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Why have we yet to have a Black president?

The United States has come along way since its embarrassing history of slavery. Today, African Americans enjoy many of the same opportunities as any other United States citizen, and the overt racism that once seemed to undermine the progress of the African American community's movement toward true freedom has been shunned by the larger society, in a sense making it taboo. With all of this advancement, why has there yet to be an African American to hold the position of the United States President. There are more African American officials holding positions in office now more than ever. There have been several attempts at election, most famously from the likes of Rev. Jesse Jackson and an obscure try from Rev. Al Sharpton, who was beaten out by, Massachusetts senator, John Kerry, for the Democratic nomination back in 2004. So what is it? What is the hump that Americans cannot seem to get over? Is the country racist, or is it that there have just simply been no viable candidates from the African American community? To answer these questions, one must go deep beneath the surface of this issue and observe its dynamics from all sides. The answer to why the United States has not yet had an African American president lies in a culture, shaped by America's checkered past, and also in the examination of past attempts by African American candidates, who showed minor successes, but were flawed in their ideology. As a foundation for this study it is important to view the history of the country. Although slavery was abolished in the late nineteenth century, the United States was still plagued with a prejudice, seen in the Jim Crow Era, which was a time of lawful segregation. With

this forced separation came a definite separation between the African American community and the United States.

After the North's victory in the Civil War, there suddenly became a new population of American citizens. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments abolished slavery, made the freedmen citizens with equal protection under the law, and prohibited racial discrimination. White Americans of the time period had to now figure out how to peaceably live among these new African American citizens. The time period between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the landmark court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 characterized the United States of America as a racially segregated nation.

After the Civil War, the Republican-controlled Reconstruction government replaced the institution of total exclusion from African Americans with a policy that provided for separate but equal access. The South's school systems were segregated, so were poor houses, institutions for the blind, cemeteries, and most often prison systems. With the addition of segregated militia units, trains, most public facilities, and street cars, segregation began to engulf public life as a whole. Many African Americans and Republicans saw segregation as improvement versus the idea of total exclusion. Segregation was to bring equal treatment and replace exclusion. During the 1870s, former Confederates began to move into power with the triumph of the Democrats in Congress. This, coupled with withering support from the North, aided in the deterioration of the conditions in the African American community. Although the government accepted segregation as opposed to exclusion, the idea of equal treatment was a facade. (Reader's Companion To American History, Segregation).

Segregation was deemed legal by a precedent set by the Plessey v. Ferguson trial in 1892. However, during the early portion of the Civil Rights Movement, in 1954, segregation was made unlawful in the wake of the historic Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka case. But the damage was already done. African Americans had been isolated from the larger society, and in many cases villainized by the general public. Stokely Carmichael described this as a form of American colonialism in his book entitled, Black Power. He understood this form of colonization in America to be the African American community acting as colonial subjects of the majority white society, who at the time of his book's publishing in 1967, controlled most social, economic, and political decision making institutions (Carmichael 6). Although his terminology and ideas are some what far reaching, they do deserve some attention from two points of view. First, for the African American this creates a structure of dependency on the so-called "Mother Country," which in this case means the white American society. By social norm, it is expected for "Americans," and not the African American community that has been isolated from such affairs, to take care of the needs of society as a whole. This is not to claim victimization for the African American community, but it is meant to simply put into perspective the psychology of the African American mind, what Dr. Cornel West describes as nihilism, a feeling of hopelessness that has manifested into a sense of political powerlessness (West 14). Secondly, those who are empowered by the structure tend to be less likely to release that power to the subordinate colony. Together these cases have historically provided a force that discouraged participation by African Americans and devolution of participation by the majority white society (Carmichael 6). Take the Jim Crow era for example. During this time, there were actual policies in place that

would not allow African Americans to vote, not to mention the discouragement caused by domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. In time, with the eventual overwhelming response to the Civil Rights Movement and the inception of the Voting Rights Act, signed by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, African Americans became more active in the political process, even going as far as running for political positions. African Americans had held such positions in the past, but the time following the Civil Rights Movement showed a clear rise in their political practice on local, state, and federal levels. Many leaders in the Movement both from the national stage and those in more local arenas began to move from protest to politics. Many of those who led in the struggle used their notoriety and activist reputation to aid in that movement. This included the likes of Jesse Jackson who in the 1984 election gave new hope to the African American experience. Many critics offer that as being his only achievement as a candidate, and that he and others like him in more recent elections, like Al Sharpton for instance, only added to the problem of symbolic politics that does more harm than good for the case of an African American president.

