

President Obama and the Harsh Racial Reality

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The black love affair with President Barack Obama is stronger than with any figure in the post-civil rights era. According to a recent “New York Times” poll, President Obama enjoys a 96 percent approval rating among African Americans. As an African American myself, I too feel pride and joy in seeing one of us succeed and attain so much respect and acclaim in the United States, a country with such a strong and recent history of racist oppression and alienation.

I also appreciate having such a positive black male role model on constant display to the entire world. To have a black man with a loving black family in the White House is the most positive coverage on television since the Huxtables from “The Cosby Show” ruled the airwaves. Yet, as happened during The Cosby Show’s run, it’s important to not confuse the success of a black family on TV with the reality of African-American families across the country. During the 1980s, as Americans and others around the world watched the wealthy, professional, two-income Huxtable family, blacks were recovering from a recession that saw their unemployment rate reach 20 percent. They were feeling the effects of the U.S. manufacturing decline, the rise of the single-parent family, and a war on drugs that quickly became a new reason to incarcerate en masse poor black males.

Today, black Americans are in the midst of another recession, and this one promises to have depression-like effects on the community. Economic Policy Institute President Lawrence Mishel estimates that 40 percent of African Americans will have experienced unemployment or underemployment in 2010. According to this analysis, the rise in unemployment will disproportionately affect the community, increasing child poverty from one-third of African-American children to slightly over half.

In light of such disturbing numbers, it truly is incredible that blacks give such high ratings to the president. Nearly 90 percent of African Americans are generally optimistic about the next four years with Obama, and 86 percent approve the way he’s handling the economy. As part of my work at the Institute for Policy Studies, I contributed to a “report card” on Obama’s first 100 days in office. I was asked to give a grade between 1 and 10 on Obama on racial equality, particularly as it relates to economics: a 5 represented no improvement from the Bush administration and a 10 represented change you can believe in. I gave President Obama a 6. As African Americans enter the worst economic times in over a generation and disparity grows between black and white America, I couldn’t find a way to give a higher ranking – regardless of how great it feels to watch him on television.

In spite of such strong support and the precarious socioeconomic position of the African-American community, Obama hasn’t addressed the challenge of growing racial inequality. I don’t believe this is due to a lack of concern on his part, but rather the recognition of a

harsh political reality. Apparently, much of the United States is ready to have an African-American president, but isn't willing to confront racial inequality as a whole. It will be an ironic and sad commentary on the nation if the first African-American president presides over the worst socioeconomic decline of blacks in decades.

In dealing with the disenfranchisement and alienation of African Americans, the United States has a long history of viewing the end of one particular form of discrimination (such as Jim Crow segregation or the election of an African American president) as reflecting socioeconomic equality of opportunity for the entire marginalized group. The sad truth is that the long history of racial inequality appears to be deepening rather than coming to an end, despite Obama's election. So although black, white, indigenous, Asian, Arab, and Latino Americans may come together to support Obama, no change we can believe in – at least as it relates to racial inequality – is on the horizon. However, just like in the 1980s, it certainly can be found on TV.

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