personal experiences in the Obama Campaign. The discussion looks at the campaign from a multidimensional perspective. She discusses the Obama Presidential Campaign by providing an in-depth examination of her personal experiences as a volunteer in the campaign. She uses autoethnography to interpret those experiences. In an interesting recounting of her experiences, she provides a single case study that reveals the presence of racially charged political discourse related to social stratification and race. In her layered description that encompasses her multiple identities as a female, Asian American, intellectual, a "Progressive," among others, she demonstrates that the everyday campaign worker was confronted with inconspicuous and conspicuous racist commentary. Often, the commentary was derived from distortions of Obama's biography which was rooted deeply in right-wing ideological vies and particular racial perspectives. Apparently, Kim's personal experiences as an active participant in the campaign mirrored a larger racial discourse among some Americans during the election campaign. Adam Murphee and Deirdre A. Royster's chapter and Chip Berlet's chapter reveal the extensiveness of the anti-Obama sentiments during the Obama Campaign and after his election. The mythology of a post-racial America is thoroughly debunked by their analysis of Internet-based commentary and content analysis of contemporary literature.

Murphee and Royster surveyed bloggers who held anti-Obama sentiments. Creating the interesting term "Obamathets," the authors discovered a high level of anti-Obama sentiment as expressed through racial epithets. As the election of Obama became more apparent, the intensity of the sentiment increased within the community. In their chapter, they use critical race theory and contemporary research on racism as analytical tools for interpreting racist language used on an internet web site. Murphee and Royster's study of Arfcom, a conservative website, provides a clear example of how attitudes about Obama changed in the virtual community. With their application of a longitudinal design, they track the frequency and type of anti-Obama language preferred by the denizens of the site over a year's time.

Through a close read of the discussions on the site, they identify specific terminology; and they discover a high level of Obamathets as the evidence of racial animosity related to the Arfcom members' realization of Obama's eventual election to the presidency. Ironically, the presidential candidate who used the virtual world to his advantage to bolster his bid was attacked simultaneously in cyberspace by his political and ideological enemies. The authors explore the subtle and non-subtle racism associated with the Obamathets. Their chapter provides an interesting read on the on-going debate about a "post-racial America."

Chip Berlet's chapter continues the Murphree and Royster examination of the anti-Obama sentiment by reviewing survey data and literature that surfaced during the election campaign and the early years of the Obama Administration's tenure. Berlet uses social movement theories in a comparative interpretation of the Tea Party "movement" and other right-wing literature and electronic media's anti-Obama rhetoric with historical right-wing movements. As an affiliate of a leading American "progressive" think tank, his content analysis relies on the think tank's twenty-five year data base that places emphasis on debunking "conspiracy theories" and other fabrications/distortions regarding Obama. His examination explores many of the themes discussed in this volume by other authors such as Kim, Murphree, and Royster. In Berlet's chapter, he places the rhetorical attacks against Obama into a historical context that demonstrates it is a part of a continuous political narrative, albeit with a special racial dimension related to Obama.

The 12 chapters in this volume reflect a breadth and depth of analysis on the key racial dynamics of the Obama Administration. As the volume editors, we have chosen a cross-section of articles from various topics to demonstrate the diverse set of critical issues that must be addressed in a forthright manner. This volume is not exhaustive nor does it examine all of the critical issues related to the Obama Administration; however, it does provide a serious analysis of some important issues such as African foreign policy, the changing role and impact of an African-American First Family and First Lady, the issue of social justice with an African-American head of state, the Obama campaign's originality and challenges, and the contemporary reaction to the Obama Administration's policies. We believe that this volume provides useful information for any serious scholar or political analyst examining the early years of the Obama Administration.

Donald Cunnigen
Marino A. Bruce
Editors

PART I
AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN
THE AGE OF OBAMA

OBAMA AND AFRICA

Robert E. Washington

ABSTRACT

Barack Obama's emergence as the leader of the world's most powerful nation stirred much enthusiasm in Africa. This article examines Obama's relationship to Africa and African reactions to Obama – spanning from the time of his election to the United States Senate to the current period of his role as president of the United States. Focusing specifically on Obama's Ghana speech and subsequent African policy initiatives, the article suggests that many Africans are disappointed with Obama's Africa policy and that this is the result of several misperceptions: misperceptions of Obama's power as US president, misperceptions of his moderate political world view, and misperceptions of his cosmopolitan identity as an individual of African ancestry.

