

**“YOU MAY NOT GET THERE WITH ME ...”
OBAMA & THE BLACK POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT¹**

KAREEM U. CRAYTON

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One of the earliest controversies involving the now historic presidential campaign of Barack Obama was largely an unavoidable one. The issue beyond his control, to paraphrase his later comment on the subject, was largely woven into his DNA.² Amidst the excitement about electing an African-American candidate to the presidency, columnist Debra Dickerson argued that this fervor might be somewhat misplaced. Despite his many appealing qualities, Dickerson asserted, Obama was not “black” in the conventional sense that many of his supporters understood him to be. While Obama frequently “invokes slavery and Jim Crow, he does so as one who stands outside, one who emotes but still merely informs.”³

Controversial as it was, Dickerson’s observation was not without at least some factual basis. Biologically speaking, for example, Obama was not part of an African-American family – at least in the traditional sense. The central theme of his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention was that only a place like America would have allowed his Kenyan father to meet and marry his white American mother during the 1960s.⁴ While

¹ Special thanks to Vincent Brown, who very aptly suggested the title for this article in the midst of a discussion about the role of race and politics in this election. Also I am grateful to Meta Jones for her helpful comments and suggestions.

² See Senator Barack Obama, Remarks in Response to Recent Statements by Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. (April 29, 2008), in N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 29, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/29/us/politics/29text-obama.html> (“I have spent my entire adult life trying to bridge the gap between different kinds of people. That’s in my DNA, trying to promote mutual understanding to insist that we all share common hopes and common dreams as Americans and as human beings”).

³ Debra J. Dickerson, *Colorblind*, SALON.COM, Jan. 22, 2007, available at <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2007/01/22/obama/>.

⁴ See Senator Barack Obama, 2004 Democratic Convention Address (July 27, 2004), reprinted in BARACK OBAMA, DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE (Three Rivers Press 2004) (1995) [hereinafter OBAMA].

increasing numbers of Americans today are products of multi-racial families, Dickerson also identified a substantive deficit about Obama's biography -- his apparent lack of a personal experience living inside of a black community.⁵ In the memoir "Dreams from My Father," Obama traces his childhood search for racial identity that continues into his adult years in Chicago, Illinois.⁶ His native state of Hawaii, with its many racially complex features, did not have a significant African American population.⁷ In the modern era, this distance from racial issues was a rarity for not just black politicians, but most national figures in the Democratic Party. Every Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson -- including the putative "first black president" -- came of age in the American South, where issues of race and racial identity have always dominated the political and social landscapes.⁸

Ironically, Obama's lack of an early formative experience among blacks helped to make him an attractive candidate for many non-black voters. For his white liberal and moderate supporters in particular, Obama presented a rare personal and professional profile that gestured toward their vision of the illusory color-blind society. In fact, Obama received plaudits from conservatives because his election would mean the end of

⁵ See Jones, Nicholas, and Amy Symens Smith. 2001. "The Two or More Races Population: 2000." in Census 2000 Brief. U.S. Census Bureau. According to the 2000 Census, about 2.4% of all Americans surveyed described their racial background using more than one of the recognized categories. Among those respondents 18 years of age or younger, the number described as "multi-racial" rose to 4%.

⁶ See OBAMA. Importantly, much of this narrative is intentionally (re)constructed by Obama; he uses composite characters to represent individuals, a device which allows him to derive his own lessons from the experiences as he recalls them. This is not to say that Obama had no basis for establishing a linkage. In at least one speech, Obama again marshaled his family's story to respond to this critique. In his March 2007 speech in Selma, Alabama, he argued that the demonstrations for civil rights in the South were in part directed at fighting for the rights of his parents' ability to marry during the 1960s.

⁷ The U.S. Census reports that African Americans in Hawaii accounted for 1.73% of the state population in 1980, 2.34% in 1990, and 1.72% in 2000. Even among multi-racial Hawaiians in the census, those whose self-description included "black" accounted for less than 1% of all multi-racial persons in the 2000 Census.

⁸ Jimmy Carter was born in Georgia and Bill Clinton in Arkansas, both in the American South. Each of their professional careers involved navigating racial issues as governors of their respective states. See also Toni Morrison, *The Talk of the Town: Comment*, NEW YORKER, Oct. 5, 1998, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1998/10/05/1998_10_05_031_TNY_LIBRY_000016504.

the racial equity arguments of “charlatans” like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson.⁹ Even as the general election tipped in Obama’s favor, some Democratic supporters were reported to have campaigned by reminding hesitant voters of Obama’s white mother.¹⁰ Obama’s story seemed to resonate because it transcended the typical social divisions of race and class. Even if Obama could not credibly invoke direct formative experiences from a childhood spent inside the black community, neither did they burden him.¹¹ And for some voters, life in Hawaii helped to shield Obama from the most scarring chapters of America’s history on race that played out in the rest of the country.

What makes Obama’s political ascendancy so remarkable is not the fact that he won the presidency, but *how* he succeeded in doing it. Many black political candidates begin their campaigns with solid black voter support, and their task is expanding their appeal in other racial groups.¹² Obama’s experience in the Democratic primary, however, was quite the contrary. This candidate started with most of his support coming from white liberals, which is stunning for almost any black politician. But the challenge

⁹ One such example is columnist Andrew Sullivan, both who openly celebrated the dawning of a new age on race in which the likes Jackson and Sharpton were reduced to the margins of political conversations. See, e.g., Andrew Sullivan, *Goodbye to All That: Why Obama Matters*, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, Dec. 2007, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200712/obama>.

¹⁰ Jennifer Steinhauer, *Road to November: Canvassing for Obama in Elko, Nev.*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 2, 2008, available at <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/02/road-to-november-canvassing-for-obama-in-elko-nev/?ref=politics>.

¹¹ Obama did, at times, try to invoke a connection to the Civil Rights Movement. In his 2007 speech commemorating the Selma March, Obama explained how his father and mother’s relationship was itself a product of the Civil Rights Movement: “I’m here because somebody marched. I’m here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses generation; but we’ve got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn’t cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. You’ll see it. You’ll be at the mountain top and you can see what I’ve promised. What I’ve promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. **You will see that I’ve fulfilled that promise but you won’t go there.**” (emphasis added). Senator Barack Obama, Speech at Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration (Mar. 4, 2007), available at http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/03/obamas_selma_speech_text_as_de.html.

¹² See, e.g., CAROL SWAIN, BLACK FACES, BLACK INTERESTS (Princeton Univ. Press 1994).

for Obama's effort, though, was establishing and consolidating support for his campaign within the black community.

This is more than just a novel point, since blacks are a crucial part of the Democratic electorate. Obama could not have become the Democratic nominee without winning among black voters overwhelmingly in the state primaries and caucuses scheduled during the month of February.¹³ The campaign rolled up ten straight wins – and, with it, a crucial convention delegate lead -- in the South and Mid-Atlantic states, including places where black voters accounted for close to half of the Democratic primary electorate.¹⁴ Yet in the early going, the candidate faced a steep climb from obscurity to make his case to black voters. Even after his spectacular debut in the 2004 Democratic convention, Obama remained relatively unknown outside of Illinois.¹⁵ Further, his main rival for the party's nomination in 2008 (the early front-runner) was one of the best-known and most admired name brands in politics – especially among blacks.¹⁶

Against these long odds, Obama's success was possible largely due to an unconventional strategy for black politicians. Having started with solid base of white

¹³ See Table 1. Public opinion shifted heavily toward Obama during the month of February, largely in response to his winning streak. After Super Tuesday, February 5th, Hillary Clinton lost a string of ten state contests to Obama. Her next state victory came in Ohio on March 4th.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Rachel Swarns, *So far, Obama Can't Take Black Vote for Granted*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 2, 2007. available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9905E3DE123FF931A35751C0A9619C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2>.

