

# We Won the Super Bowl, I Mean, the Presidency: The Continued Spectatorship of Blacks in America

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*the welfare of a society is determined more by the state of being  
of its masses than the achievements of its leaders*

My initial reaction was one of uneasiness for the spectacle before my eyes. It was the waning hours of November 4, 2008, and the major television networks had just called the presidential election for Barack Obama. I am not an "Obama Hater:" as much as I differ strongly with a number of Obama's stated political stances, I was not wishing for his defeat. Nor do I disapprove of people celebrating a deemed "historic moment," regardless of how highly symbolic and substance-lacking I regard the accomplishment. I totally feel people have the right to support Obama and celebrate his election to the American presidency. What disturbed me was how a vast number of people celebrated: what it looked like, what it felt like, and what it reveals about where many people are.

Let me paint a picture of another "historic moment" that happened a week prior on October 29, 2008: the Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series (baseball). This was the first major sports championship for the city since the Sixers won the NBA (basketball) title in 1983, which added to the "historic" nature of the Phillies' win. (The final game was also historic since it was the first ever suspended World Series game, continued from two nights ago when rain forced it to be stopped.) The Phillies hosted the game at its fairly new stadium (opened in 2004), so fans gathered around it hours before game time. Once the gates to the stadium were opened, fans bustled to their seats: including "elite fans," who had cherished field level seats by home plate or enjoyed the splendor of a luxury box. When the Phillies scored runs or made great defensive plays, the fans cheered loudly in a sense of collective jubilation. In between innings, music played from the sound system, giving fans the chance to rock to tunes befitting the festive mood. This joy built to a great climax when the Phillies' closing pitcher struck out the last batter: the players rushed to pile by the mound as the fans went crazy. They yelled, hugged, slapped high fives, sprayed each other with beer, waved towels and signs, and jumped for joy. The celebration even went beyond the stadium. After the moment of victory, people rushed into the streets to dance and celebrate, others shouted loudly from building windows. Cars honked horns, people yelled from sun roofs. People shot fireworks (and probably gunshots) into the air. Crowds gathered in downtown Philadelphia streets to collectively flaunt "their win." Young people jumped up and down, some with tears of joy. Old Phillies fans said, "We needed this!" Even

Philadelphia's new African-American mayor, Michael Nutter, said, "We Did It!"<sup>1</sup> -- a we that embraced the team's victory as one for the entire city. There were also some acts of vandalism and disorderly conduct which are common to championship celebrations, but these are not relevant to the comparison I am making so I will spare you the details of these.

Fast forward to a week later: the scene is Grant Park in Chicago, where Obama fans -- I mean, supporters were gathered to watch the results of the presidential election. People began lining up outside the park hours before the public "Election Results Party" was to begin. Large jumbo screens were set up, much like the ones found at stadiums and arenas, to allow Obama supporters to watch the results live as the television networks reported them. A stage with podium replaced the baseball field where Obama would make his acceptance or concession speech. A VIP section was also set up, similar to the luxury boxes at stadiums, to provide a separate space for elite supporters to attend. When the gates to the park were open to the general public, supporters on the long lines rushed in to get spots by the stage. As Jay Newton-Small, a reporter for Time Magazine, described it:

"Every time a state was called for Obama [comparable to the Phillies scoring a run] the crowd went nuts. The atmosphere felt like an upscale Lollapalooza, except the throbbing music came in staccato bursts between CNN's Wolf Blitzer calling states as the election returns came in."<sup>2</sup> [words in brackets are mine]

And when the TV networks declared Obama the winner, supporters cheered, yelled loudly, hugged, slapped high waves, waved signs, and cried for joy. In cities across America, including Philadelphia still simmering from the previous week's celebration, people rushed into the streets to cheer and dance for joy. They yelled from windows, honked car horns, shot fireworks (and gunshots) into the air. People collectively flaunted "their win" in the streets. Old and young supporters, many African-Americans among them, said, "We needed this!" And Philadelphia's mayor Nutter probably joined others in chanting, "Yes We Did!" -- slightly different from the "We Did It" exclamation he made days ago about the Phillies winning the World Series. I would be remiss not to say there were no reported acts of vandalism and minor crimes that followed the World Series celebrations, but that may be because the stadium sold massive amounts of alcohol to fans whereas alcohol was not widely consumed at Grant Park.

To me, the images of crowd frenzy for Obama's victory seemed like a scene of people ecstatic because their team just won the Super Bowl or the World Series. The montage of people of diverse ethnicities and ages appeared more like *fans* than *thoughtful citizens* who had voted for a person who will face some of the most daunting challenges any president has ever faced. That is not to say

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<sup>1</sup> "Scattered Vandalism as Philadelphia Fans Celebrate World Series title." The Associated Press article, October 30, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Barack Obama Wins Big: 'Change Has Come to America.'" Article by Jay Newton-Small for Time Magazine, November 4, 2008.

Obama supporters should not be demonstrative in celebrating, but when voters start to look like fans that concerns me. Particularly given the Obama-mania prevalent throughout the primary and presidential campaigns, where Obama events looked and felt more like celebrity appearances than rallies providing voters with useful information on how Obama will address the country's challenges.

## ARE YOU A FAN OR A VOTER?

Let us examine some of the significant differences between a fan and a voter. Traditionally, voters in this country are (or were) expected to be discerning about their choice of candidates, even if their choice is (was) shaped by a single issue like abortion. They are (were) expected to evaluate candidates before choosing them: their choice to support a candidate is (was), in part, a trust to affirm the candidate's policies and stated political agendas. Votes are (were) considered something to be wagered by voters and earned by candidates, not given "without any strings attached" -- in other words, votes are (were) supposed to get voters something tangible. Voters are (were) expected to research candidates: read newspapers, examine campaign literature, watch news coverage of candidates and campaigns, and watch debates to become informed about the candidates. Voters usually come (came) to the political process with issues they care about which play a significant role in determining if a candidate is politically compatible. Candidates' personalities are (were) often a factor in the evaluating process, but is (was) usually accompanied by tangible policy stances voters take (took) the time to examine. Even if politicians break their campaign promises, as many do, voters are (were) at least aware of the promises when choosing who to vote for. And historically, voting is (was) seen as part of a larger practice of citizenship, where one is (was) actively engaged in the lives of their families and communities to contribute to creating a society that reflects their values. As with most things, not all voters meet (met) this threshold of what a voter is (was) expected to do but at least this is (was) the socially-deemed standard. The question is will this continue to be the standard -- for this reason I have put past tense references to the above attributes.