Africa doesn't need strong men.
It needs strong institutions.
(Barack Obama, 2009)

INTRODUCTION

Even before Barack Obama became president of the United States, his name was familiar to the ears of many Africans. Beginning in 2004, after he was

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elected to the Senate and subsequently visited Africa, his popularity on the continent soared. Noted one reporter, "in Kisumu (Kenya), near his father's birthplace, locals have renamed local beer from "Senator" to "Obama." Nightclubs across the continent bang out hits such as Tony Nyardurdu's song "Obama," and the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, reports that Nigerian co-eds plaster photos of the junior senator for Illinois on dormitory walls as if he were a "rock star".¹ Viewed by many Africans as one of the world's most important black leaders, even though then only a senator, Obama appeared to be a unique and rising political star. From Kenya and Nigeria to Senegal and South Africa, never before had so many Africans expressed such affection and enthusiasm for a Western politician.

As the enchanting young black US Senator with a Muslim name, Obama's early celebrity, in Africa, was soon overshadowed by his presidential election. That event elevated him from the status of admired politician to that of a virtual deity. Reflecting the excitement aroused by his presidential victory, one radio commentator in Cape Coast (Ghana) declared,

It's a dream come true ... We are very proud of Obama, I have a big Obama calendar on my wall at home. He's the epitome of hope for Africa²

This echoed the attitudes of many ordinary Africans to whom Obama was not simply an American political leader but also an African kinsman, a son of African soil, who was destined to change Africa. Although he had never lived in Africa, he belonged to Africa; because his father was a Kenyan, his identity – in their minds – was undeniably African. They expected good things from him. Those expectations were derived as much from mass African disillusionment with dysfunctional African governments as from the young African-American president's captivating charisma.

The reaction of African intellectuals and journalists to Obama's presidential election differed from that of ordinary Africans. Although their reactions also tended to be positive, their expectations were more restrained. Observed one Ghanaian journalist on the eve of Obama's first presidential visit to Africa:

[T]he election of the first black president, a man with a Kenyan father who came on a scholarship to Hawaii, has been celebrated as a kind of second coming throughout Africa. The symbolism is obvious. President Obama arrives with enormous expectations that he will do more and care more.³

This journalist, unswayed by the surrounding euphoria, sounded a note of caution. "I submit to you that the central challenge of US-African relations today is the management of these unrealistically high expectations."

Obama had just been elected president of a predominately white Western nation. What, after all, could Africans realistically expect from the Obama administration?

Similarly restrained were the responses of many African political leaders. Remarked Kenya's Prime Minister, Raila Amollo Odinga,

Today marks a pivotal movement for the United States ... The decision by the white majority electorate to vote an African-American for such an august position is a vibrant indicator of the long distance the U.S. has traveled from its history of slavery and racial domination.⁴

It is noteworthy that Odinga – an African political leader, who shared the Luo ethnic ancestry of Obama's father – did not regard Obama as an African, but rather chose to place Obama and his achievement solely within the context of American race relations and American history. No doubt many African political leaders felt uneasy seeing the enthusiasm of ordinary Africans for a foreign political figure. Nevertheless, African political leaders tended to see it as a major symbolic achievement for African people because Obama's election stood in stark contrast to the history of Western colonialism and racism.

However, not all African political leaders shared that view. Muammar Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi, the erratic Libyan political leader, to cite one glaring example, expressed dismay in response to Obama's election. That was because Gaadafi believed that Obama, as a black man, might have an inferiority complex, which he would compensate with weak foreign policy.⁵ This odd formulation revealed more Gaaddafi's attitude toward blacks than Obama's policy inclinations toward Africa. Gaaddafi was speaking as an Arab political leader, whose primary concern was not sub-Sahara Africa but the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was this that caused him to feel pessimistic about the prospect that a black American president would change US foreign policy.

Among the most unusual and intriguing reactions to Obama's election was that of an African intellectual, the historian, Achille Mbembe, who teaches in South Africa. Focusing not on Obama's political election but his hybrid racial identity, Mbembe suggested that Obama was an "Afropolitan personality" who melded Africanity and worldliness. This hybridity, Mbembe argued, enabled Obama to transcend all of the ordinary social identities, making him "a powerful unifying force in our fractured world."⁶ Mbembe, who was apparently disillusioned with the current state of African politics, felt that Obama's election might cause Africans to "shift from the politics of victimhood to the politics of possibility." He believed that Obama

might inspire Africans to move beyond their parochial ethnic and religious identities. "The Obama phenomenon reframes the black question," Mbembe concluded. "It pushes it to a level that we have not achieved in the history of modernity." This intriguing reaction views the effect of Obama election as that of moving Africans into postmodern culture.

Despite these varied African opinions, in truth – no one knew what Obama's election would mean for Africa. All that observers knew, as a matter of public record, was that Obama had traveled to Africa twice, before being elected president.

