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F. Michael Higginbotham

University of Baltimore School of Law, higginbotham@ubalt.edu

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Is America finally ready to elect a black president?

Michael Higginbotham
Special to The Desert Sun

For black Americans, the equality identified 232 years ago in the Declaration of Independence has been a dream deferred, particularly in the political arena.

It took 100 more years and a civil war for blacks to gain the right to vote and another 90 for that guarantee to be enforced. Discriminatory devices such as poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses and violence prevented blacks from voting until 1965.

As a result, many — including blacks — have been hesitant to support black presidential and statewide candidates, convinced that white resistance would prevent victory. It took more than a year for black support to rise above 50 percent for Sen. Barack Obama. This combination of white reluctance and black hesitancy has made successful minority candidacies rare. As such, today only six of the 100 members of the Senate and four of the 50 governors are minorities.

Democratic presidential nominee Obama offers hope for change. He has won in all parts of the country, including the very-white New England, Midwest and Plains regions. Obama narrowly leads Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain, in polls.

A long journey toward equality

His campaign presents Americans an opportunity to enter the final phase in a long journey toward equality. Obama's message of change resonates with those committed to ending racism: those who questioned whether they would ever see a minority presidential nominee, those who grew up attending segregated schools, those who watched in shock as law enforcement officials released dogs and fire hoses on blacks seeking the right to vote, and those who can see racial inequality even today.

Should Obama win, his election sends a message around the world that the highest office in the American political system is open to all. What Obama describes as a "whisper" that began "in Springfield soon carried across the cornfields of Iowa" and into the hearts and minds of an enthusiastic, diverse movement that continues to make history.

Born to a black Kenyan father and a white American mother from Kansas while they were students at the University of Hawaii, Obama struggled with his multiracial ancestry and the rejection it spawned. But as he matured, his academic successes mounted. He graduated from Columbia University with a degree in political science. After college, he turned away lucrative job opportunities to work as a community organizer in some of the lowest income communities of Chicago. He attended Harvard Law School and presided over its law review, one of the most respected legal publications in the country — the first African-American to do so in Harvard's 104-year history — and graduated with honors.

The audacity of hope that life can be better

While working as an associate attorney in a Chicago firm, he lectured in constitutional law at the University of Chicago, while simultaneously representing the south side of Chicago as a state senator. In 2004, he inspired many Americans with his speech at the Democratic National Convention, where he stressed that Americans should have the audacity to hope their lives could and would be better. Four years later, those that had "the audacity to hope" would find a candidate for president who inspired them.

Early in the campaign, it was said that Obama is not "black enough" to be the first to break the racial divide. His non-American black father and white mother did not qualify him with enough African-American heritage.

These claims could not be further from the truth. Under any historical definition of black, whether it be the "one drop rule" where any African ancestry makes one black, or a one-quarter rule, one-eighth rule, or one-sixteenth rule, Obama would qualify as black. Moreover, he looks black under American profiles.

There are some who suggest that Obama's popularity with whites is a cynical ploy on their part to end, once and forever, any discussion on current racism. References made comparing Obama to Jesse Jackson and other minority candidates with less cross-racial appeal, Geraldine Ferraro suggesting Obama was an affirmative action candidate not qualified to be president, false accusations that Obama is Muslim, and the focus on Jeremiah Wright's racist comments foreshadow a general election campaign filled with racial, ethnic and religious overtones that Americans have not seen since Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat campaign for president in 1948.

An opening salvo was provided by Fox News commentator E.D. Hill when she referred to a "fist pound" between Obama and his wife as a terrorist gesture. More recently, at a conservative Republican conference in Washington, D.C., boxes of "Obama Waffles," depicting the candidate in an Aunt Jemima-style caricature, were prominently displayed.

'Time for Americans to turn the page'

In his Democratic National Convention speech of 2004, Obama decreed that "out of a long political darkness a brighter day will come." Four years later, on June 3, in a speech where he acknowledged that he was the presumptive nominee, Obama reiterated a common theme of his campaign that it is "time for Americans to turn the page."

Yet, 30 percent of whites admit to some racial bias that will impact their vote in this election. Some blacks have expressed a reluctance to vote for Obama because of fears that his election will incite hate groups and trigger assassination attempts.

Americans must not let fear or prejudice squander this opportunity. The combination of tremendous hope inspired by Obama's success and the multiracial coalition responsible is a phenomenal occurrence.

One can only hope that this is a moment when the dream deferred takes another step closer to realization. This is a dream born of self-evident truths in 1776, fertilized by blood in 1860, reinforced by a reconstructed constitution in 1865, reinterpreted by a Supreme Court in 1954, enforced by nonviolent protests in 1964, and re-inspired by a presidential candidate who makes people dream once again.

Michael Higginbotham, a professor of law at the University of Baltimore and New York University, is the author of "Race Law" and the forthcoming "Ghosts of Jim Crow." Matt Feinberg, a law student at the University of Baltimore, co-wrote the article. Higginbotham's father, Dr. Robert Higginbotham, lives in Rancho Mirage.