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PHENOM



He galvanized political activism, raised voter participation, shattered fund-raising records, and inspired a nation and a world with a few well-chosen words.

The frosty December day worried Democratic strategists nationwide. A runoff election was being held in the Georgia U.S. Senate race between Republican Saxby Chambliss and Democrat Jim Martin. A Martin win would give senate Democrats the numbers they needed to nearly guarantee their agenda – led by President Barack Obama.

The problem: African Americans historically turn out in low numbers during runoff elections, especially in less than perfect weather. But Barack Obama is why Morgan Bryant, a Morehouse sophomore from Decatur, Ga., withstood the cold that morning to vote for Martin.

“There is a trickle down,” said the 20-year-old marketing major as he shivered. “If you voted for Obama, you should vote for Jim Martin. It’s like second nature.”

Would Bryant be out in the cold had there not been a President Obama?

“Honestly, no. I don’t think so,” he said.

Though Martin lost the runoff to Chambliss, Bryant’s story is indicative of many others during a historic presidential election campaign that saw Obama become the nation’s first African American president. Obama’s accomplishment ushered in an unprecedented surge in African American political activism. It also became a source of inspiration for minorities, a segment of the American political system that has long either been ignored or exploited.

Political experts nationwide said Obama’s candidacy did everything from giving voice to people who felt excluded by the nation’s political system to forcing others to question their political loyalties. It even began a cottage industry for anyone on a street corner who wanted to sell anything with Obama’s face or family on it—from ubiquitous T-shirts to Rubik’s Cubes.

The entire phenomenon has been called a lot of things, but most notably it has been dubbed “The Obama Effect.”

MEN The Obama Effect

By Add Seymour Jr.



President Franklin joins students at a viewing party on election night.

The numbers give a similar account.

In Georgia, for example, 834,000 African Americans voted in the 2004 November presidential election, compared to nearly 1.2 million in 2008. That's 350,000 more than previously. In early voting for the 2008 presidential election alone – the weeks before Nov. 4 when absentee ballots can be cast in Georgia – nearly 721,000 African Americans cast ballots. The state also hit an all-time high with 1.7 million black registered voters.

Further south in Florida, 1.2 million African Americans cast ballots in the 2004 presidential election. That number increased by more than 200,000 in 2008. Other states had similar increases. The cause: Obama's candidacy.

Not only were more African Americans voting, many became more politically active before the election.

"Obama shows people that they can be involved in their government and the direction of this country," said Georgia State Rep. Rashad Taylor, who attended Morehouse and, before running for office, was political director for the Georgia Democratic Party.

"They realize the power is within their hands. What [Obama] has shown people is

that when you get involved in the political process you can make a difference in the world and in your own individual lives."

Morehouse students boarded buses and vans to stump for Obama in not only Atlanta, but also in South Carolina and—just days before Election Day—in Ohio. On campus, 70 students manned phones at Douglass Hall as part of the Election Protection Coalition, a national effort to monitor voting polls and ensure that voters across the country were being treated fairly.

"You had students stepping up and assuming leadership positions – and (Obama) won," said junior Mark Anthony Green after Obama's win in South Carolina. More than 150 students had made the last of their three trips across South Carolina to campaign for him.

"His charisma has bled beyond the borders of politics and seeped into the areas of social and political activism," said author and lecturer Michael Eric Dyson in November just before participating in a panel discussion at Morehouse. "People are now renewed in their desire and determination to see justice done and to believe that their particular form and action — and particular behavior — can

affect not only social change and the outcome of an election, but also the mood of a people. So in that sense his effect has been to inspire and ignite new social motion towards the goal of greater and enhanced democracy."

One late October afternoon in 2008, legendary network television anchor Tom Brokaw sat on a bench outside of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, reflecting on his days as a young journalist in Atlanta in the 1960s.

"You know, I thought we'd be further along, 40 years after Dr. King," said Brokaw, who was in town to interview five Morehouse students for a story on their reactions to Obama's candidacy. "I now stand back and realize that we have made a lot of progress. Forty years in the long reach of history is not a long time."

He pointed to the men of Morehouse he talked to as examples of what Obama's run meant to the country.

"The fact that he got the nomination is an indication for those people in America, 45 and younger, that they have a whole different attitude about race and race relations than people 45 and older who still remember the bad old days and are still struggling with the demons," he said.

"The younger people who've come along after civil rights acts are going to integrated schools, working in integrated work places, watching television where they see black middle class and professional families and have a different attitude, and I think Obama is a symbol of that."