On the first trip in 1988, which he recounts in his book, *Dreams of My Father*, he visited Kenya and traveled to his father's home village in Western Kenya, where he met members of his extended Kenyan family.⁷ Although he described this exploration of his African ancestry as a powerful emotional experience, he would not return to Africa – until 18 years later, shortly after he was elected to the US Senate, in July 2006. He maintained contact with several of his Kenyan half siblings after this initial trip, but his Kenyan relatives never became part of his life. His closest relatives remained his white maternal grandparents, who had a large hand in raising him and his half sister, all living in Hawaii.

Unlike his first African trip, which was a personal existential journey, the second trip consisted of a 15-day diplomatic tour of 5 African countries (Kenya, South Africa, Sudan, Qatar, and Ethiopia). On his visit to Kenya as a US senator, Obama attempted to discourage expectations that he would use his position to garner financial assistance for Kenya." Noted one reporter,

Kenyans hope Obama's rise in the U.S. will help their own country, but he and his handlers have been careful to try and dampen expectations of what Obama can do for this poor East African nation, and the Senator often remarks in his speeches that his constituents are in Illinois and that his first loyalty is to them.⁸

Traveling as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Obama met dozens of African political officials, observed life conditions in different urban settings, and expanded his knowledge about Africa's problems. In Kenya, he "toured a research facility run by the Centers for Disease Control and the Kenyan medical Research Institute, and learned about the thousands of people in Kenya, and millions across the world, killed by malaria every year. He also visited a project run by the non-governmental agency Care, which helps grandmothers care for children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. The program, which Obama has personally helped to finance with a donation of some \$13,000, gives loans to

grandmothers who can use the money to run small businesses—selling soap, for instance—and then pay the capital back with interest.”⁹ This was a version of the micro financing programs Obama’s mother helped to pioneer. Also during this trip, he publicly criticized African political leaders. In Kenya, speaking at the University of Nairobi, he highlighted the issues of corruption and ethnic politics. In South Africa, he targeted the government’s inept response to the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) crisis. In southern Sudan, he traveled to Darfur and lamented the devastating ethno-racial violence.

This second trip actually opened Obama’s eyes to Africa’s political and economic hardships, creating lasting perceptions that influenced his work in the Senate. Shortly after returning to Washington, he cosponsored the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act, which classified the conflict in Darfur as genocide and authorized funds to assist African Union Forces in the region. He also cosponsored the Darfur Divestment Authorization Act of 2007, a measure that assisted federal, state, and city government agencies in divesting their Sudan-related stock. His second African trip thus marked the beginning of his political engagement with Africa; but a 15-day visit was hardly sufficient to make him an African expert. Africa remained a relatively minor part of his political agenda because of his growing interests in a possible run for president and increasing focus on domestic political issues.

In the light of both his limited African experiences and his election to head a government, which historically had relegated Africa to a low priority in its foreign policy, many observers felt uncertain about the direction Obama’s African policy would take. This uncertainty fueled curiosity and speculation about his planned visit to Accra, Ghana, where he was to deliver his first presidential foreign policy speech on Africa. Would this speech launch a new era in US-Africa relations? Noted a *New York Times* reporter:

There is no denying that Mr. Obama, by the sheer dint of his Kenya heritage, coupled with his progressive politics, his youth and his seemingly intuitive grasp of how people across the world interconnect, has an unprecedented opportunity to rewrite the America-Africa equation.¹⁰

Even if the speech failed to live up to those lofty expectations, many felt it would be quite consequential, at the very least, because not only would it quell the obsessive spiral of speculation about the new direction of United States’ Africa policy, it would also, and more important, help to resolve the mystery of Obama’s world view. Given his African ancestry, his extensive childhood international experiences, his work experiences as a community organizer in a poor Chicago neighborhood, and his stint as president of

Harvard Law Review, what might his message to Africa reveal? Would it reveal the world view of a compassionate internationalist or a tough political pragmatist?

THE GHANA SPEECH

“On Friday, when president Obama stepped off Air Force One in Ghana for his first presidential visit to sub-Sahara Africa, it was clear he was stepping into a continent of stratospheric expectations. He was mobbed at the airport by drummers and dancers and seemingly the entire Ghanaian government, as if his arrival were a long awaited homecoming.”¹¹ Accra Ghana was the place Obama chose to present his administration’s Africa policy. The significance and gravity of this speech cannot be understood apart from its context. First, it marked Obama’s first comprehensive statement of his views on African societies and their problems. Second, although ostensibly addressed to Ghanaians, it actually had three distinct audiences: Africans wanting a better future, Americans sympathetic to African interests, and American conservatives opposed to US foreign aid for Africa. Third, and finally, it occurred during the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression, a crisis that imposed painful, debilitating hardships on African nations as well as severe constraints on American foreign aid. Obama no doubt realized he faced a difficult task, as he walked up to the podium in Accra. Not only was he stepping into turbulent domestic political waters, roiled by ideological controversy over American foreign aid, he was risking his image as a new age world leader.