¹⁶ See Jeffrey M. Jones, *Clinton Most Positively Rated Candidate Among Blacks, Hispanics*, GALLUP NEWS SERVICE, June 29, 2007, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/28006/Clinton-Most-Positively-Rated-Candidate-Among-Blacks-Hispanics.aspx>. As First Lady, Hillary Clinton shared much of the special affection that black voters held for her husband -- the 42nd president. A 2007 Gallup Poll, for example, reported her favorable rating among blacks exceeded that of Barack Obama (84% to 68% respectively). And as U.S. senator, Clinton herself had forged close relationships with many of the most heralded figures in the black Civil Rights community. Even a majority of the members of the senior members in the Congressional Black Caucus, including Maxine Waters, Stephanie Tubbs Jones, and John Lewis, endorsed her run for the nomination.

liberal voters, Obama campaigned for black votes in much the same way that many white candidates do: utilizing the credibility of surrogates within the existing black political structure. Primarily, the strategy involved his emphasizing associations with these public figures whose names carried weight among black voters. To the extent that Obama was unknown to blacks, these connections located him within the black political establishment.

But as important as this alignment was for adding credibility to the candidate's profile as a black candidate, it also had to be a dynamic one. With all of their help in familiarizing the black electorate with Obama, these connections caused unease or distrust among some non-black voters. At crucial points, therefore, Obama distanced himself from these individuals in order to maintain his cross-racial appeal. In the end, the mixed strategy allowed Obama to embrace the mantle as a general election candidate with the capacity to transcend race while also legitimately claiming a part of the black political experience.

In this essay, I illustrate this strategy by examining Obama's involvement with three significant figures that are well known within the black political establishment. Obama could not successfully engage black voters solely using his personal history or his professional record; in different ways, they supplied their own credibility to burnish Obama's bona fides as a racially authentic candidate. They vouched for the candidate's commitment to the substantive concerns of blacks at critical moments, connecting in a manner that the candidate (at least at first) could not do himself.

This interaction was not only symbolic in nature. At the same time, these surrogates provided Obama with tangible assets that eventually helped him compete in

his own stead. Their contributions shaped Obama into the kind of candidate who could later compete for black votes on his own, even after his ties to surrogates either frayed or severed altogether. Having secured this key constituency, the Obama campaign emerged with a lead in the Democratic Primary that it never relinquished. While not perfect in design and execution, this strategy nevertheless was effective in branding Obama as someone who effectively could bridge the black and white liberal constituencies in the Democratic Party.

THE RELIGIOUS MENTOR: JEREMIAH WRIGHT

If a single person can claim credit for the initial and rapid rise of Barack Obama as a force in the city of Chicago and for his entry into the world of black politics, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright certainly can. Wright, the former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ, served as Obama's cultural interlocutor with the South Side's black community at a time when few others could.¹⁷ The candidate himself repeatedly presented his connection to Wright as one akin to that of a second father, who taught him early lessons about the intersection of race, politics, and religion.¹⁸ While this relationship was clearly fraught with complexities, Jeremiah Wright offered mentorship and guidance at an early point in Obama's development as a political figure.

The relationship with Reverend Wright provided Obama with three specific assets that were indispensable for an outsider who sought a place in Chicago politics. First, the Wright connection helped Obama gain acceptance in a black community with a notoriously insular social network. Second, Wright assisted Obama in developing a

¹⁷ Ben Wallace-Wells, *Destiny's Child*, ROLLING STONE, Feb. 22, 2007. *available at* http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/13390609/campaign_08_the_radical_roots_of_barack_obama/3.

¹⁸ James Carney & Amy Suliivan, *The Origins of Obama's Pastor Problem*, TIME, Mar. 20, 2008, *available at* <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1723990,00.html>.

religious and cultural identity that could resonate with black communities. The religious elements of Obama's current political philosophy and rhetoric largely reflect what he learned as a result of Wright's influence. Finally, Obama's membership in the Trinity church congregation provided the crucial ingredient for any future candidate – an identifiable and large power base of loyal voters that could launch a campaign for political office.

Much of the political science scholarship on black politics acknowledges that the black church plays a role whose prominence is difficult to overestimate.¹⁹ This institution has been the heart of black political and social life long before most black Americans could become citizens.²⁰ Black Americans have depended upon churches both for inspiration, for economic support, and for political organization from the ante-bellum period through the twentieth century civil rights movement.²¹ And no other single institution in the black community has been more responsible for the development of the nation's most prolific public figures – from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King. Throughout this period, the black church has served as the major focal point for the formation and evolution of a distinct black political ideology.²² Then, as now, the church remains the lone point of contact in black public life that has remained largely protected from regulation by the larger society.

¹⁹ MICHAEL DAWSON, *BEHIND THE MULE* (Princeton Univ. Press 1995); FREDRICK C. HARRIS, *SOMETHING WITHIN: RELIGION IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM* (Oxford Univ. Press 2001) (1999). *See also*, C. ERIC LINCOLN & LAWRENCE H. MAMIYA, *THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN- AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* (Duke Univ. Press 1990).

²⁰ WILLIAM E. MONTGOMERY, *UNDER THEIR OWN VINE AND FIG TREE: THE AFRICAN- AMERICAN CHURCH IN THE SOUTH, 1865-1900.* (LSU Press 1993).

²¹ *See* Fredrick C. Harris, *Black Churches and Civic Traditions: Outreach, Activism, and the Politics of Public Funding of Faith-Based Ministries*, in *CAN CHARITABLE CHOICE WORK?: COVERING RELIGION'S IMPACT ON URBAN AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL SERVICES* (Andrew Walsh, ed., Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life 2001).

²² *See, e.g.*, Harris, *supra* note 21 at 15.

In most of these ways, Trinity United Church of Christ has been the institutional anchor for blacks living on the South Side of Chicago. Since its founding in the 1960s, the church has pursued a mission of ministering to the city's most vulnerable and depressed neighborhoods.²³ Its congregation today welcomes an increasingly rare cross-section of the black community, with members who live on public assistance and those who belong to the most affluent ranks of the city's professional class.²⁴ Trinity also embraces as part of its mission the directive to contribute to its surrounding community. The church operates a variety of services that cater to the poor, the elderly, and the unemployed in Chicago. These are some of the poorest sectors of the city, and the church's involvement makes a very significant difference. And its professed ideology of being "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian" captures the dual traditions of racial pride and social activism that run strong throughout the black church community.²⁵

When he became pastor at Trinity in the 1970s, Wright arrived with a background that was well suited to the time and to this religious community. Wright was born in Philadelphia, and he had graduated from traditionally black colleges in Virginia and Washington, DC. But Wright's credentials also included markers of his capacity to excel in mostly non-black professional settings as well.²⁶ For example, Wright interrupted his undergraduate studies to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. During his tenure in the

²³ Manya A. Brachear, *Reverend Jeremiaah Wright, Jr.: Pastor Inspires Obama's "Audacity,"* CHICAGO TRIBUNE, January 21, 2007.

²⁴ See Claudine Gay, *The Effect of Neighborhood Church Density on Political Participation*, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association 67th Annual National Conference, The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL, (Apr. 24, 2009) (unpublished manuscript, abstract available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p361832_index.html).

²⁵ <http://www.trinitychicago.org/index.php> (follow "About Us" hyperlink). See generally, Barbara Hagerty, NPR correspondent, *A Closer Look at Black Liberation Theology* (Mar. 18, 2008), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88552254>, for a discussion of the role and history of afrocentrism and social activism in Black Liberation Theology and Trinity's position therein.