But there are many young people, particularly minorities, whose daily concerns have little to do with what's happening within the Washington beltway.

Danny Bellinger '92 heads the College's Project Identity program, which helps spur collegiate interest in minority middle school students, especially those in high-risk communities. He wonders how the Obama Effect affects those communities still hanging on the margins.

"How will all of this impact the state of black boys in this country, many of whom are fatherless [5.6 million of them], are growing up poor [40 percent live in poverty], or watch as black men languish in jail [840,000 black males are incarcerated in this coun-

try!?” Bellinger asked.

“Obama’s nomination should motivate black boys to be more confident about their chances of becoming developers, doctors, senators, writers—even presidents of large corporations. Or even president of the United States,” he said. “But notice I said should. The fact is, black boys—at least many of the ones I encounter—still see their role models living in the “bling” lifestyle, sometimes as drug dealers and gang bangers, rather than politicians.”

On the night that Obama won the presidency, the cheers and smiles of Morehouse students gathered at Douglass Hall to watch Election Night returns beamed across the world. Besides the lens of ABC News, a reporter and cameraman from the British Broadcasting Corporation also were on loca-

tion to show the world the euphoria.

The fact that the BBC even cared about an election that wasn’t British proved how important Obama’s impact is worldwide.

That’s why former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young believes Obama signifies a renewed emphasis on America’s place in solving global problems.

“That says that we’ve got to think of our leadership role—and it always has going back to W.E.B. DuBois, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Morehouse style of leadership—as never being just domestic,” he said. “I would say that Martin Luther King Jr. was not just a black leader. He led America. He led the world and he didn’t have to tell black folks anything about racism. He had to help white people in the world understand the effects. So he was really a change agent for white

America. So in that sense, Obama is being called upon to be a change agent to heal the world. If the world is going to survive, he is going to have to heal the planet.”

No matter what its present meaning, the Obama Effect, said Martin Luther King III ’79 during a speech to students in April 2008, has to become tangible action and not just an avowed affection for the new president.

“I’m excited about what I see in relationship to young leadership,” King said. “I’ve never seen the kind of enthusiasm that exists today in America. Somehow we must galvanize this energy beyond the election, but into 2009 and beyond to ensure that, ultimately, we will eradicate poverty, racism and militarism. That would be a part of the dream and vision that our father had for freedom, justice and equality for all humankind.” ■

Where Do We Go From Here? Alumni Meet on Eve of Obama’s Inauguration to Discuss New Political Era

THE EYES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. ’48 sternly gazed from a front wall in a ballroom in the Historic Willard Intercontinental Hotel in Washington, D.C., towards the sea of Morehouse Men in the room.

On the opposite side of the wall was the face of the soon-to-be inaugurated president, Barack Obama.

The space between the two was a symbolic gap that Morehouse Men expect to bridge by connecting the legacies of the two leaders in the new era of political leadership.

Alumni and friends gathered the day before Obama’s inauguration on Jan. 19 – King’s birthday – for the panel discussion, “King to Obama – The Dream Realized: Where Do We Go from Here?”

A panel of prominent Morehouse men, including Africare President Julius Coles ’64, CNN contributor and political consultant Jamal Simmons ’93, the Rev. Otis Moss Jr. ’56, the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III ’72, along with Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection executive director Clayborne Carson and a current student, Terrence Woodbury, spoke about where Morehouse Men will make their mark in the new political era.

“He will need us to hold him accountable,” Simmons said of Obama. “It is the squeaky wheel that gets the grease and if we don’t squeak from time to time, we may not get all the grease that we want to have.

“I’m also clear that, in this environment, I am much more interested in what Barack Obama does for black people than I am in what Barack Obama says about black people,” he said. “I want to see the policies that he institutes and what the impact of those politics will be



President Robert M. Franklin ’75 leads the discussion on the roles of Morehouse Men in being positive tension in their communities. Panelists include (left to right) Clayborne Carson, Julius Coles ’64, Lamell McMorris ’95 and The Rev. Otis Moss Jr. ’56.

on our community more than I need to hear his voice.”

“That seems to have always been the role of the Morehouse Man,” Butts added. “...The Morehouse Man was born on a spiritual level to rebel until we see the dream realized.”

Woodbury, a senior, said he believes the Morehouse Man has to be the community’s tension to make things happen.

“If we know something is wrong, we will acknowledge it,” he said of Morehouse Men. “I think we must remain that annoying mosquito that continues to bite society and to remind it that...we have not completely fulfilled the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”

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