The fan, on the other hand, has a less-demanding, more passive set of standards. Only the truest of die hard fans are expected to know details about the team: ranging from teams' history to rosters, players' stats, teams' schedules and records, the outcome of each game, strengths and weaknesses of opponents, potential trades and prospects, etc. But complete ignorance of these details does not make you a bad fan, even if you are labeled a band-wagoner for following a team riding a wave of success. One of the reasons for this is because fans do not have the responsibility of making decisions regarding the team. A fan's primary task is to follow the team and be a consumer: whether by attending or watching (televised) games, buying team merchandise, wearing and displaying team logos and paraphernalia, showing team loyalty and pride, etc. Fans are not limited to sports teams: there are fans of entertainers, celebrities, "renowned" persons -- and even politicians. But regardless of what type of fan one is, there is a common significant factor: fans are spectators. And spectators are passive: they watch and react to what the team does, a team whose fate is controlled by forces other than the fans. Fans are not in the position to determine or enact the team's performance and policies: they are not the players, the owners / management, or the investors. And neither of these groups

will relinquish their power to fans, even if, at times, they cater to fans to attract their support: for example, an owner firing a coach on an already bad team to appease fans' frustration with losing.

Another important fact about fans is that many of them are only engaged when the team is doing well. This means when the team is losing there is minimal involvement by fans, usually just the die hards. To bring this approach to the political realm where, for a majority of people, the maximum involvement is usually voting in presidential elections (once every four years), can we realistically expect fans to remain involved in the political process to produce the change that was a main slogan of the Obama campaign? Even Obama himself has said that people will need to stay involved to effect the change his campaign promised. I emphasize that for most fans their maximum involvement is voting and talking, so to no longer perform these minimal tasks leaves nothing in terms of *actions* necessary to produce (more than superficial) social change. Accordingly, we can expect Obama fans to be around to cheer for his "wins," such as the celebrations on election night. And when, as almost all presidents do, he encounters "losses" most fans will disappear or (less likely) criticize Obama from the passive fan position. Fans, as consumer spectators, are not inclined or empowered to make determining moves. They only passively attain success (or more accurately, a sense of success) when their team attains success.

So what is the success of Obama's presidential campaign? Did he attract a mass of voters who chose him because they researched and support Obama's policies and stated political agendas? Did they vote for him knowing they were getting something tangible in return? I am sure among the hundreds of millions who voted for him there are some whose support was based on his policies, as vague and unspecific many of his (and other candidates') policies were during the 2008 campaign. (And I will not get into how some of his and McCain's policies changed during the course of the campaign -- that is another essay.) And I am sure some (a select few) will get something tangible in return for their support of him. But Obama's campaign, with the help of the media, clearly emphasized more strongly ideas such as "hope" and "change." While these may be powerful aspirations and feel-good emotions for some, they are not policies. What are the tangible action steps to institute the "policies" of change and hope? What is the first step, then second and third steps to be employed? What are the outcomes that can be clearly assessed to evaluate one is making measurable progress in the "policies" of hope and change?

A campaign that emphasizes hope and change instead of policies is catered more to fans, of which a significant portion of people who voted for Obama are. This is affirmed by the fact that when asking such persons, even prior to the election, what they expect Obama to do as president most did not cite policies. Often their responses are prefaced with "I hope Obama will do" this or that, including stating things Obama has never stated as part of his campaign issues. For Blacks, this even included hopes that Obama will make things better for Black people: something Obama has not said. In fact, he has gone to great lengths to disassociate himself from "Black issues." His race-neutral campaign was concerned about "all Americans," and certainly not Blacks as a specific group. [To quote Obama from his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, "There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America: There's the United States of America." Hopefully I do not need to explain that when the outcome of Blacks in America is grouped with all

Americans, Blacks are usually neglected.] But Obama has no need to correct fans from such misconceptions because, as fans, they will follow him as long as he is winning. And the Obama team was primarily concerned with getting their fans' votes, allegiance, and money (in the form of donations) -- that is part of the passive role fans play in supporting their teams.

Now if Obama allowed voters to believe he will do something he knows he will not do, he has to fear future retaliation from them. With fans, the only "retaliation" is abandonment when he is losing, which can be reversed if he starts winning again or does other tactics to appeal to their fan nature (like fire a coach, I mean Cabinet Member). And in politics, winning is less tangible than winning games: even George W. Bush showed (for awhile) that losing a war can be spun as a victory, which helped him win his second term as president.

The increased engagement of citizens as fans as opposed to voters in American politics began prior to the Obama campaign. But he has certainly taken it to a higher level, one that warrants concern by people who are genuinely interested in justice, equality, and freedom. The danger of becoming fans in politics is directly tied to dangers of spectatorship. Let us examine spectatorship with more depth, then come back to the Obama campaign to see how prevalent this danger is.

## WOE TO THE SPECTATOR: PASSIVITY IS NOT ACCIDENTAL

Webster's Dictionary defines spectator as "a person who sees or watches something without taking an active part; an onlooker." From a spectatorship perspective, the definition lacks the necessary clarity in regards to what is an "active part." Fans of Obama may say, "I went out and voted for him -- that's active." For decades, many business and cultural forces have manipulated what it means to be "active" as a way to increase their profits and control over consumers. So I will instead approach the issue from the other end and ask: is the part you play passive?