Although the African American political movement, that occurred after the Civil Rights Movement, brought a time of participation of African Americans in politics and was generally excepted as a good thing, many of the politicians that this era spawned may have very well hurt the their political movement. With his entrance into the 1984 presidential race, Jesse Jackson unearthed one of the biggest problems in the African American political movement-- the concept of Black leadership in the African American community.

History has shown that during the time after slavery, once the slaves had been freed and made citizens, they were instantly separated from the rest of society. In this colonial explanation given by Carmichael, there had to be some sort of liaison between the two entities. This gave rise to the concept of Black leadership, the lone African American, who was to speak on behalf of the African American community. This so-called leader became the preacher, the leader of one of the only Black run community institutions, the church, and a figure who was charismatic and connected to the lives of his (and in most cases it was a he) constituency (Kelley 22). Thoughts of the Civil Rights Movement immediately trigger images of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Jesse Jackson. Once the Movement was over, those like Jesse Jackson chose to take their prominence into the political arena.

In his pursuit of the presidency in 1984, Jesse Jackson seemed to be a promising candidate. He presented himself as a man of the people, and the voice for the African American community. Jackson appealed directly to the African American community with his use of church networks he had formed over the years. Many so-called Black leaders that held actual political positions at that time, like Mayer Coleman Young of Detroit and Mayor Andrew Young of Atlanta, were initially opposed to Jackson's campaign because he seemingly seized their role as brokers for Black interests. They were eventually either won over or silenced by Jackson's overwhelming support from the African American community (Reed 2). Author, Adolph Reed, Jr. described Jackson's early efforts for electoral mobilization in his book entitled, The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon:

Faced with considerable opposition from entrenched political elites in the Black community, Jackson had to find some other basis through which to legitimize a candidacy that had been on his mind for years. Thus originated a round of highly publicized speeches in packed Black churches and auditoriums, primarily in the South. The mass media--uncaring or, as a colleague suggested, unable to distinguish between a social movement and a group of people shouting in a church—projected this Jackson tour with sensationalism similar to that later accorded Michael Jackson. Soon a line was set; despite lackluster response from elite Blacks, it was held that Jackson's initiative had overwhelming support at “grassroots.” Gradually, Black politicians—doubtless made insecure by their ineffectuality in the face of the general deterioration of the quality of their constituents lives—climbed onto the bandwagon. A ground swell was created with mirrors as the mass media colluded in reducing the terms of the Black interest in the 1984 primary season to the status of Jackson candidacy (Reed 12).

But while Jackson and the Black political elite were squabbling over the right to represent the Black interest, they were not realizing the detriment they were causing the African American political movement. In its very nature, discussion of partiality to the interests in question perpetuates the separation of the African American community from the rest of the United States. By separating the African American community from the country and claiming to speak for a community of people, Jesse Jackson also isolated himself. To be the president of the United States, one has to be a unifying theme, and not a dividing factor. This is not to say that one has to deny his race or ethnicity, but he or she does have to embrace what it is to be American, which encompasses many nationalities, lifestyles,

and faiths. But it would be hard for Jackson to shake his past, which was saturated by his involvement with the Civil Rights movement.

