

**THE BEGINNING OF A NEW AGE FOR AMERICA...OR IS IT?**

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Whether or not people agree, this presidential campaign holds the potential for change for the American people. The two Democratic Presidential nominees represent a new opportunity for change and progress within America, two concepts that this nation proudly embraces. Change in the sense that America has an opportunity to decide between the mainstream white male Republican Candidate and a black male or white female. Progress is in the sense that by choosing one of the two Democratic Candidates, America will be taking a big step toward overcoming gender and racial biases which run deep in this society.

This paper will deal with the history of gender and race (racism), the current situation with both issues and their roles in this upcoming election. I will focus more on racism because the ideology is one that is ingrained in the heart of this nation yet few believe that this is a socially constructed reality. Understanding and trying to find ways to overcome racism have become life passions for me because it is only until fairly recently that I got introduced to this unfounded ideology. In addition, the history and the future of this nation cannot be told without mentioning the effect that racism has had over the years.

Gender inequality is an issue that has persisted in almost all countries of the world and in most of these cases women are considered the weaker sex (Sernau 2006). The ideal Victorian woman was one who had many children and maintained the home for her husband and children while the husband was the sole breadwinner for the family. The woman's entire livelihood was devoted to her home and family. According to Sernau (2006), the hunter-gatherer societies provide an example of the closest human history has come to gender equality. This is because both men and women's roles were valued and important for the survival of the society. The men were dependent on the women gathering food just as the women were dependent on the men hunting for food. Over time however, as societies changed from hunter-gatherer to industrialized

ones, women lost their indispensable roles and became dependent on the men almost entirely (Sernau 2006). Gender inequality has persisted ever since.

Senator Hillary Clinton, who is one of the two Democratic Candidates running for President, has long been an advocate for women's rights. Suffice it to say that she used her influence as First Lady to fight for the equality of men and women. One of the things that she has been and continues to be passionate about is equal pay for equal work between men and women in which she went ahead and introduced the "Paycheck Fairness Act." She is passionate about encouraging women to pursue non-traditional jobs like engineering, law enforcement and others by expanding avenues for women. Senator Clinton has also advocated for comprehensive sex education in schools to help prevent unwanted pregnancies among teenagers and has also pushed for funding for programs like "Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act" that cater for women who have been abused. She has also spoken about children and families and for the reformation of the current health care system to provide adequate services for children and adults. She has addressed issues on energy, public safety, immigration, housing, homeland security, foreign policy and Iraq and many other issues as well (Senator Hillary Clinton-"On the Issues" and "Women"). In essence, she is a capable candidate and well able to make a competent president of this country. She has been in the White House and she knows how the system works.

Despite her being an apt candidate, she has definitely faced gender bias with men in particular. Altin Sila (2008) said that one of the main reasons why she is not getting many male votes can only be explained as sexism. He argues that even now many men are uncomfortable voting for a woman for president because some find her toughness "as either intimidating or simply unlikable. They perceive her strong self-defense (e.g. responding to the Obama campaign

mailers in Ohio) as whining and complaining and her attacks on her opponents as pettiness. Should a male candidate make these same attacks and remarks, they would most certainly be viewed differently. This is unfortunate but true. It is a real explanation of her lack of support among men in the United States and has been a hurdle which she has had much trouble overcoming” (Sila 2008).

Susan Estrich (2006) reported a sexist comment made by Dick Morris about Senator Clinton and her attitude in running for Senate and president and quoted him saying she has a “coy pretense of indecision.” Sir Elton John of Britain was upset because of the “misogynistic attitudes of some people in this country” in talking about the negative effect that sexism has on Clinton’s campaign (Tribune’s Washington Bureau- The Swamp). It is quite clear that America still has a long way to go in overcoming gender bias. On the other hand, it has been argued that those who choose not to support Clinton do so not because she is a woman but because they do not agree with her political stands on different issues (Chaudhry 2007; Hantschel 2006). This is mostly other women, who are self proclaimed feminists and I completely agree with them! Being a feminist does not mean choosing any woman for President just because she is a woman. Part of being a feminist is being strong enough to stand for what and who you believe in even when it is against the mainstream. Many women may support Clinton just because she is a woman, but it is more important to look beyond gender to what each candidate is bringing to the table.

Looking to the other side, race in America has been an issue ever since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when African slaves were brought to this country and kept here against their will. Initially, they were referred to as “...indentured servants...” but the features of the slavery practiced in the U.S. leaned more towards “chattel slavery” which is a racially biased type of slavery (Becker 1999).