The passivity of spectatorship has never meant a complete absence of actions. Even when watching a game, fans will stand and cheer, wear team clothing, boo the opponent, and more. But, by their nature, these acts are passive. How? To quote Webster's Dictionary again, these acts are "influenced or acted upon without exerting influence or acting in return."<sup>3</sup> Fans stand and cheer **when**, and only when, their team does something positive. To stand and cheer when your team lost the game would be seen as insane although it is okay to literally go crazy when your team wins. The passivity of spectatorship is that the limited acts of the fans are almost always reactions to acts of other determining players or the situations these players are placed within. Determining players can include members of the fans' team, their team's opponents, their team's owners / management, their team's investors, the referees, etc. And I stress "limited actions:" the acceptable actions of fans are pre-determined and only performed when certain situations arise. For example, when your team's star player makes the winning basket as time runs out in the game, the fans (and players) go ecstatic.

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<sup>3</sup> Webster's Dictionary definition of passive.

Following this line of thought, for fans to declare their act of voting for Obama as active is misleading. As an Obama fan, when it is election time and he is running for office a determined act for you is to vote for him -- that is what an Obama fan is supposed to do. But clearly this act is made with his campaign (and other forces) exerting influence on you within the situation of the election race. And, as I will now explore, this exerting influence is masqueraded (marketed) to appear as "your choice."

As a supporter of Obama, do you remember when you first decided to support him? For what reason(s)? For some, it was Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that made him *famous*. He gave what many called a powerful and captivating speech that stirred the hearts of many who watched his *performance*. There was little tangible policy matter in his speech but many Democrats and media outlets deemed him a rising star. And let me remind you, he was speaking at a political convention where, traditionally, policy should be embodied in the speeches and presentations.

For others, their first "Obama moment" may have been on the trail to winning the Democratic Party nomination for president. He crossed the nation, giving riveting rallies that made rock concerts envy his power to have thousands of people stand in long lines for hours just to witness his oratory and presence. Then there were the campaign *commercials* and *televised appearances*, including debates. Then there were the state primaries *he began to win*. Then there was the increasing *media hype*, including promoting the "historic nature" of his campaign. There may have been the *peer pressure* of belonging to a group of friends, families, or associates who were Obama supporters. For some, when Obama won the Democratic nomination they joined his side because he became *the star player* of their team, the Democrats. And I will even concede that for some it was the wish to replace George W. Bush as president, someone who was going to be replaced anyway since he could not run for another term. But I will not discount the "*enemy of my enemy is my friend*" path some took to the Obama fan club..

The above are not necessarily negative reasons for supporting Obama. And for sports fans, much of the above can suffice as reasons why they like their favorite player or team: the team (or player) performs well in games, you saw them on TV, the sports media says their good, they have a good record, the team is famous, your family or friends are fans of the team, the team (or player) moved to your city, you hate one team and the team you now root for is able to beat your enemy. So much in America today conditions consumers (which fans are) to embrace products (which teams are) for reasons that, in retrospect, are not always sound. The process of critical analysis and thoughtfulness has, for decades, been weaned from the social cultivation process in America. As a result, many people no longer think deeply for themselves: how else can you have people buy a product just because they saw a commercial for it on television? It is this mindset, supported and encouraged by powerful forces in society, that leads someone to say: I want to be like a famous singer just because of their singing ability. And all other characteristics, including negative ones, are irrelevant in this fan's admiration of the singer -- even if the singer is a womanizing, drug-abusing, mean-spirited person.

As I conceded earlier, you may have deep, thoughtful reasons for supporting Obama. But I think few can honestly deny that a significant portion of people supported Obama for some of the above

reasons. Such choice is made in response (reaction) to an exerting force upon the person, such as witnessing a powerful speech, media hype, a commercial, a television appearance, a good performance in a debate, his “history-making” campaign, etc. Is this a healthy way to choose a president (or anything of significance): that your choice to choose him is based on how he (and his campaign, the media, etc.) exerted an impressionable force upon you? If you remember my words about voters, they bring their issues and concerns to the political process and measure candidates against these. This often includes much learning, personal development, and life experience to cultivate who they are and what is important to them. It is in this manner that when I measure what Obama says against my values, I do not choose to support him. And certainly there are others who, after measuring Obama against their values, choose to support him. This approach to choosing to support (or not support) a candidate is in the direction of moving from the passivity of spectatorship. But there is more involved.

Spectatorship thrives upon illusive identity: the (manipulated) perception that has the fan identify the team’s accomplishments as his or hers. So when the team wins, the fans say “we won.”<sup>4</sup> But usually this “we” goes no further than symbolism. Let us look at the Phillies 2008 World Series win as an example. Due to the Phillies’ accomplishment, will the names of the millions of Phillies’ fans be put in the record books that note the on-field statistics of the Phillies’ players? Will the names of fans be listed by the number of team wins, team home runs, the team’s pitching and batting statistics? Will the millions of fans be given World Series Champions rings? (I am not talking about the commemorative rings some sports memorabilia companies will sell.) Will the millions of fans receive or share the salaries the players receive, including the World Series bonuses some players will be given? Will the millions of fans be able to better negotiate present and future job contracts by listing themselves as members of the 2008 World Series Champions? Or even be able to gain endorsement deals merely by being a fan of the 2008 Phillies championship team? The answer to all of these is: no. In fact, this illusive identity has encouraged and masqueraded the reality that millions of Phillies’ fans spent massive amounts of money and time to watch the team’s championship run. Not to ignore the relatively small contribution fans make to the performance of the team by cheering them on: yes, a supportive environment created by fans will help some players perform better. But this contribution does not entitle fans to the benefits the players, owners / management, and investors attain by winning. Neither are fans given a share of the profits they generate by supporting the team by going to games, buying team merchandise, etc.

In this same way, the millions of people voting for and supporting Obama results in only Obama becoming president. And despite the rhetoric of hope, change, and a more transparent Obama presidency, only a small group of persons will be appointed to key administration positions with tangible powers: positions the exceeding majority of Obama fans will not be deemed qualified for. A look at his campaign advisors (many who will become administration advisors) reveals a list of political

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<sup>4</sup> This mentality resembles that of the “House Negro” as described in Malcolm X’s speech, *Message to the Grass Roots*, delivered on November 10, 1963 in Detroit, Michigan. In the speech Malcolm describes the mentality of the House Negro as one who “identified himself with his master, more than his master identified with himself.” The speech is contained the collection of speeches titled, *Malcolm X Speaks*.

insiders whose stances do not veer beyond the prevailing consensus of Democrat and Republican party politics, including persons who served under past presidents (so much for change).<sup>5</sup> And persons from such molds -- just like the sports team players, owners / management, and investors -- will use these positions to further their aims, some at the expense of the fans who supported Obama.