To get a true understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, one must analyze exactly what the Civil Rights Movement was. It was an entire community of people who united and made clear to the government that they were not doing their job. There were countless protests and marches and sit-ins that all gave the same message, “This is what you have done to me, and I am not going to take it any more.” In retrospect this was a very embarrassing time for the United States, almost as bad as the history of slavery. What made this different was the fact that there were images that showed white Americans the injustices that they were perpetuating on the television, in photographs, and in real life, all on a daily basis. Those images leave a bitter taste in the mouths of Americans that some think will never go away. A presidential candidate who speaks directly from that era has almost no chance of being elected, simply because they are a constant reminder of those injustices and America’s past. Illinois senator, Barack Obama speaks of this in his book, The Audacity of Hope. In it he described the styles of, say, Jackson or Sharpton, considered the most notable African American candidates from the past as being abrasive at times, speaking at rather than to the government about what they have done to African Americans (Obama 229). There will be no American president who has set himself apart from the rest of society. In the case of Al Sharpton, who in the 2004 presidential race, held no real chance of gaining a position in office, many feel that his role was, for the most part, purely symbolic.

The most critical writers have described Al Sharpton’s run at the presidency in 2004 as a “copy cat” to Jackson’s campaign, and have made the assertion that his run was

just as, if not more, symbolic in nature. Although Jackson did not go on to become president, his campaign did accomplish several key objectives: it stimulated Black voter registration, generated support for the election of other African American candidates at state and local levels, and invigorated discourse in the African American community over the possibility of a Black president (Reed 11). While Sharpton did reinvigorate many of the objectives from the Jackson campaign, many feel that his goal was to do what was not mentioned in Jackson's list of accomplishments, and that was to take his rightful place as what Norman Kelley describes as the head Negro in charge. In his book, *The Head Negro in Charge Syndrome*, Kelley gives a critical analysis of contemporary Black leadership and describes where they have misrepresented the African American community. He describes Sharpton's run as Scampaign 2004.

In Kelley's opinion, Sharpton was in no way qualified to be the president of the United States. He even went as far as to say that Sharpton's run for the presidency was purely for his own gain. In the second chapter of their book, *Politics of the Presidency*, Joseph Pika and John Anthony Maltese described qualifications for the presidency. They listed financial capital, experience, and character as some of the top qualifiers (Pika and Maltese 36). While it is assumed that Sharpton did have the financial resources, with his broad church and institutional network, he did not, however, have the experience or credibility needed to run for president. According to Kelley, Sharpton's idea of qualification was based on his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and his reputation as a so-called race leader. To date, he has run for four political office positions: twice, for New York Senator; once, for New York Mayor; and once, for the presidential position. Over the years, in stead of running for more winnable positions, like

state legislature or city council, where he could gain a great deal of credibility and experience, Sharpton, like his predecessor, Jesse Jackson, has chosen to run for the more glamorous positions (Kelley 39). With all of the news and media coverage surrounding the presidential nominations and elections, Sharpton basically has the luxury of winning despite loss, because after all of the hoopla of the elections and his subsequent loss, he predictably took his seat as the head Negro in charge. Beyond that, Sharpton is simply just not seen as credible, and has even been referred to as a deviant by the mainstream American public. He is seen as a media creation, always looking for a story, and not representative of the values, opinions, and passions of the larger society (Kelley 41). In the African American community, he is a symbolic leader who is known for providing civil rights nostalgia, with protests and marches. He had no chance of winning the nomination, and he was predictably defeated.

Although the opinions expressed by many scholars and intellectuals have been very critical of the candidacy of both Jackson and Sharpton, one thing does hold true. The prospect of an African American president has been heightened by their perspective runs. But what they argue is true. In order for the African American community to present a viable candidate to the presidency, they must have more than symbolic leaders. By the qualifications described by Pika and Maltese, that candidate must be experienced and credible in the political arena, his character cannot be in question at all (he must have the trust of the mainstream American public), and his relevance must reach beyond the confines of the African American community. Because of these gentlemen, the prospect of a Black president is seen as a possibility by not only those in the African American community, but, most importantly, the mainstream American public, which includes

white American men and women and crosses gender and age groups. The United States has come so far in terms of equality and inclusiveness. The fact that the prospect of a Black president is more real than ever attests to the growth that the country has had over the year, and it will not be long before the United States experiences an African American president.

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