²⁶ Brachear, *supra* note 23.

military, Wright served as a personal attaché to President Lyndon Johnson. His later graduate studies included work in Divinity Schools at the University of Chicago and Union Theological Seminary – an especially well-known institution for a philosophy emphasizing the linkages between religion and social activism.²⁷ Wright presented as a scholarly cleric with strong roots within the black community and with the requisite skills to navigate in institutions outside of the community.²⁸

During Wright's tenure, Trinity dramatically grew from less than a hundred to more than eight thousand members.²⁹ Many in the congregation still live in South Side neighborhoods that had witnessed severe economic blight during the 1970s and 1980s, and Wright's message responded to their concerns about economic and cultural decline. As is true for many ministries in urban settings, Wright's sermons characterized the problems associated poverty, drug abuse, and unemployment both as social ills and spiritual challenges. Wright grounded his preaching in the need for social activism as a tool for change, and it invoked themes of black consciousness and self-reliance as rallying points. Only by rejecting the social by-products of racism and economic exploitation could people realize their full potential.³⁰ This religious philosophy helped spur the church's drives to establish community services like childcare, community banking, and affordable housing.

Trinity's burgeoning social network and its charismatic leader played a huge role in Obama's coming of age in Chicago. Obama himself recounts that upon first arriving in the city as a community organizer, he did not immediately succeed in reaching out to

²⁷ Steven Gray, *How Jeremiah Wright Found Religion*, TIME, Apr. 29, 2008.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

neighborhood groups in the South Side.³¹ The longtime residents of the South Side were either skeptical or entirely dismissive of his initial efforts -- not a surprising reaction to someone who was, in many ways, an outsider. Obama held no immediate personal ties to Chicago, he had been educated in private and elite schools on the East Coast, and he had no significant familiarity with the places and people that he sought to serve.³²

It was in this regard that Wright's intervention on Obama's behalf proved essential in making inroads with the South Side.³³ Wright agreed to appear alongside Obama in a series of meetings to introduce the young organizer to neighborhood leaders. Reminding them of his own credibility in helping to advance their goals of rebuilding the community, Wright assured these audiences that while the young man "needed some help," he was capable of assisting them and could help improve the South Side.³⁴ Since Trinity's own neighborhood development projects were well known far beyond the church membership, community leaders were willing to give Obama a chance to demonstrate his worth. But Wright's initial willingness to deploy his own influence with these organizations on Obama's behalf convinced these groups to give the young outsider a fair chance to prove himself. Wright argued that they could trust Obama, and that effort helped to transform him from a well-intentioned outsider into a committed and capable local activist who could assist in making life better for the residents of the South Side.

More crucial than the pastor's gesture of lending a professional reference, though, was Wright's direct influence in shaping Obama's religious identity. In discussing his

³¹ See OBAMA, 272-74.

³² Kenneth T. Walsh, *Obama's Years in Chicago Politics Shaped His Presidential Candidacy*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, Apr. 11, 2008, available at <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/campaign-2008/2008/04/11/obamas-years-in-chicago-politics-shaped-his-presidential-candidacy.html>.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* ("Obama joined Wright's growing church in part to deepen what one friend called 'a whole web of relationships' in the community that gave him a strong political base and a well-connected mentor."). See also Brachear, *supra* note 23, for a discussion of Wright's mentorship assisting Obama's aspirations.

developmental years, Obama acknowledged that religious life (Christian or otherwise) had not played a significant part in shaping his childhood experience.³⁵ His lack of association with any established church denomination (let alone a traditionally black one) was, in fact, an additional reason that the early outreach to the South Side neighborhood groups faltered.³⁶ Having a “church home”, no matter how frequent one’s actual attendance, is as much a bar to entry in the black community as residing in a South Side neighborhood. As an official member of an established congregation, however, Obama could refer to Trinity’s external work to bolster his ideas to establish community programs.

Formally accepting Christianity as an adult enhanced Obama’s abilities as a political communicator as well. Intrigued by Wright’s sermons that drew partly upon liberation theology, Obama engaged in a series of one-on-one exchanges with the minister about the various chapters of history in which churches played a role in promoting social change.³⁷ As it blossomed, the relationship honed Obama’s thinking about social policy issues to appreciate both their material and moral aspects. These exchanges also gave Obama access to a powerful and well-established interpretation of the Christian gospel, including a familiar vernacular that could be marshaled to frame ideas and arguments. Until he met Wright, Obama held views about public policy that did not take on a decidedly religious dimension. The ease with which Obama now weaves biblical imagery and talk of values into his speeches is almost entirely a product of his spiritual awakening and subsequent study while at Trinity. This particular

³⁵ *See, generally*, OBAMA, 1-56.

³⁶ *Id.* at 274 (noting the advice he received to improve his outreach to neighborhoods “It might help your mission if you had a church home.”).

³⁷ *See id.*, 281-95.

marriage of the scholarly and the spiritual was not uncommon within black churches, but Wright's influence opened the door to these themes that were previously unfamiliar to Obama.

Finally, the political salience of Obama's connection to Wright and Trinity deserve some consideration. Though a far more secular advantage than either of the aforementioned factors, one cannot easily dismiss the fact that Trinity provided a well-developed and powerful political network in Chicago circles. The eight thousand member congregation was an ideal constituency base for any candidate to launch a political campaign to represent the South Side.³⁸ White and black politicians alike regularly visited Trinity to gather voter support during election seasons.³⁹ Because of its size and visibility, Trinity was a crucial starting point for attracting votes, soliciting donations, and recruiting organizers. And the leader of the flock did not take his power for granted; Rev. Wright regularly encouraged his members to participate in elections to assure that government was run by the wise and just. As Wright's seal of approval held sway for South Side neighborhood groups that Obama approached as a private citizen, a political endorsement was an even more significant prize for Obama to gain attention and respect among blacks as a candidate who could be an effective public servant in elected office.

In light of Wright's close relationship with Obama, the campaign's later decision to distance itself from the minister in more sharp terms was perhaps the most challenging

³⁸ See Jodi Kantor, *Disinvitation by Obama is Criticized*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 6, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/06/us/politics/06obama.html>.

³⁹ See *id.*

issue during the entire election.⁴⁰ Anticipating objections to some of Wright's more controversial statements from the pulpit and his long affiliation with figures like Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, the campaign quietly blocked Wright from appearing at Obama's January launch in Springfield.⁴¹ Although Wright noted that his invitation to appear at the ceremony was rescinded at the last minute, representatives of Obama's campaign told the media that the decision was intended to shield Trinity from negative attention.

The avoidance strategy reached the breaking point later during the primaries. When the media began reporting Wright's more incendiary critiques of American foreign policy and contemporary race relations in March, Obama delivered his "More Perfect Union" speech in answer to questions about his views on race. Taped excerpts from Wright's past sermons surfaced that revealed very sharp critiques of the federal government for its alleged involvement in promoting the drug culture, the spread of AIDS, and for maintaining a racially biased criminal justice system.⁴² Some of these statements, taken on their own, appeared more strident than the actual policy views of either the pastor or the church. Other more political statements, in which Wright employed very incendiary rhetoric, were more difficult to defend. For example, in criticizing black voters who supported Hillary Clinton, he exclaimed: "Hillary Clinton ain't never been called a n*****r."⁴³

⁴⁰ Jodi Kantor, *Obama Denounces Statements of His Pastor as 'Inflammatory'*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 15, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/15/us/politics/15wright.html>.

⁴¹ Kantor, *supra* note 38.

⁴² Ronald Kessler, *Obama and the Minister*, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, Mar. 14, 2008, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120545277093135111.html>.

⁴³ Alex Mooney, *Controversial Minister Off Obama's Campaign*, CNN.COM, Mar. 15, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/03/14/obama.minister/index.html> (last visited June 10, 2009).

Facing strident calls to denounce Wright outright, Obama recognized the grave risk of alienating voters in the black communities he had worked hard to cultivate at the start of his campaign. Wright was a well-regarded figure in black churches who could not be wholly dismissed, especially with his long history with Obama. The risk of Wright publicly lashing out at his “spiritual son” might have undermined the candidate’s claims of authenticity within black audiences. At the same time, remaining silent about the most controversial comments would tarnish the candidate’s racially inclusive image. For whites, the video clips from these sermons were vivid reminders of some of the most poignant and troubling racial issues that are commonly (even when unfairly) associated with black politicians. Failing to confront this controversy, at worst, might be interpreted as Obama’s tacitly approval of some of Wright’s more extreme claims.