This should not be surprising for anyone who follows presidential politics. Political pundits and candidates themselves acknowledge every president makes campaign promises that are forgotten or not carried out in the presidential administration. Obama even admitted this himself in his speech announcing he was running for president (on February 10, 2007): "After all, every four years candidates from both parties make similar promises, and I expect this year will be no different." And when Obama does break certain promises, the fans who shared in "our victory" will not have the power Obama has: they are not president and cannot use the powers of the office to enact the broken promises he offered. Neither have the fans employed an established tactic in politics where you wager your support for policy promises **and** appointments of people within a candidate's inner circle to ensure certain policies will be carried out -- like Wall Street and other business sectors did, like pro-Israel constituents did. Of course, this approach would require the fans to have developed an agenda of aims they collectively agree on before approaching the Obama campaign to discuss supporting it. But such thoughts are not considered in the frenzy of being an Obama fan, especially in the hysteria of the moment of victory.

In fact, the Obama campaign has used many of the same tactics sports teams use to sell the idea of illusive identity. One clear example is the use of merchandising. Teams promote buying a team hat or jersey -- with a team logo or player prominently displayed -- as a way of "supporting the team." But when a fan walks around wearing the hat or jersey they are providing the team with free advertising. Compound this with the fact that you paid for the team hat or jersey, you have paid the team to provide them with free advertising, displaying their team logo in places they might not reach with media ads. Obama, along with other campaigns before him, employed this marketing strategy too, and with interesting similarity. The Obama Store on his website displayed a range of Obama t-shirts and jerseys priced from \$15 to \$60. To compare, the World Series Phillies' online store had t-shirts ranging from \$20 to \$55 -- the team jerseys are much more expensive, ranging from \$100 to \$200. Hundreds of millions of dollars were generated by the sales these and other merchandising items, many bought proudly by millions of Obama and Phillies supporters. There is also the additional benefit, which would be hard to assign a financial value, of free advertising for Obama and the Phillies fans provided by wearing their t-shirts in the streets, in homes, in offices, etc. The benefit Obama and the Phillies attain from this dynamic far outweighs the benefits fans achieve by participating in this scheme of "supporting their team:" of actually paying to provide free advertising and exposure to Obama and the Phillies. Such fans have basically given away these valued services for nothing: and can

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<sup>5</sup> Even as I write this essay, a number of key positions are being filled by people who served in the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. These include Hilary Clinton serving as Secretary of State and keeping Robert Gates (selected by Bush) as Secretary of Defense. Many of Clinton and Bush's policies, including economic deregulation and military escalation, have led to the political reality Obama has pledged to change. It was Albert Einstein who said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result" -- you make the connection.

only hope that Obama and the Phillies will use the benefits they attained from these in a way that benefits the fans.

Illusive identity garners another valued prospect for the team: the molding of a group identity through a process of de-individualization in which individual responsibility diminishes, if not completely disappears. Therefore, it does not matter if you, as an individual, vote for Obama with limited knowledge of his policies because you are part of a greater "we" who support him. And those who profit from fans engaging the "we" mentality go far to espouse the importance of being fans (the group, not a group of individuals). The questions individuals are more likely to raise in evaluating a candidate -- and when dealing with millions of people that can become a million set of questions -- become collective cheers and other acts prescribed by the campaign team or the situations that present themselves. Thus, with millions of fans, Obama does not have to worry about having his policies and agenda pass the scrutiny of millions of people assessing him: he can instead group them into larger masses whose questions (if they have questions) are imposed upon them by the group identity his campaign and other societal forces exert on them. Accordingly, fans who fall into the group concerned about the Iraq War will ask a limited set of questions: Were you for the war? Are you for a responsible pullout? And Obama gives his rehearsed responses to these questions over and over again throughout the campaign. And the fans are happy because that is the prescribed role of such a group when following that script. Even if individuals in such groups begin to ponder questions that go beyond the determined limits, there is an array of forces in place (much societal, not limited to the campaign) to encourage conformity, especially if the team is winning or the star player gives an extraordinary performance.

Through this group identity, the achievements of the team become acceptable reasons for unity: our team won, thus, the poor can cheer with the rich even if the rich are exploiting the hell out of the poor. Team success, and sometimes failures, can be used to justify people with opposing and competing agendas to "come together" to support the team. Following this formula, masses of Black people, under the race-neutral Obama campaign, have united with other groups who continue to oppress Blacks or benefit from the continued oppression of Blacks. Some Blacks have even mistaken this superficial unity as progress in the pursuits of better race relations, justice, equality, etc. The reason I call this unity superficial is because the unity achieved is not based on the individual and collective achievements of those supporting Obama. It is not like the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott where the work of the people (organizing and using alternative forms of transportation than the city buses) manifested collective benefits. With fan-based unity, what that unity is and what it is used to achieve is determined by the ones the fans have unified to support. In the case of the Obama campaign, unity has been woven more around symbolism than substance. And a series of losses or the departure / betrayal of the team often reveals how shallow the fan unity really is: it usually dissipates. Why pursue this type of unity when, by our own individual and collective work, we can derive an unity that is rooted in us and what we do?

Understanding these elements about fans (and there is more I could share), is it logical to think they can be part of a movement, let alone a movement that will significantly change America and the world? Fans, by a combination of their individual choices and external exerting forces (they concede

to), are not inclined to engage collective efforts to self-determinate better outcomes for themselves. Even their (passive) actions, which may be sincere and exhaustive, are limited to pre-defined manners determined by those they support and the situations these exerting forces are within. But fans are perfect for participating in *mass followings* portrayed to be movements, whose agendas and tactics are decided by a controlling elite (the team). And if people participate in such mass followings, part of the blame for participating in this charade rests with themselves: it is illogical to expect the Phillies not to operate as a profit-driven corporation that greedily pursues the profits of fans. In the same way, one should not expect a slick presidential politician to not take advantage of the fans he amasses in his run for president.