In an article by the “SocialistWorker.org” organization, Ahmed Shawki’s work, the “Black Liberation and Socialism” showed that racial bias began as a way to justify having and keeping slaves because they were an economic asset to this country. It was not uncommon for people to differentiate between themselves and people who were not of their clan or group. However, their distinction did not mirror what we have come to call racism today (SocialistWorker.org).

Racism in the current America is more subtle and covert. Due to the “open” condemnation of this prejudice, many racists have to hide their dislike or hatred for the “race” that they believe to be inferior. Racism continues in the form of institutional racism which is where institutions like schools, governments, corporations, discriminate against certain people intentionally or not thereby limiting some or all of their rights. This type of racism is difficult to get rid of because those who are guilty of perpetrating it can easily blame the system and this is one of the issues the Illinois Senator wants to deal with head on when he is elected as President.

Senator Obama represents what America has always been - a diverse nation. When the term “racism” is used, the default meaning is always the relationship between black and white people although the term also applies to prejudice against other minorities. Obama is of African and Caucasian descent. He represents a bridge between Africans and Caucasians as well as other minorities. Barack is as much Caucasian as he is African. Most people will agree that race is playing role in this election because of Obama’s African heritage. In his speech on “The Most Perfect Union,” Obama made it clear that this nation has been stuck in “a racial stalemate” but that there is still hope to truly become one when all people, black, white or brown all look beyond their “old wounds” (Huffington Post). I’m sure that this Senator knows that it will take time to resolve race issues in America, but he is a beacon of hope that it is possible to have a united nation made up of diverse people.

Joan Vennochi, columnist of the Boston Globe pointed out Barack's race dilemma in this election. She said that Senator Obama does not want to be seen purely as a black man because a successful candidate needs to project more than race and gender in his or her candidacy. Vennochi holds that the Illinois Senator is in a challenging position because if he lets every racist remark go, then there is the risk of offending black voters while if he regards every awkwardly stated statement as racist, the reverse will be true for white voters ( Vennochi, The Boston Globe). From early on in the campaign process, one could sense that Obama was walking a very fine line being careful not to offend either the white or black race. More so now, it is almost as if everything he says has to be completely neutral otherwise the possibility of offending one of the two races will increase.

Still there are other people who do not want to see an African-American in power in the U.S. The American Conservative Magazine takes a closed minded, ignorant, intolerant, prejudiced and structural-functional approach (leave things they way they are....there is no need to change), to the political, social and economic life in America. This is a magazine for the hard-core conservatives (Pat Buchanan) who go to the extent of believing that African-Americans should be grateful that they were brought to a better life here in the U.S. during slavery!!! In talking about Senator Obama, the author, Steve Sailer asserted that deep inside the Senator's heart, he has hatred for his mother's side of the family and in essence for white people. While the country is genuinely trying to bridge the racial gap and move as seen in the younger generation, Sailer goes as far as suggesting that "Obama provides a disturbing test of the best-case scenario of whether America can indeed move beyond race" (Sailer 2007). Clearly this is an American who is complacent with the current state of affairs with regard to race in America!

The words of Reverend Jeremiah Wright in the sermon that brought controversy into Obama's campaign caused many Americans to wonder just how genuine Obama was. Obama maintained that even though Rev. Wright had greatly influenced his life, he did not agree with some of the remarks in his sermon and the Rev. left Obama's campaign advising team (Ross and El-Buri. 2008). Obama used this unfortunate situation to show the American voters that he would not stand for divisive words even if they came from one of his most trusted friends! How much closer to genuinity does one come in America? There was some truth to what Rev. Wright said about the actions of America overseas although perhaps he could have worded his sermon differently. Nonetheless, even that ounce of truth that was in that message was eclipsed in the negative sounding part of asking God to damn America and suffice it to say, the media focused and magnified section only thereby not giving enough context from which to make a sound judgment!

Like Senator Obama, I believe that America can come to a point of racial reconciliation if the majority and minorities come together, realize that both sides have played a part in the persistence of this ideology and then find ways to move beyond it. There is also hope for the gender divide but like racial inequality, this will need to be worked on as well. It is ironic that America tries to lead by being an example to the rest of the world yet some African countries have gone beyond gender inequality to elect women as presidents. Examples from African and other countries include the Philippines, Nicaragua, Burundi, Liberia and so many more (Women Presidents 2008). America has taken pride in herself as a progressive nation and in many ways this is true. However, the more fundamental issues like race and gender still stand in her way making the progressive reality unattainable. The opportunity to take up the challenge has been presented in this year's presidential election. Will America seize it?

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