Any successful public statement, therefore, had to place Obama’s long relationship with Wright in context and to provide a measured, but clear, expression of the candidate’s disapproval of Wright’s comments. As much as possible, though, the candidate also needed to avoid rebuking Wright’s leadership of Trinity outright, which would have offended many of the loyal members of his church.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Obama very carefully tried to make sense of his conflicted but continued embrace of the church and its pastor.

Once more, his starting point for the address was a return to his uncommon personal biography to show his bona fides on the project of racial reconciliation. His belief in America’s commitment to racial justice was evident from the story that brought

⁴⁴ See Steven Gray, *The Unretirement of Wright*, TIME, Jun. 4, 2008. Not all of Trinity’s members were supportive of Rev. Wright’s comments. The church was divided during the transition to a new pastor. Partly due to the Obama controversy, Wright postponed his retirement to address his critics. That decision stoked divided loyalties for Obama as well as for the incoming minister, Rev. Otis Moss, III.

his parents together, which eventually produced a family of “brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents.”⁴⁵ But more important, Obama pointed out that he was married “to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners.”⁴⁶ This complex familial history represented “an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters.”⁴⁷

Of course, part of that familial history involved Trinity; the church had been the site of his own conversion, his marriage, and the baptism of his children. During that time, he acknowledged, he had attended services when some troubling statements came from the pulpit (he was decidedly vague about which ones).⁴⁸ But for him, church membership did not require endorsing every idea uttered from the pulpit; rather, it meant an embrace of a community. Obama remained a member because the church’s mission, despite its negative features, was closely linked in service to his own adopted community. Like other black churches, he claimed, Trinity “contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.”⁴⁹

As for Wright himself, there was no shrinking from Obama’s affiliation either with the pastor: “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community.”⁵⁰

Wright had guided Obama toward a community and a faith, both with which he closely

⁴⁵ Senator Barack Obama, Speech on Race (March 18, 2008), in N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 18, 2008, at 1, *available at* <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 3. Of course, one must also recognize the very key role that the presence of Michelle Obama played in the effort to establish her husband’s bona fides as an authentically black candidate. Her childhood experience on Chicago’s South Side was an exceedingly familiar one to African-Americans. And her appeal to African-American women – a key constituency in the Democratic electorate – was crucial to Obama’s strategy of winning in several states around the country. While there are far more points to make about Michelle Obama’s role in the nomination contest, a more complete consideration of the extent to which she enhanced Obama’s political effectiveness is beyond the scope of this chapter.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 5.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

identified. While he argued that Wright had never expressed hatred toward any racial group, the statements under scrutiny were inappropriate because they were divisive and misguided. According to Obama, the flaw with Wright's comments was the underlying assumptions inherent in his critique of America:

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country – a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.⁵¹

There are at least two critical points to make about Obama's decision to distance his own thinking from Wright's in the manner that he did. First, Obama characterized Wright's views about self-reliance and racial pride as, at best obsolete – at worst, un-American in nature. Obama's account frames his own ideology based upon love of country and optimism about its potential to heal its imperfections, but he characterizes Wright's viewpoint as akin to an ossified relic. Yet the brand of righteous anger and tough love directed at promoting change is what undergirds some of the most impassioned sermons within today's liberation theology tradition. It is a perspective that seems quite consistent with what brought Wright to Trinity as its pastor and Obama as a member. Despite his longtime membership, Obama's analysis suggests that the candidate only discovered his interpretation of Wright's ideology (at least as he framed it) only months into his presidential campaign. Even some moderate Democrats found that this claim of surprise strained credulity.

Second, the more substantive portion of Obama's speech addresses the ongoing debates between black and white Americans in the matter of race. For example, he

⁵¹ *Id.*

compares the real anger that many African Americans feel as a result of slavery and segregation along with the pressure and resentment held by whites who oppose race-conscious programs like affirmative action. The press and strategists largely found that this rhetorical turn showed the candidate's mastery of the ability to empathize with each group's plight in the latest episode of America's battle with race discrimination. While he may have vividly described the major terms of this debate, Obama chose not place himself anywhere in this discourse. He very skillfully presented each side of this dispute in the manner of a concerned, yet not actively involved, observer. The lack of any historical or political experienced that marked this candidate allowed him to avoid saying more. While a politically successful effort to defuse a volatile situation, the Philadelphia speech failed to provide a serious account of Obama's own views about these trying and vexing racial issues.

THE LEGISLATIVE OPERATIVE: EMIL JONES, JR.

Reverend Wright proved to be a tremendously effective emissary for Barack Obama as he made inroads organizing the social networks on the South Side of Chicago, but State Senator Emil Jones added political experience and the management of public power to Obama's resume. Obama's relatively brief time in the Illinois Senate was markedly positive one thanks to help from his political patron – a renowned and acutely effective operator within the world of state government. Jones, the first black legislator to preside over the Illinois Senate, steered Obama toward opportunities that positioned him ideally to launch a statewide campaign. Given the barriers that typically prevent

rank-and-file legislators from quickly becoming stand-outs, Obama's close alliance with Jones was essential for the success of his relatively early effort to become U.S. senator.

An often-overlooked part of Obama's political resume is that his first elected position was as a representative from a majority-black legislative district. Some political scientists argue that this starting point often prevents candidates from winning higher office, since the ideological composition of a majority-black (or non-white) constituency often differs sharply from a larger statewide electorate.⁵² In representing their voters, legislators from majority-black districts tend to build records considered "too liberal" to run statewide for governor or U.S. senator.⁵³ While the legislator's attention to the preferences of his constituents is a source of strength within the district, it may be a liability in the rest of the state. This account is commonplace in examinations of the structural constraints for many black politicians, leading some writers to question the policy of designing majority-black districts to entrench political representation.⁵⁴

Added to this challenge is a more traditional, and broadly accepted, issue for any political figure that enters a legislative chamber as a new member. The norm in most legislative caucuses is that seniority provides the keys to exercising political power, and members therefore must earn their way into leadership positions.⁵⁵ The more times a politician wins re-election, the more he demonstrates his political power and influence.

⁵²See, e.g., KEITH REEVES, *VOTING HOPES OR FEARS* (Oxford Univ. Press 1997); JAMES M. GLASER, *THE HAND OF THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN POLITICS* (Yale Univ. Press 2005); MATTHEW STREB, *THE NEW ELECTORAL POLITICS OF RACE* (Univ. of Alabama Press 2002).

⁵³SWAIN *supra* note 12, at 209; Lisa Handley & Bernard Grofman, *The Impact of the Voting Rights Act on Minority Representation: Black Officeholding in Southern State Legislatures and Congressional Delegations*, in *QUIET REVOLUTION IN THE SOUTH: THE IMPACT OF THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT 1965-1990* 335, 336-37, 343-44 (Chandler Davidson & Bernard Grofman eds., Inter-univ. Consortium for Poli. and Soc. Research 1994).

⁵⁴See, e.g., EARL BLACK & MERLE BLACK, *THE RISE OF SOUTHERN REPUBLICANS* 69 (Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press 2002); DAVID LUBLIN, *THE PARADOX OF REPRESENTATION* 112-13 (Princeton Univ. Press 1997).

⁵⁵Robert Peabody, *Leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives*, 61 *AM. POL. SCI. REV.* 675-93 (1967).

Even a member of the majority party must wait in line before chairing a legislative committee or sponsoring an important bill on the floor of the chamber. Only after a period of apprenticeship to the more senior caucus members can a newly-minted legislator assume the responsibility of managing institutional leadership.