## THE MYTH OF A MOVEMENT

For Blacks in America, this dynamic of mass followings should ring a historical bell since it played a key role in the demise of the “Civil Rights Movement.” Those who have not looked beyond mainstream accounts of this period (from the 1950s to early 1970s) may be surprised to know that so-called movement was not originally about civil rights. In its early days, it was called the Freedom Movement or the Movement / Struggle for Equality, even if steps toward this freedom and equality were made within the separatism of Jim Crow social norms. In fact, the original aim of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was not for Blacks to sit anywhere on the bus; neither was Rosa Parks arrested for sitting in a White seat.<sup>6</sup> Parks was sitting in the Black (or “Negro”) section and, as was the social custom, when the White section was filled Blacks could be asked to give up their seats in the “Colored” section so Whites could sit. What Parks and the boycotters protested was this unequal treatment of Blacks having to give up seats for Whites: that if Whites do not have to give up their seats in the White section for Blacks, Blacks should not have to give up seats in their section. When Parks refused to give up her seat for Whites to sit in, she was arrested. She later said about her arrest, “I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a *citizen*, even in Montgomery, Alabama.”<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis mine to highlight “citizen.”) As news spread of Parks’ arrest, Blacks in Montgomery became upset and were ready to do something. Local Black leaders called for an one-day boycott of the buses, which the people agreed to and carried out. The date for the boycott was set and it was a success: the city buses were virtually empty. When the people gathered that night for a mass meeting, they decided to continue the boycott despite concerns from some of the church leaders that to continue the boycott was going too far. But the will of the people was respected and followed, which is why the boycott continued for more than a year. The people also selected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be their spokesperson.

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<sup>6</sup> I must acknowledge my great grandmother, Inez Louise Taylor, who gave me firsthand accounts of her involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and other Freedom Movement activities.

<sup>7</sup> From an April 1956 interview of Rosa Parks by Pacifica radio station KPFA. The interview can be obtained from Pacifica Archives in California.

During the boycott, Blacks walked miles to get back and forth. Some carpooled, some rode mules and horse buggies. Some Black taxi drivers picked up customers for the price of bus admission, lower than the regular taxi rate. Other Blacks with cars set up community taxi services, which was illegal to do without a license, and many were arrested for operating without a taxi license. Blacks were persistent in their cause despite acts of intimidation, including numerous arrests and fines, police harassment, death threats, and houses being bombed. The resolution to the bus boycott came as a result of a federal court decision in which the lawyers argued for and won the end of segregation on buses. (Although this was a different objective than the people's reason for boycotting, it made sense as a legal strategy given the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that declared "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" -- a similar legal argument was made against bus segregation.)

The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was deemed a "historic moment" for a "new movement" -- although it was one culmination of local organizing that had been going on for decades in Black communities throughout America. The boycott's success was followed by years of chicken dinner speeches (usually before rich audiences), international speaking tours, and book-signings that created fans of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the struggle he became representative of. He became a celebrity and, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which he co-founded, raised money to initiate efforts in other parts of the American South. Unlike the Montgomery Bus Boycott where the people took much of the initiative, King and SCLC began to go to communities (like Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham and Selma, Alabama) to initiate campaigns where the people were expected to follow the guidance of SCLC and other prominent organizations (like SNCC, CORE)<sup>8</sup>. Even in communities where local groups had been active in their own locally-controlled campaigns for years, they were expected to surrender the reigns of their campaigns if SCLC was to come in: an expected compromise for the "expertise" and amount of media attention King would bring. Strategy and the designation of powers and responsibilities were no longer decided by local communities themselves; instead these were decided at private meetings and then dictated to the people at mass meetings. People were discouraged from coming up with their own creative tactics as now all actions had to be approved by the Steering Committee: SCLC staff, possibly with a few local community members. Also, since SCLC was dependent on donations, their funders, in essence, became owners / investors who dictated the strategies of SCLC and other organizations. Thus, whereas the people were more concerned about addressing local inequalities, even by negotiating agreements with local Whites within the framework of Jim Crow segregation, King and SCLC became focused on integration and national civil rights legislation. These objectives were pursued even as integration in the South often proved lethal for local Blacks, and in historical knowledge that federal laws (such as the U.S. Constitution's "All men are created equal") played little to no significance in the local applications of law and social practice in communities throughout the country. And so to move people from citizens (like Parks who refused to give up her seat) to mass followers (fans) like many of the thousands who gathered for the 1963 March on Washington, SCLC began to organize activities like media events. These were designed to garner the support of fans who would be moved by

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<sup>8</sup> SNCC stands for Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. CORE stands for Congress of Racial Equality.

exerting forces such as media coverage: I saw King on TV so he must be an important and powerful person I should admire and follow.

Thus, a period where Blacks were sitting at Whites-only lunch counters by their own accord, or refusing to give up seats on buses without the media being contacted to cover the event, of Blacks seeking to integrate colleges for the sake of their own education - not to be on TV -- this period of self-determining initiative evolved into a mass media-oriented operation where Blacks were no longer encouraged to act on their own or in (equal) partnership with leaders. Instead, Black masses were expected to only follow the dictates of their leaders, even as other forces exerted more influence on who could become Black leaders (via funding, media exposure, awards). Within this atmosphere, King became a "messiah"-- even if one with sincere intentions to help Blacks. And many people (some very action-oriented) who did not want to be limited to the tactics of King left what became the Civil Rights Movement -- some forming what became known as the Black Power Movement. For those who remained with King, his assassination in 1968 left a (superstar) void than no one adequately filled. As a result, by the early 1970s, civil rights actions had diminished greatly and much of the civil rights work moved to legal and watchdog organizations, no longer local communities actively engaged in their own betterment. And the fans of King either basked in his memory, found others to follow, or no longer participated in organizing efforts.

