

Yes We Did!

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: November 5, 2008 07:47 AM

Yes We Did! Forget about the Bradley effect, Republican voter suppression tactics and October surprises. Obama won a clear and resounding victory last night, one that will be etched into the consciousness of our country for generations. Even though we have all seen the polls for months and this has seemed inevitable for a few weeks, this is still something extraordinary. This moment, and this election, changes everything. Obama ran on a progressive, although not 100% pure, platform promised real change, and demonstrated a style, intellect and understanding of today's world that we have not seen in years. His election has broken important ground for our country. Obama has shown millions of children and young people that anybody can grow up to be president of the United States-anybody, except, of course, John McCain.

Obama's victory is also important because it is about as clear a rebuke of the Bush years as possible. While Obama is not perfect on all issues, he is about as progressive as one can be and still be in the mainstream American politics. His victory is a victory of reason, sanity and progress after the eight years of delusional reactionary rule by Bush and Cheney.

In the early primaries, we heard young Obama supporters chant "Race doesn't matter!" For people of that generation, there is something to that. A huge number of young people affirmed that race, in fact, doesn't matter, but change and hope does. This is a fantastic evolution in our polity.

For those of us who are a little older, however, race matters. For us, tonight is a night we didn't know we would ever see. Not too put too fine a point on it, but we just elected an African American president. This is an amazing breakthrough, perhaps it should have happened earlier, but many of us didn't think we would ever see this day. This is a great day for America and for all Americans.

Obama's election does not somehow show that there is no more racism in America, nor will his presidency end racism, but it will make all of us recognize just how much our country has changed in the 4-5 decades since we ended apartheid in the American south.

Democracy is always a triumph of hope over fear. The notion that somehow collectively we can make good decisions and govern ourselves, or as E.B. White wrote "the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half the time", is not one that comes easily. Barack Obama's victory is a unique triumph of hope over fear: the hope that we can unify our country, bring meaningful change, do things differently in Washington, and engage the world in a thoughtful and collaborative rather than belligerent and combative way has triumphed over the fears of creeping socialism, secret Islamist plots and of change itself. Obama's is a triumph over all those who whispered fearfully "I don't think America is ready", or campaigned by saying "We just don't know enough about him."

This last comment is a particularly offensive use of fear. If anybody feels they don't know enough about Barack Obama, they might have taken some time over the last two years to either get online, buy a television or even, not to show my age, read a newspaper. We know about Obama's parents, his education, his resume, his views on all the issues and plans of all the foreseeable issues. We even know the name he called his beloved grandmother. We know more about Obama than any other candidate for president who was not already in national office.

The Obama family captures what is best about America and the American dream. Both Barack and Michelle Obama show us, and the world, that in the US if you work very hard and get a few breaks you can make it-regardless of who you are or who your parents are. Obama's victory, however, does not just belong to him. It also belongs to many Americans who are no longer with us-not only the Martin Luther Kings, Thurgood Marshalls, Paul Robesons, Rosa Parks and other civil rights leaders, but also for anybody who ever marched for the right to vote, got arrested for fighting for equality, or believed enough in the ideals of the United States to fight and sacrifice for them. Obama's victory is a victory for all Americans who have ever worked hard to get into a good school, get a good job or get ahead, worked to raise their kids with a belief in hard work and the value of education, were naïve or innocent enough to believe in the American dream or that in Obama's famous words "in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope."

The US is an unusual country because it is not based on shared ethnicity or tribe but on an idea. Today that idea sure seems like a good one.