Within this rigid promotion system, Jones himself developed a skill and mastery of the legislative process that earned him a top spot in the leadership. He was first elected to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1972 from a district in the South Side of Chicago. After a decade of service, Jones successfully campaigned for a seat in the Illinois Senate.⁵⁶ Throughout his legislative career in that chamber, Jones advanced in the ranks by employing a strategy common for many black legislators -- working within the party caucus structure to secure funding projects for his district. After serving with distinction in that body, Jones was selected by his Democratic colleagues to become their Leader in 1993 – at a point when Democrats held 27 seats.⁵⁷ Jones asserted control over the legislative and campaign business of the Democratic members and quickly took steps to improve their competitiveness throughout the state.⁵⁸ By the point of Jones' retirement 2009, the Senate Democrats had grown to a 37-member veto-proof majority.⁵⁹ Much of that success is due to Jones' heralded ability to recruit new candidates and to fundraise on behalf of the members of his caucus.

⁵⁶Lesley R Chinn, *Senate President Emil Jones Announces Retirement*, CHICAGO CITIZEN, Aug. 20, 2008.

⁵⁷ La Risa Lynch, *Black Pols: Jones Key to Senate's Veto Proof Super Majority*, CHICAGO CITIZEN, Nov. 15, 2006, available at <http://www.proquest.com/>; Document ID: 1170186721; see also Jo Becker & Christopher Drew, *Pragmatic Politics Forged on the South Side* N.Y. TIMES, May 11, 2008. available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/us/politics/11chicago.html?pagewanted=2>

⁵⁸ Christopher Drew & Raymond Hernandez, *Loyal Network Backs Obama After His Help*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 1, 2007. available at

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/01/us/politics/01obama.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1

⁵⁹ *Id.*

Due to the legislature's seniority norms, Obama's swift emergence as a key figure in Springfield was far from predictable. For one thing, his service in the Illinois Senate was his first experience holding public office. Compared to the other Democratic members of the Senate – including the more senior black members – Obama was a political novice.⁶⁰ Further, many of his positions on substantive policies were still unknown and untested; the other longer-serving members in the party had demonstrated loyalty that was easily verifiable. And at least a few of Obama's fellow senators were also rankled because he had unseated a well-regarded black incumbent senator in the Democratic primary.⁶¹ Still, certain elements of Obama's profile were nonetheless appealing to Majority Leader Jones. His membership in Trinity and affiliation with Reverend Wright provided some evidence of Obama's political orientation. And Jones was not entirely unfamiliar with Obama, since his own senate district bordered many of the South Side communities that Obama himself represented.⁶² More than this, Obama's Ivy League pedigree offered a fresh look for the party (and its black members) that did not evoke the less-positive views about Chicago's machine-based politics.

So how specifically did Jones' mentorship improve Obama's standing as a legislator? First, Jones showered favor on Obama by designating him as principal sponsor or spokesperson on several high-profile policy legislative initiatives.⁶³ For example, Obama served as the point-person for sponsoring legislation on ethics reform in state government. This issue was especially salient in Illinois because of various

⁶⁰ See Table 2. Obama was actually the most junior of the members in the Illinois Senate Black Caucus.

⁶¹ Janny Scott, *In Illinois, Obama Proved Pragmatic and Shrewd* N.Y. TIMES (Jul. 30, 2007). *available at* <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/30/us/politics/30obama.html?pagewanted=all>. More than a few narratives about Obama emphasize his use of the political machinery to disqualify his challengers in the Democratic primary, including the incumbent.

⁶² Abdon M. Pallasch, *Jones Took 'Pushy Organizer' Under His Wing*, CHICAGO SUN TIMES, Aug. 24, 2008, *available at* <http://www.suntimes.com/news/politics/obama/1123166,CST-NWS-jones24.article>.

⁶³ Scott, *supra* note 60.

publicized corruption scandals that reached as high as the governor's mansion.⁶⁴ Obama also won praise for managing a floor vote in support of a bill to change criminal law enforcement interrogation and detention standards.⁶⁵ This particular proposal helped demonstrate his responsiveness to black protests about racial profiling by law enforcement.

Both of these assignments would usually be valuable rewards for deputies with years of loyal service to their party. The most that a back-bencher in the senate might hope for would be playing a supporting role in shepherding these bills on the floor. Aside from teaching courses on the topic, Obama had no special expertise with substantive policies like crime or ethics reform. Nor did he enjoy any pre-existing ties with the colleagues who needed to be lobbied for their votes. However, Obama did have the backing of a Senate leader who desired a new front-man for the party's legislative agenda.

At the same time, Jones deserves credit for shielding Obama from taking more controversial floor votes. A crucial power of the party leader is to require a member's loyalty on tough floor votes; however, Jones rarely requested this task of Obama. Throughout his terms in the Illinois Senate, Obama remained insulated from the policy questions that most candidates would have found difficult to defend. Among the most biting criticisms of Obama as a presidential contender was that he had ducked votes in the Illinois Senate on bills to limit or ban abortion.⁶⁶ While other candidates had cast difficult votes on similar issues in Congress, Obama had consistently "dodged the hard

⁶⁴ Claire Suddath, *A Brief History of Illinois Corruption*, TIME, Dec. 11, 2008, available at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1865681,00.html>.

⁶⁵ Amy S. Clark, *Obama Record May Be Gold Mine for Critics*, CBS NEWS.COM, Jan. 17, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/01/17/politics/main2369157.shtml>

⁶⁶ *Id.*

questions” in furtherance of his political ambitions. By voting “present” on many of these votes or missing some roll calls altogether, Obama eluded criticism attacks that he was too solidly within the liberal or conservative camps.⁶⁷ No matter how one views these “present” votes, the fact is that Jones’s intervention preserved Obama’s reputation as a centrist senator who maintained alliances with Republicans. In addition, the candidate remained untouched by the more unseemly political deal-making that legislators sometimes must support in service to the party.

Finally, the assistance from Jones included an advantage of unparalleled worth during the redistricting process. This particular form of assistance not only secured Obama’s senate seat, but it ultimately positioned him to pursue a statewide campaign for U.S. Senate. When legislative districts are redrawn each decade to equalize their populations, individual members often find that their personal interest in re-election diverges from the main concern of their party leaders -- protecting the margins for the party statewide. For example, a party leader may decide to transfer enough voters from an incumbent’s district to leave that incumbent vulnerable; however, that same move might be necessary to help the party’s chances of securing or gaining seats elsewhere.

These statewide tradeoffs largely worked to the benefit of Obama in the 2000 process, thanks largely to Jones. Although he was a very junior member of the Illinois Senate, Obama had the privilege of designing his own district and constituency with very little meddling from the leadership. In considering a run for the U.S. Senate, Obama desired greater exposure to voters living beyond the South Side neighborhoods in his existing district. A constituency with a larger number of professional and non-black

⁶⁷ Raymond Hernandez and Christopher Drew, *It’s Not Just ‘Ayes’ and ‘Nays’: Obama’s Votes in Illinois Echo*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 20, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/us/politics/20obama.html>

voters would cement his bona fides as a serious statewide candidate who could obtain the money and deliver the message to compete. The changes would also provide Obama with access to much-needed campaign donors.

With Jones's consent, Obama redrew his district's lines in the 2000 process so that its borders largely ran north-to-south, rather than east-to-west. The consequences of this geographic change were quite significant. In the 1990s, Senate District 13 was slightly more than 70% black and was solidly anchored in the South Side neighborhoods near his home base, Trinity United Church. As a result of the refashioning, though, District 13 exchanged some of this South Side territory for segments of Chicago's more affluent Gold Coast farther north.

