

**The  
BLACK  
C o m m e n t a t o r**

Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
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**Barack Obama and the Great Yearning**  
**By Jean Damu**  
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The election of Barack Obama as 44th President of the United States is a benchmark event in African American's long, long history in this country. However, the overwhelming support Obama received from the nation's Black communities, support that saw unprecedented numbers of African Americans marching as one to the polling booths, stemmed from emotions and events far removed the world of modern politics.

The massive support Obama received from the nation's Black communities was an expression of most of African America's long and historic yearning to be a part of America, to be perceived, accepted and respected as equal citizens; a respect and acceptance that eludes many Blacks to this day.

This historic yearning to be a part of America should not be interpreted to mean that masses of Blacks yearn to meld into white America, but rather a yearning that they, their institutions and their communities be nurtured and respected and that individuals be treated accordingly.

Many commentators have assumed that Obama's successful campaign began with the Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King's 1963 [I Have a Dream](#) speech at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial. Lots of evidence supports these theses. Others have noted Obama stands on the shoulders of Black politicians who were successful during the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era. Lots of evidence there also.

While it is important to recognize that Obama won because he had the support of broad sections of the US electorate, no section of the US electorate supported him in a

proportion equal to that of Black America. Therefore, it is important to trace to its origins, Obama's massive Black support and equate that support to Black America's historical yearnings to be an equal part of America.

This desire was possibly first articulated on January 15, 1817 at a meeting held at Philadelphia's Bethel Church, pastored by Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The meeting, called by Rev. Allen, shipping entrepreneur Paul Cuffee and others, was to discuss a proposal made to Cuffee by the newly formed American Colonization Society to re-colonize free Blacks in West Africa.

For many years previously, Cuffee had supported emigration efforts on the part of Blacks who wished to re-settle in Africa after suffering lifetimes of abuse at the hands of white Americans. Richard Allen, who had found it necessary to establish a Black church because free Blacks were unwelcome in white churches, was sympathetic.

From Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith's [\*Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery\*](#), we learn that Cuffee, in his remarks to the 3,000 men who had assembled at Bethel Church to discuss the emigration proposal, noted that he and others on the stage, including the ubiquitous Absalom Jones, were now old warriors and recalled their unsuccessful struggle 20 years earlier to repeal the Fugitive Slave Act. He made these observations to defuse any notions some might have had that he was quitting the fight for equal rights and against slavery. But he said he was also a realist. He had been to Sierra Leone, a colony of free Blacks who had resisted slavery by supporting the British during the American Revolution, and finally resettled from Nova Scotia to West Africa. There, he said the multitude of Blacks "enjoyed all the rights that are withheld from us here."

"Here in America we face an uphill struggle. Our victories can be taken away with a single stroke of the pen by men like former president (Thomas) Jefferson. He and others like him have always envisioned the United States as a white man's nation..."

The debate on whether or not to accept the American Colonization Society's (an organization that refused to accept Black membership) proposal to emigrate raged throughout the entire day. Finally the measure was put to a vote.

According to the January 16, 1817 edition of the Philadelphia Liberator newspaper, as ballots were handed out to the 3000 in attendance and then counted, the Bethel choir entertained the guests. After just two hymns, attendants announced that the voting results had been tabulated.

As the Rev. Mr. Allen stepped to the podium and cleared his throat, the audience drew quiet.

"You, the people, have voted unanimously against your leaders. You have rejected returning to Africa. Whatever our future is to be, you have decided that it will be here on these shores. God help us all."

As decisive as this unanimous vote was, it did not end for all time the emigration issue among African Americans (13,000 newly freed Blacks were to re-settle in Liberia and even today there is a mini-movement among well-to-do Blacks to establish dual

citizenship in an African country) but it did lay the basis for what we refer today as the African American identity, and it was a signal that after almost 200 hundred years in what became the United States, African Americans in 1817 felt themselves to be as much a part the US fabric as anyone else.

It was this yearning to belong, to be able to claim for itself equal membership in a nation in which they are neither American nor African which drove African Americans collectively to the polling booths. The next stage of the African American journey will determine how Obama's presidency addresses African American's yearnings to become equal partners in America.

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