Fast forward to 2008 and this dynamic is in play again in Obama's presidential campaign. We are within another "historical moment" with a "new movement." Except some things are more compromised, when it comes to Blacks, than King was in his days of organizing. King ran a Black "movement" that was inclusive of other races: he explicitly said many of his efforts were directed at delivering Blacks from injustices and inequalities.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Obama has ran an explicitly race-neutral campaign for "all Americans;" and has, in practice, gone to great lengths to avoid his campaign being perceived as Black. Is it logical to expect someone who takes such a stance to do things to specifically address problems that disproportionately affect Blacks? Things like racial bias and discrimination, excessive incarceration, overpolicing of communities, police brutality, poverty and economic exploitation, gentrification, a denied right of return (to New Orleans by poor Black victims of the Katrina tragedy) are not problems for "all Americans" and, therefore, are probably beyond the policy concerns of Obama and his advisors. And I have not mentioned the more subtle forms of racial discrimination Blacks face that are the current chapter of a long history of racial oppression in this country against Black people -- surely these are beyond the policy concerns of "all-Americans" Obama. Even King acknowledged his achievements, including passage of federal civil rights laws, had a limited effectiveness in bettering Blacks; that is why the last years of his life took a different direction and focused on ending poverty and war as a way to better address injustice and inequalities Blacks face. But Obama is starting from a lower measure when it comes to Blacks, yet many of us are "hoping" he will do something to help Black people specifically.

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<sup>9</sup> Some may legitimately argue how Black it really was when you look at who ultimately controlled the Civil Rights Movement, but it was at least culturally and socially identified with being Black or Black Church oriented.

Some have compromisingly argued that even if Obama does little for Blacks at least having a Black family in the White House will help Whites be more accepting of Blacks. My initial response to this is: Ha! This kind of reasoning has been regurgitated countless times by those who support a racial integration still riddled with racial inequalities: that the problem of race is not based in economic, social, political, and cultural realities but is a problem of Whites learning to accept Blacks. Such reasoning has roots in the Abolitionist movement: a movement in which many Whites who advocated the ending of chattel slavery still saw Whites as superior to Blacks. These Whites saw the ending of chattel slavery as an opportunity to transition enslaved Blacks to workers but not controllers of their own destiny. (And if you saw how workers were treated in the North at that time, this was not much of an improvement: working seven days a week for 12 to 18 hours a day with low wages and no benefits, including no health care or pensions.) In this way, the cultural barriers to moving talented Blacks into jobs that best exploited their special skills could be achieved -- cultural barriers (even in the North) often prevented Blacks from having jobs deemed more important than Whites. This shift also served the facade of equal opportunity and just relations among the races. A more recent application of this principle has seen a small group of Blacks attain prominent positions in corporate management while greater masses of Blacks remain in less favorable economic positions, denied opportunities to attain these few token positions. And while some may cherish tokens breaking glass ceilings, I am reminded that the concrete walls and ceilings that are more restrictive remain unmoved and in place.

Whites' acceptance of Obama should not be mistaken as a statement of Whites' acceptance of Blacks. And even if Whites' suddenly accept Blacks, that does not change the forms of oppression Blacks continue to face today. But examine what Whites have "accepted" in accepting Obama: a light-skinned mulatto man who ran a race neutral campaign. And America has long had a love affair with mulattoes: a number of "classic" American films and literature attest to this. But Obama dresses, talks, acts, and expresses himself in a manner that is acceptable to White mainstream culture and certainly does not signify as Black. He has credentials valued by Whites, such as: a degree from Harvard; a White mother and grandmother that he cites as major influences on him; being given a prime time spot to speak at the Democratic National Convention. These narrow characteristics do not apply to the majority of Blacks and, therefore, we should not assume Whites will accept Blacks who do not fit Obama's profile. In fact, if Obama were a few shades darker there is a good chance this alone would have prevented a number of Whites from supporting him. So Whites' acceptance of Obama might be an accomplishment for them given their historical extreme limited acceptance of Blacks. But it is in no way a new era for race in America despite how much this theme is spun in the mainstream media. It does not begin a process of addressing or ending injustice and inequalities in this country. For Blacks, Obama's acceptance does not significantly change things for us unless you weave dreams from symbolism.

Another major factor in the so-called "Obama Movement," like in the Civil Rights Movement, is money: who is funding who and becomes de-facto owners / investors. Obama's campaign raised over \$745 million for his 2008 presidential run.<sup>10</sup> To compare, George W. Bush raised \$367 million

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<sup>10</sup> "Obama Stimulus: Campaign Hits \$745 Million Haul," The Associated Press article by Jim Kuhnhenn and Jim Drinkard on December 5, 2008.

in his run in 2004. Obama, unlike Bush, opted out of the public financing system: a system designed to limit the influence of special interest money in presidential elections, although the effectiveness of the system can be argued. However, when Obama was running for the Democratic nomination for president, he indicated he would participate in the system. This would have ensured that he and McCain were limited to comparable amounts of money in the last months of the presidential campaign. But Obama changed his mind, making him the first presidential candidate to opt out of the public financing system since it began in 1976. (Many liberals and progressives would have relentlessly attacked any Republican candidate who did so, but many have miraculously found it palatable, if not justified, for Obama to do so: another sign of how many will shift their morals and values to be on the "winning side.")

The significance of this move is that it allowed Obama *to raise unlimited amounts of money* -- that alone should raise eyebrows for anyone following politics. This follows the George W. Bush presidency in which the imprint of special interest money (especially from the oil, energy, and military / defense industries) was clearly visible in the policy directions of the Bush White House. And since Obama is not a billionaire who can just pull \$745 million from his rich daddy's trust fund, the money had to come from somewhere -- and usually with a price.

The Obama campaign presented the public facade that most of their money came from "grassroots support," small donations under \$200. Although large amounts were raised in this manner, it is very misleading to portray Obama's fundraising efforts in such a way, especially when looking at the donations from big donors and corporate forces which amounted to about half of his raised funds.