The black population in the district, though still a majority, was markedly smaller in Obama's redesigned plan. Not only did Obama remove from his district areas where potential challengers for the seat lived, but he also built a voter coalition that served as a template for his campaign U.S. Senate in 2004.⁶⁸ Functionally, the re-engineered legislative district allowed Obama to show his viability inside and outside of the black community. But with all the disruptive effects that these shifts caused in several adjoining districts -- and for their incumbent politicians, none of this reshuffling could have been possible without Jones.⁶⁹

Of course, a grave risk of holding the reins of power as a political operator is the propensity toward developing peculiar (and sometimes damaging) associations. Jones' tremendous influence in Illinois politics brought him close to several moneyed interests

⁶⁸Scott, *supra* note 60.

⁶⁹Pallasch, *supra* note 61.

that helped to bankroll a number of Democratic campaigns.⁷⁰ Particularly in district constituencies as economically impoverished as those on the South Side of Chicago, external sources of financial support were vital to fund incumbent campaigns. Along with other Democratic leaders, Jones worked hard to cultivate major contributors and to distribute their donations among his colleagues.⁷¹ As the network of money backers flourished, so too did the allegations of public corruption. At least some of these donor connections at least indirectly threatened Obama as a presidential candidate.

One of Jones' key fundraisers was Antoin Rezko, the now-convicted real estate mogul who assisted Obama in the purchase of a home.⁷² Because of the questionable timing of the transaction, this real estate deal drew considerable media scrutiny when Rezko was arrested on allegations of corruption.⁷³ Rezko himself had lent his financial support to the entire Democratic Party in Illinois, including Jones and the now-impeached Governor Rod Blagojevich. Emil Jones had specifically recruited Rezko to be a principal recruiter of new financial supporters for other political candidates, including Obama.⁷⁴ As the official investigation into Rezko's web of influence became more intense, questions about Jones involvement in corrupt exchanges for campaign money surfaced. The very hint of scandal posed a huge liability for Obama, who claimed to have helped to clean up ethical violations in Illinois government.

Despite Jones' centrality in creating opportunities for Obama in the state senate and in readying his campaign for higher office, the connection with his political mentor

⁷⁰ Tony Allen-Mills, *Barack Obama: Toxic Mentors Start to Corrode Pristine Campaign*, TIMES ONLINE, Mar. 23, 2008,

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article3602710.ece

⁷¹ Scott, *supra* note 60.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

became difficult to defend in light of the Rezko scandal. Jones' intervention and tutelage had been crucial for Obama's avoiding the typical constraints of many black politicians. Each of the legislative accomplishments Obama touted on the campaign trail for the Senate and the White House was largely due to Jones' generosity. Without these policy achievements, the attacks on Obama's resume would have been far more successful. Further, refashioning Obama's district was also a direct product of Jones political mentorship. Obama could not have run statewide as the consensus candidate of the South Side black community without Jones's approval. Unless Jones had intervened on his behalf, for example, Obama might well have faced a more complicated campaign with other black challengers (at least a few his colleagues in the state senate) in the primary race for U.S. senator.

Even as Jones's management of his office stirred legal controversy and hastened his own retirement from politics, Obama surprisingly managed to stay above the fray. The bulk of his legislative portfolio was attributable to, if not entirely dependent upon, Jones's traditional style of deal-making on his behalf. And the far-reaching scandal implicated several principle players in his rise to prominence in state politics. Yet Obama bore none of the costs associated with the choices that made his rapid climb possible. Even if they were never charged with a crime, few politicians could have emerged with an unblemished public image with such a close political association. However, Obama turned the focus of his policy expertise on the substantive issues he advocated as a legislator rather than the political patron and ally who made them possible. Severing the formal, public ties between the two politicians was therefore a relatively simple enterprise in light of the legal and political issues that they created.

THE PARTY POWER-BROKER: JESSE JACKSON

The third figure from the black political establishment essential to Obama's emergence as a candidate was the Reverend Jesse Jackson. This relationship was perhaps the most vital for Obama to secure in his presidential campaign, yet it was also the most volatile one. Unlike the other individuals in this study, Jackson was neither personally nor heavily invested in Obama's career success. Jackson was also based in Chicago, but his network of black political supporters was national in scope; indeed, Jackson maintained perhaps the broadest public profile of any spokesman on civil rights issues.⁷⁵ An endorsement from Jackson would therefore prove critical to Obama's effort to secure the party's nomination. At the same time, though, Jackson's statements and positions in his campaigns for president had branded him, at least in some quarters, as a divisive and polarizing personality.⁷⁶

As a public figure, Jackson had a background that combined many of the strengths that Wright and Jones possessed. Like Wright, Jackson was an ordained minister with well-known civil rights credentials that made him a legendary personality in black communities.⁷⁷ Jackson was a young protégé of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and he became a major leader in his own right during the post-civil rights era.⁷⁸ Jackson later founded Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) and the Rainbow Coalition, two groups that advanced an agenda to eradicate racism, sexism and poverty.

⁷⁵ William Crotty, *Jesse Jackson's Campaign: Constituency Attitudes and Political Outcomes*, in JESSE JACKSON'S 1984 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN: CHALLENGE AND CHANGE IN AMERICAN POLITICS 57, 58 (Lucius J. Barker & Ronald W. Walters eds., Univ. of Illinois Press 1989).

⁷⁶ Joyce Purnick & Michael Oreskes, *Jesse Jackson Aims for the Mainstream*, NY TIMES, Nov. 29, 1987. available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/29/magazine/jesse-jackson-aims-for-the-mainstream.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=5>

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ Mfanya Donald Tryman, "Jesse Jackson's Campaigns for the Presidency: A Comparison of the 1984 and 1988 Democratic Primaries" in BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM. (Huey Perry & Wayne Parent eds., Univ. of Florida Press 1995).

At the same time, Jackson developed a reputation as an important power broker within the Democratic Party's national organization.⁷⁹ For any politician (black or white) seeking to develop a strong relationship with the black community, Jackson was an invaluable point of contact.⁸⁰ Like Emil Jones, Jackson had worked for years forging political alliances; in Jackson's case, however, that effort culminated in two path-breaking campaigns for U.S. president.⁸¹ And just as with both Jones and Wright, the source of Jackson's appeal within the black community was viewed in the larger public as a liability.

Jackson did not himself have an especially close personal tie to Obama in the manner that Wright and Jones did, although his children's alliances with the candidate brought him quite close to Obama's ambit. Jackson's son, a U.S. congressman, had signed on early with the Obama team as a statewide co-chair of his presidential campaign committee in Illinois. Jackson's daughter, according to many reports, was a longtime personal friend of Obama's wife, Michelle.⁸² Despite his relative distance from Obama, Jackson was a major factor in Obama's success as a national candidate with appeal to the black community. Interestingly, Jackson's contributions to the campaign were made years before Obama entered politics, let alone decided to run for president. Jackson was responsible for prompting important institutional changes within the Democratic Party as a result of his own political campaigns.

⁷⁹ *Id.*; see also Michael Slackman, *Blacks Weigh the Impact of the Post-Jackson Years*, N.Y. TIMES, May 2, 2004.

⁸⁰ Truman, *supra* note 77 at 62-63 (describing the strength of Jackson's endorsement in the 1992 Democratic Presidential primary contest).

⁸¹ See KATHERINE TATE, *FROM PROTEST TO POLITICS: THE NEW BLACK VOTERS IN AMERICAN ELECTIONS* 137-139 (Harvard Univ. Press 1994).

⁸² Rosalind Rossi, *The Woman Behind Obama*, CHICAGO SUN TIMES, Jan. 20, 2007. available at <http://www.suntimes.com/news/metro/221458,CST-NWS-mich21.article>

Symbolically speaking, Jackson's presidential campaigns largely put to rest the question of whether a black candidate could seriously contend for the highest office in the land. While Shirley Chisholm made advances in her spirited 1972 bid for the nomination, Jackson developed the first truly national campaign team that challenged the Democratic front-runners in both the 1984 and 1988 primary elections.⁸³ Jackson's run helped to transform the civil rights movement from one oriented toward protest into one that advanced a substantive agenda aimed at governance.⁸⁴ The campaign won or placed second in more than ten state primaries each year and, along the way, raised millions of dollars in support this cause. Jackson's strong performance was strong enough to outlast several of the other contenders in the race, some of whom were name brands in the party. The experience as a candidate made Jackson a pivotal player at the nominating convention in both elections.