Obama focused the speech on four areas, which he said were “critical to the future” of not just Africa, but the entire developing world. They were democracy, (economic) opportunity, health, and the peaceful resolution of conflict.¹²

Democracy in Africa, the first area, was hardly a new stated concern of US foreign policy, but Obama seemed to take it far more seriously than had previous US presidents. This was probably influenced by his knowledge of the frustrations his father encountered in Kenya, under the authoritarian rule of Jomo Kenyatta. Obama maintained democracy was necessary not only because it reflected the will of the electorate but also because it made government accountable for failed policies. It was his concern about democracy in Africa that prompted his decision to deliver his first major Africa policy speech in Ghana (rather than Kenya or Nigeria). Highlighting Ghana, a country that had conducted two successful democratic elections,

as a model of African democracy, he said to his audience, “Now, time and again, Ghanaians have chosen constitutional rule over autocracy, and shown a democratic spirit that allows the energy of your people to break through. (Applause) We see that in leaders who accept defeat graciously – the fact that President Mills’ opponents were standing beside him last night to greet me when I came off the plane spoke volumes about Ghana – (Applause) ...” But in Obama’s view, the value of democracy went beyond its accountability; as he noted, “it mattered also because it facilitated economic development.” Governments that respect the will of their own people, that govern by consent and not by coercion, are more prosperous ...” For Obama, this democracy-economic prosperity equation was indisputable.

It was closely related to Obama’s second area of concern – economic opportunity and the general problem of economic development. In this crucially important part of the speech, he presented his view of Africa’s economic predicament and his proposed solution. Here, to the surprise of many observers, he delivered a tough neoliberal message of self-reliance. “We must start from the simple premise that Africa’s future is up to Africans,” he said. But this message stressing the need for Africans to become self-reliant was presented not as the detached observation of an outsider but as the witness of a fellow insider, a black man who shared his audience’s African ancestry.

As he pointed out,

I say this knowing full well the tragic past that has sometimes haunted this part of the world. After all, I have the blood of Africa within me, and my family’s – (Applause) – my family’s own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story. (p. 3)

Obama thus skillfully connects his family’s story to the larger African story, indicating that his family had shared both the triumphs and the disasters of African history.

My father grew up herding goats in a tiny village, an impossible distance away from the American universities where he would come to get an education. He came of age at a moment of extraordinary promise for Africa. The struggles of his own father’s generation were giving birth to new nations, beginning right here in Ghana. (Applause) Africans were educating and asserting themselves in new ways, and history was on the move. (p. 3)

After acknowledging Africa’s postcolonial achievements, Obama shifted to a harsher tone in assessing the causes of Africa’s current problems.

In seeking to identify the source of these contemporary problems of economic stagnation and poverty, Obama said, Africans should blame not the West, but themselves. "Now, it's easy to point fingers and to pin the blame of these problems on others. Yes, a colonial map that made little sense helped to breed conflict. The West has often approached Africa as a patron or a source of resources rather than as a partner. But the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants. In my father's life," Obama told his audience, "it was partly tribalism and patronage and nepotism in an independent Kenya that for a long stretch derailed his career, and we know that this kind of corruption is still a daily fact of life for far too many" (p. 3).

Although Obama placed the blame for Africa's problems on Africans, particularly its rapacious political leaders, he hardly felt that the United States should ignore Africa's needs; rather, he articulated what he regarded as the US responsibilities. "America can ... do more to promote trade and investment, along with other "wealthy nations" we "must open our doors to goods and services from Africa in a meaningful way. That will be a commitment of my administration," he promised (p. 7). After noting that the United States had committed \$3.5 billion for a food security initiative, which was focused on new methods and technologies for farmers, Obama reiterated his message of self-reliance. "Aid is not an end in itself. The purpose of foreign assistance must be creating the conditions where it's no longer needed," he said, as if his audience needed to be reminded that charity should not be regarded as an end.

The aims of this neoliberal economic message, undoubtedly the most sensitive part of the speech, were twofold: to chastise Africans while avoiding a patronizing tone and to appease American conservatives, who Obama knew would monitor his speech for evidence of "wasteful foreign aid" commitments.

Obama's comments about public health in Africa, his third critical area of concern, offered little that was new. For the most part, it followed the previous administration's initiatives. Acknowledging that he wanted to build on the "strong efforts of President Bush," who had committed \$15 billion to fighting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/AIDS in Africa, Obama noted that his administration would add the new goals of helping to eradicate malaria, tuberculosis, and polio. Confronted by the grim reality of the US economic crisis, Obama could hardly hope to expand foreign assistance in this area, even though many African nations desperately needed financial support to expand their overburdened public health systems.