Let me begin by dealing with the small donations. Obama's campaign was effective at raising money over the Internet, an approach not as successful in past presidential campaigns. Many of these contributions fit in the category of small donations, \$200 or less. Campaign financing laws do not require such donations to be publicly reported and, therefore, beyond the eye of most public watchgroups. Thus, people can make numerous donations on the Internet, providing false information or in someone else's name: such as donations made under the name "Good Will" that used the address of a nonprofit in Austin, Texas to make numerous donations to Obama's campaign.<sup>11</sup> Since these donations are not publicly reported (they are reported to the Federal Election Commission), the extent of such fraudulent donations may not be uncovered unless the Federal Election Commission does an audit of Obama's campaign *after* the election. Even if a large scale of fraud is uncovered, it will be too late to impact the election. The potential for abuse of this set up is enticing for those wishing to do so, especially when legitimate questions can be raised about what Obama's campaign was doing to prevent fraudulent Internet donations. To use some numbers to illustrate my point: if \$200 million was raised by small donations, 1% of fraudulent donations is \$2 million; 5% is \$10 million -- amounts that reach the level of felony fraud.

But even when examining the remaining small donations, of which I will concede most were legal, these donations include the sale of Obama merchandise. So if you bought a t-shirt at an Obama rally,

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<sup>11</sup> "Obama's 'Good Will' Hunting," article in Newsweek by Michael Isikoff on October 13, 2008.

that money is added to the campaign coffers and counted as a contribution since the merchandising was run by the campaign itself. Much of the \$5, \$10, and \$25 donations the Obama campaign heralded in the press were actually the sale of hats, t-shirts, pins, bags, stickers, key chains, etc. This differs from most presidential campaigns that outsource merchandising to a vendor, usually to comply with the limits of raising funds under the public financing system. The Obama campaign, in the midst of Obama-mania, certainly sold hundreds of thousands of merchandise items at events and online. Legally, the campaign is supposed to count these sales as campaign contributions. But most people would not consider buying an Obama hat as making a campaign donation. And, the purchase of a hat by someone who has already donated the legal maximum to the campaign should not be allowed, but this probably was not prevented or corrected (money returned) since it was a small donation. Such practices are misleading in presenting the level of honest grassroots support the campaign received, but there is a more pressing reason to inflate the numbers of small donations: to downplay the significance of big donor money received by the campaign.

Some reports show only a quarter of Obama's contributions were \$200 or less. This is a slightly smaller percentage of small donations than what Bush received in 2004<sup>12</sup>: a smaller percentage but a higher number since Obama had more donations -- but do not forget Obama included merchandise sales as small contributions. Other reports say Obama's small contributions amount to \$260 million.<sup>13</sup> But even if we say \$300 million was raised by small contributions, this amounts to over \$445 million raised by larger contributions to Obama's total of over \$745 million. Where did the rest come from? Big chunks of money came from Wall Street (securities and investment industry), the entertainment industry, lawyers, and, to a lesser extent, the energy industry -- all corporate forces. Large amounts have also been raised by bundlers, sometimes raising up to \$500,000 on behalf of numerous donors to go to the campaign, usually in alignment with specific issues or political agendas. Most of these bundles are funneled through political committees that allow large donors to contribute as much as \$65,000 -- a lot more than the \$2,300 limit for individuals to contribute during the primary campaign, and then again during the general election. The problem with this type of fundraising is, "after this election, the people who have bundled and put together big pots of money are going to come back, whoever is elected, and they're going to be looking for access and influence."<sup>14</sup> As much as I think the game of large political contributions is dirty, if I give \$65,000 to a campaign or collectively raise over \$100,000 for a campaign, I expect something in return for my money if that person wins.

This same dynamic of control through financial contributions is what steered the Civil Rights Movement in a direction different than what Blacks in the South wanted. As much as personalities like King were revered by Blacks, northern liberal big donors had more influence on the direction of King

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<sup>12</sup> "Big Donors Drive Obama's Money Edge," article in Washington Post by Matthew Mosk and Sarah Cohen, October 22, 2008. Also know, these numbers may change somewhat when the final campaign reports are made to the Federal Election Commission.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Buzeberg, Executive Director of the Center for Public Integrity, on Democracy Now news show, October 22, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: Bill Buzeberg.

and civil rights organizations than the Black people King and these organizations claimed to be working for. In fact, King's public stance against the Vietnam War in 1967 was criticized by many in the civil rights leadership fold, not so much because of the policy implications but because of how this stance would offend their funders who were in support of the war. (A careful reading of history will show that the majority of Americans were in support of the Vietnam War before they turned against it, just like the present Iraq War / Occupation that began in 2003.) Combine this history with the continuing legacy of presidential politics, and it is impossible to deny that Obama, by accepting hundreds of millions of dollars from special interest corporate groups, is already compromised in what policies he can enact. So what if he did not receive money from lobbyists -- as if this indicates his presidency will be free from special interest influence -- when he accepted money from industries that hire lobbyists. And in the game of exerting political pressure, those who put in the highest dollar amounts have the most influence. The few thousand large donors will have more influence in Obama's administration than the millions of small donors. This is a political reality that should not be ignored or downplayed. It sets up the possibility of Obama's administration surrendering an increasingly level of power and influence to corporate forces: possibly a concentration of corporate power never seen before in American politics given one of the highest, if not the highest, levels of campaign contributions received from corporate forces.

When you follow the money it is very clear that the Obama presidency will not be a grassroots-driven administration. Just as large funders dictated the direction of the Civil Rights Movement and its demise from a people-based movement to a media-oriented mass following, the large amounts of corporate donations Obama's campaign received ensures they will dictate the direction of the Obama administration more than the millions of his fans and less rich supporters. One of the biggest proofs of this truth will be the multitude of political and corporate insiders who will be assigned to key positions (with powers) in his administration. This script has been played over and over again in the presidential stage of American politics.

#### SO WHAT DOES AN OBAMA PRESIDENCY REALLY MEAN FOR US?

For most who have taken the spectatorship path in following Obama's presidential run, an Obama presidency will not significantly change their lives. As fans, despite the joy of victory, the dynamics of their position in this society is one of spectatorship, not a citizen who is involved in determining the fate of themselves and the country. Even if things get better (of which there are many indicators to suggest otherwise), the betterment fans receive will be dependent upon what Obama and his administration (with the consent of his de-facto owners / investors) choose to relinquish to the general public. But just like with the World Series Championship Phillies, the fans will receive little (most likely none) of the millions of dollars in additional income and financial opportunities earned by the Phillies' victory. This is because the team and owners have other people (themselves, their investors) who clearly have a higher priority in receiving a share of the victory spoils than the fans. In the same way, the Obama administration will be beholden to his owners / investors -- I mean, large campaign donors. And given the increased amount Obama raised, he may be more indebted to special interest

groups than any president ever in the history of America -- simply by the mass amounts of money his campaign accepted.