More concretely, Jackson laid out an effective plan that set the strategic framework for Obama's campaign years later. Jackson's innovation was his decision to register new voters in states that had not before hosted a close contest. This program of mobilizing new voters targeted heavily black counties in the rural South, but it also reached into economically-depressed areas with working class whites in the states of the Midwest and Appalachia.⁸⁵ Especially in the Black Belt region, the familiarity with Jackson's civil rights credentials made him wildly popular with black voters.⁸⁶ In the

⁸³ Tryman, *supra* note 77 at 63.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ See ADOLPH REED, *THE JESSE JACKSON PHENOMENON: THE CRISIS OF PURPOSE IN AFRO-AMERICAN POLITICS* 81 (Yale Univ. Press 1986). See also Katherine Tate, *Black Political Participation in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Elections*, 85 *Am. Poli. Sci. Rev.* 4 1159, 1160 (1991) (discussing Jesse Jackson's impact on voter participation).

⁸⁶ See Michael B. Preston, *The 1984 Presidential Primary Campaign: Who Voted for Jesse Jackson and Why?*, in *JESSE JACKSON'S 1984 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN*, *supra* note 71, at 131 (discussing voter turnout and electoral politics as an extension of the civil rights movement).

1984 election cycle alone, 869,000 black voters were registered in the South. Not since the initial registration surge following the 1965 Voting Rights Act had this measure grown so swiftly.⁸⁷ Jackson's expansion of the electorate helped him win at least a third of all ballots cast, which meant a first place finish in several states. The policy dividend from this achievement was political influence with white Democratic officeholders, many who relied on these new voters to defeat Republican opponents.⁸⁸

But the most significant legacy that Jackson provided for Obama was the series of structural reforms within the Democratic Party's delegate selection system. Jackson's efforts to improve accountability and transparency led to rules changes that would later inure to Obama's great benefit. After the historic losses in the 1984 general election for president, the Democratic Party resolved to tie the nomination more closely to electoral performance. At Jackson's urging, leaders agreed to a key change: To award convention delegates proportionally, based on the popular votes cast in a given state's primary.⁸⁹ Consequently, Jackson's 1988 electoral performance yielded a greater share of delegates than in his first effort. The effect was especially evident in the Super Tuesday primaries. Having won the total popular vote that day, Jackson moved from holding just about 6% of all pledged delegates to 24%. That lead launched Jackson to the second-place delegate total of the candidates at the 1988 convention. By contrast, Jackson's 20% share of the total popular vote in the 1984 contest yielded him control over just one in ten of all pledged convention delegates.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Tate, *supra* note 80 at 1160.

⁸⁸ *Id.* Richard Shelby, then a Democrat, unseated a longtime Republican incumbent in a race for the U.S. Senate in the State of Alabama. The 1986 surge in black turnout is largely accepted as a result of Jackson's registration program in 1984.

⁸⁹ Tryman, *supra* note 77 at 53.

⁹⁰ *Id.*

The benefit of this reform was further amplified by the creation of large numbers of majority-black election districts during this same period. Enforcement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act led to the drawing of majority-black constituencies in jurisdictions with records of racial polarization and discrimination.⁹¹ These remedies were designed to an equal chance for black voters to elect preferred candidates, but there were also consequences for presidential politics. In states where the award of delegates was based on the Democratic vote in state legislative districts, the big wins in the stronghold Black Belt regions made all the difference for the Jackson campaign. Even where he placed second statewide, Jackson gained delegates by winning in black-majority counties that anchored legislative districts.⁹² Although he did not win the nomination, Jackson gathered enough delegates in the primaries enough to gain access to and influence over the party's convention platform.

There is no more central factor in the story of Obama's winning the nomination than the party's rule change, which Jackson had championed.⁹³ With the proportional award of delegates in each state contest, Obama adopted an updated version of Jackson's campaign strategy to stay competitive with Hillary Clinton. Where he could not carry the statewide vote, Obama targeted his attention on geographic areas that entitled him to a decent share of the available delegates. His very strong showings in majority-black parts of California, New York, and New Jersey prevented Clinton from pulling farther ahead in those states and building an insurmountable lead in pledged delegates. Had the party's rules favored statewide performance, Obama's hopes would have all but disappeared

⁹¹ Preston, *supra* note 82 at 129-130; *see also* 42 U.S.C. § 1973(b).

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ To be sure, the caucus system in states like Iowa allowed Obama to collect delegates far in excess of what he might have achieved in a traditional ballot-box primary.

after Super Tuesday. With half of the delegate selection completed much earlier in the election calendar than ever before, Clinton's clear wins in all but two of the large state contests would have given her a decisive delegate lead.⁹⁴ The proportional allocation rule blunted this advantage, leaving the two candidates roughly equal in the delegate count after Super Tuesday. The rules change, therefore, made it possible for Obama to embark on his February surge – which set up the eventual end of the primary contest. But importantly, none of this could have been possible without Jackson's early advocacy for changing the party delegate system.

Even while these historic efforts aided the Obama campaign in very palpable ways, Jackson's benefit to Obama during the 2008 nomination fight was his *inaction*. This is true in at least two important moments. The more significant one was in Jackson's decision to provide a quiet, early endorsement to Obama's candidacy. While not the most full-throated statement, Jackson was at least willing to state on the record that he supported Obama's campaign in the primaries.⁹⁵ Without Jackson's public blessing (or, put differently, his decision not to endorse Clinton -- the early front-runner), Obama might have faltered in navigating the internal class and regional divisions within the black community that had hobbled Shirley Chisholm's bid for the nomination. Jackson vastly improved Obama's potential to reach into the South; while a number of more regional politicians aided in that effort, no other single figure was as important in

⁹⁴ See Figure 1. DEMOCRATIC NAT'L COMM. OFFICE OF PARTY AFFAIRS AND DELEGATE SELECTION, REPORT OF THE COMM'N ON PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION TIMING AND SCHEDULING TO GOVERNOR HOWARD DEAN CHAIRMAN DEMOCRATIC NAT'L COMM. 20-26 (2005); William G. Mayer, *An Incremental Approach to Presidential Nomination Reform*, 42 POLITICAL SCIENCE & POLITICS 65, 66 (2009) (noting dates on which presidential candidates clinched their party's nomination 1972–2008).

⁹⁵ It is also worth noting an additional personal benefit that Jackson's quiet endorsement provided Obama. Like Wright, Jackson had attracted controversy for making heavily publicized and racially divisive statements during his earlier campaigns. Accordingly, the lack of a close tie to Obama likely worked to the candidate's benefit.

helping to establish Obama's legitimacy as the candidate to further the black community's political interests.

At the same time, Jackson's silence about the Democratic Party's initial decision to disqualify Florida and Michigan because of their early primary dates was crucial to Obama's success. Both states held primaries in which most voters chose Hillary Clinton; however, the elections were in doubt because they were scheduled at a time that violated the party's rules.⁹⁶ The party might well have recognized the results in either of these primaries, which would have been disastrous for Obama. Clinton's margin of victory in these states would have produced enough delegates to surpass Obama early in the nomination fight – or at least cause a very messy fight on the floor of the convention.⁹⁷ To be sure, many of Clinton's advocates argued that ignoring these outcomes effectively disenfranchised states with large numbers of black and Latino voters. Had Jackson publicly spoken in favor of counting these votes, the ultimate compromise that favored Obama might never have materialized. Amid the debate among civil rights groups about the status of the votes cast in these elections, Jackson stayed on the sidelines, allowing both sides to carry their dispute to party officials.⁹⁸

This is not to say that Jackson kept silent throughout the process. On at least a few occasions during the campaign, Jackson voiced displeasure with Obama's failure to address issues of race more forthrightly. Early in the campaign, for example, Jackson expressed dismay about Obama's failure to discuss the arrests of young black men in Jena, Louisiana. According to news reports, Jackson suggested that Obama was "acting

⁹⁶ Florida, Michigan Primary Do-Overs?, CBSNEWS.COM, Mar. 6, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/03/06/politics/main3912975.shtml>.