But looking beyond the financial, there are other social myths that even fans should not believe. One of the prominent ones being: that now, anyone can be president. As I stated earlier, Obama embodies a set of characteristics that only a small portion of Blacks in America share. Some may concede: "Well, if not president, all Blacks can now attain high positions of social importance." A more realistic (post-euphoric) analysis will reveal that this is not the first time this has been said. It was said about athletes, entertainers, scientists, entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, judges, and (yes) even past Black politicians who were among the first to break the American racial barrier to fields that were exclusively White -- and usually just White male. The admission of the first few Blacks in any field has rarely gone past the stage of tokenism in America: where one or a few Blacks are symbolic stand-ins for masses of Blacks who will not be given opportunities to attain such positions. And even more important than attaining highly regarded positions is how the power of such positions is used. Even in predominantly Black cities with Black mayors and significant percentages of Black city councilpersons, Blacks remain marginalized and disempowered. Why: because the placement of (selected) Blacks in such positions does not equate to (collective) Black empowerment. Even in the days of chattel slavery, Whites sometimes used certain Blacks as overseers to the mass of enslaved Blacks. Appointment to this position of power did not better the state of Blacks; in fact, sometimes it made things worse for Blacks if Black overseers were driven to show their White bosses they could be "better" (more cruel and brutal) overseers than Whites. I will not go into details of how this dynamic is alive today in many Black political circles, but I will say this: just as White owners dictated the behavior of Black overseers, political "owners" (party leaders and large campaign donors -- of whom most are White) dictate the behavior of most Black politicians today, including race-neutral politicians like Obama.

And speaking of tokenism, Obama's election to the presidency makes the Senate, again, an all White boys' club that now accepts some White women. There are questions about if the Illinois governor will appoint a Black person to occupy Obama's seat for the remaining two years of his term, but this obscures that Obama was the only Black in a senate of a 100 persons. There have only been five Black senators in all of American history (to this date of 2008). The House of Representatives has more Blacks, but congressional districts are local / region-wide areas (as opposed to statewide Senate races) and many Black House members come from predominantly Black districts. Even with this being so, Black House members are limited in terms of what issues they are able to raise and / or address through passed legislation. And many tote an even finer line hoping to win the favor of (White) Party leaders for committee assignments and, if they have enough seniority, leadership positions in the House. Basically, tokenism is tokenism, which is a totally different thing than collective power building and acquisition.

We should also remember: Obama is not the first Black head of state in recent decades that has the support of the American political system. Post-colonial Africa and the Carribean have a list of Blacks who fit this category. And, as history has shown, a significant number of such persons have not benefitted the people they governed. Some of the worst leaders, some who have overseen mass

murders / genocides and the financial rape of national economies, have been Black leaders supported by the American political system -- some put in place by the American government. This fact should not be lost by those relishing the arrival of the "first Black American president."

Neither is Obama's presidency the dawn of a new age for race relations -- another recurring theme pulled out by the White mainstream when another "first Black" moment occurs. Even fans should not fall for this spin given the fact that Obama ran a race neutral campaign. Race neutral politics avoid addressing current and past oppression of Blacks which leaves us in political, social, and economic disadvantages. In fact, Whites' acceptance of race neutral candidates deflects attention from how some Whites (the elite and privileged groups) retain (and sometimes increase) benefits they and their predecessors attained via the oppression of Blacks. To the extent such persons become necessary supporters to these politicians, race neutral politicians will rarely do anything to make Whites think their benefits are at risk. Accordingly, Obama openly campaigned on behalf of the middle class -- political code for the White middle class since all Blacks are seen as a special group in mainstream political speak -- but says very little about the poor. Not that all Blacks are poor, but given the history of American social norms and the economics of race, a disproportionate number of Blacks face economic hardships that date back to the legacies of chattel slavery and Jim Crow social practices. Just as economic policies designed to help the rich did not "trickle down" to the middle class, we should not expect economic policies designed for the middle class will trickle down to the poor. Therefore, anyone genuinely concerned about the state of Blacks must deal with poverty -- but as I said, this is not an issue for Obama.

As we ponder next steps, there is a clear need to engage people serious about the state of Blacks to move from the fan mentality to one of being a citizen -- if not of this country, then a citizen of the world. Fans are not suited to participate in activities where they self-determine better outcomes for themselves. And if they are not suited to participate in such activities, they surely will not mature their activity to the level of being a movement -- social momentum achieved by concerted individual and collective actions. Those serious about working to better the state of Black people must engage interested persons in processes of transformation: such that they become people who will no longer participate in mass followings but instead cultivate the skills, knowledge, wisdom, and human maturity to engage in initiating their own outcomes collectively with others. It has saddened me to see some in the "pro-Black" circles ponder engaging our own people as fans: that the problem is not that they are fans but that they are fans of Obama and not someone more radical, liberation-oriented, or more "Black." Once we realize that spectatorship is a tool of oppression - that it disempowers people, we may then see that we should not engage people in this manner: unless we seek to oppress our own people. The process of liberation involves a personal transformation that makes one too wise and self-determining to be a fan of anyone. This will not only raise the stakes of who the people will choose for leadership positions, it will help people become a power unto themselves, a force others will be forced to take note of. Visualize a group of such people engaged in efforts to address our situation: words need not be said to describe it, its power and beauty will be self-evident by them living it.

Taking this approach, we also do not need to render our Blackness neutral to achieve political and social gains, even within this imperialistic, oppressive America. We can always be open to discussing how Blackness as social, economic, political, and cultural realities should be engaged in our efforts to better our state. But the (limited) success of a race neutral political campaign does not mean we need to now abandon or downplay our Blackness to effect change in society, especially when you examine these approaches have been used to make us spectators in our own existence.

To quote a lyric from one of my songs: "Don't be a spectator in your own life."