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ *Cf.*, Grace Raugh, *Lawsuit Eyed by Sharpton Over Florida*, N.Y. SUN Mar. 10, 2008.

like he's white" by making only a tepid public statement about the issue.⁹⁹ Civil rights groups and black public officials had organized protests around this controversial topic, and Jackson believed that a black national candidate should also be "all over the issue" as he would have been.¹⁰⁰ Jackson issued a statement denying the specific comment about Obama, although he also did embrace with the general tone of the criticism about Jena.¹⁰¹

Later, Jackson received a public scolding in print for making a more off-color remark about the candidate. This time, the statement was documented. Jackson also objected to some of Obama's statements that the Reverend viewed as "talking down to black people" to score political points.¹⁰² Jackson bristled at marshalling conservative values arguments that raised cultural critiques of black communities and ignored structural problems. Obama argued to a largely black audience in Houston, Texas that improving the education system was a priority for government, but that they also needed to "pull their kids away from the t.v." and "not serve Popeye's Chicken for dinner."¹⁰³ Jackson noted his strong displeasure with the effort to minimize the effects of structural elements of the problems, threatening in no uncertain terms to take Obama to task. However, Jackson's very off-color comment was immediately rebuked by his son, who urged his father to "keep hope alive and shut up" for the duration of the campaign.¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

⁹⁹ Lynne Sweet, *Jackson tells Sweet Obama "does not have to jump through hoops to prove his ethnicity." Does not recall saying Obama is "acting like he's white."* Chicago Sun Times, Sep. 20, 2007, available at http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/09/sweet_column_jackson_tells_swe.html

¹⁰⁰ *Id.*

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² At a public event, Jackson was caught on an active microphone whispering to another panelist that he wanted to "cut [Obama's] nuts off" for "talking down to black people," he quickly turned contrite. He said his words were "crude and hurtful." Allison Samuels, *At Arm's Length*, NEWSWEEK, Jul. 12, 2008, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/145844>.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Jesse Jr. to Jesse Sr.: You're wrong on Obama, Dad*, CHICAGO SUN TIMES, Dec. 3, 2007, available at <http://www.suntimes.com/news/commentary/letters/678092,CST-EDT-vox03.article>.

On the eve of his assassination, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. announced to a Memphis audience that he had been to the mountain top and had seen what he described as the Promised Land. Drawing on themes in the book of Exodus, the prophetic speech conveyed in very moving terms King's ambitious vision that black Americans would eventually reach the goal of their long struggle toward equal rights. But just as Moses could not enter the land of Canaan with the people he led, King cautioned listeners, "I might not get there with you. But we, as a people, ... will get to the promised land."¹⁰⁵ The mixed sense of regret and promise infused in this final speech conveyed the idea that march toward racial freedom and political incorporation for black Americans was larger than the fate of any single person, and that the true measure of success was the achievement of rights for all. In other words, the civil rights movement depended upon the sacrifices of many individuals -- all for the sake of a common purpose.

Forty years after that speech, the possibilities and perils for black politics remain just as true in light of the nomination of Barack Obama. Perhaps with a touch of irony, Obama evoked this very same biblical imagery in his speech commemorating the Selma to Montgomery March in 2007.¹⁰⁶ After paying tribute to the lions of the civil rights movement that day, Obama announced that he and other young black politicians were part of the Joshua Generation – those who had received the inheritance of the movement.¹⁰⁷ The congregation reacted to this imagery with great approval, but few likely recognized that the signal that Obama might have been sending was not all positive. King had embraced the role of Moses in the Memphis speech, but one could

¹⁰⁵ Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, I've Been to the Mountaintop 8 (April 3, 1968) (transcript *available at* http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/I%27ve_been_to_the_mountaintop.pdf).

¹⁰⁶ Speech at Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration, *supra* note 11.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

read Obama's invocation of the Joshua Generation as notice to the black political establishment (many of them, in King's generation) who could not cross the river Jordan with him.

No one can seriously doubt that the Obama campaign inherited a great legacy from black politics. Although he was not himself a direct descendant of that legacy, Obama positioned himself to benefit from it. With the aid of each of the figures described above, Obama successfully marshaled the language, the skills, and the strategy from the black political establishment in mounting his bid for the Democratic nomination. This achievement simply could not have been possible without their assistance – or their sacrifice. These figures helped to perfect the linkage between his constituency of white liberals and black communities – even where Obama's name was largely an unfamiliar one. Absent any one of the actors' effort to legitimate Obama's claim to represent black substantive interests, this candidacy would surely have faltered early. Even with the obstacles and challenges that these relationships at times posed, the alliances nevertheless stood as credible and durable testimonies to his authenticity as a black candidate.

At the same time, though, one must approach this quite laudable moment of achievement with a sense of caution. Joshua's entry into Canaan, Obama rightly noted, came at a cost to Moses. To the extent that members of the black political establishment are the Moses Generation, the years to come may not be entirely filled with celebration. As crucial as these actors were in developing this candidate and his campaign, the mark of their success was not in the election itself. Rather, it was the promise of what Barack Obama, as president, could change as a president. At least in the days after the

nomination fight ended, very little evidence of this change was apparent in his decision-making. The people who were crucial in the early going were marginalized shortly after the nomination was decided. Wright, Jones, and Jackson all found themselves outside of the inner circle of Obama's policymaking team after the convention. Part of the reason, of course, is due to the necessary moves that all presidential candidates make toward the center in general elections. But the shift is an especially sobering one for a campaign that was once so reliant upon gaining the support of black voters.

So does the election of Obama mean that the cause of black political empowerment has also succeeded? Perhaps the new president has taken the advice and guidance from these black figures to heart, and developed his own sense of a racial mission. To be sure, many of the faces in the White House are people of color. Some of the African-American faces are new and younger ones, but they may bring many of the lessons that the established generation of politicians have taught. On the other hand, it is also possible that the appeal to racial concerns may prove more instrumental than substantive in value. One therefore must be quite careful to recognize that electing a black candidate for the nation's highest office may certainly be part of the formula for black political power, but it cannot substitute for the enactment of substantive policies that respond to the long overdue calls for racial justice. On this score, the Obama political story largely remains a work in progress.

Table 1

State	Obama	Clinton	Obama Delegate Gain	Black Share of Democratic Electorate
Mississippi	61	37	+5	50%
Louisiana	57	36	+12	48%
Delaware	53	42	+3	28%
Georgia	66	31	+33	52%
North Carolina	56	42	+17	33%
Alabama	56	42	+2	51%
Virginia	64	35	+25	30%
South Carolina	55	27	+13	55%
Maryland	61	36	+14	37%

Data collected from 2008 primary exit polls, *available at* www.cnn.com/Election/2008/primaries/results; <http://politics.nytimes.com/election-guide/2008/results/votes/index.html>; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21660890>

Table 2
Black Members of the Illinois Senate-- 90th General Assembly (1997-1998)

State Senator	Senate District Number	Year First Elected
Margaret Smith	3	1983
Earlean Collins	4	1977
Rickey Hendon	5	1993
Barack Obama	13	1997
Emil Jones, Jr	14	1983
William "Bill" Shaw	15	1993
Donne E. Trotter	16	1993
James F. Clayborne, Jr.	57	1995

Data Taken from Illinois State Government Blue Book.

Figure 1

