None of us truly dared to believe that we would see it happen in our lifetime—the election of the first African American president of the United States. And the political pundits, as well as the Republican opposition, were caught off-guard by the unprecedented numbers (and the awe-inspiring diversity) of citizens who registered, voted, and turned out to celebrate a much-hoped for victory.

Throughout this entire campaign, Barack Obama has done the impossible. He has inspired hope when others offered fear. He has adhered to the highest moral ground in a campaign that turned ugly and reached a new level of vitriolic mudslinging-- "socialist, wealth spreader, unpatriotic," etc.—in an attempt to dissuade the American public from voting for an untried, but committed candidate. Despite these obstacles, Obama reached across generations and mobilized a grassroots campaign apparatus that will forever garner a new level of respect for community organizing.

And when it came time to choose the next leader of this country, the American public (all of us) reached deep inside our troubled social history and chose an "unyielding hope" over fear mongering, inspiration over sloganeering, and intelligence over ineptness.

While this was a swift victory at the voting polls—again unprecedented, yet definitive, in the quickness of its political message (the American people have spoken), the road to the White House is paved with many unseen detours, and we all know that this president will be scrutinized in ways unimaginable to his past predecessors. His successes will be attributed to his exceptional education, his biracial heritage, his experience of living in other countries—anything but being a Black American. And his failures, no matter how small, will be the evidence needed for those who fundamentally believe in the innate inferiority of an entire people.

It is hardly a win-win situation. But it is the best we have at the moment. President Obama carries with him to the White House, the 800 pound gorilla of race. It has sat in the back of the room throughout this entire campaign. Hillary Clinton first evoked it when she appealed to the working class of Pennsylvania—that is, white working class. The McCain campaign simply talked about "Joe Six-pack" and later "Joe the Plumber" who became iconic figures representing the white working class. Ironically, the media failed to critique either Clinton or McCain for pulling the (white) race card.

Yet, any mention of race by Obama was immediately seized upon and used as an opportunity to question his ability to be an inclusive president for all Americans, a question that never surfaces when the candidate is white. It is presumed that whiteness is universal, and white candidates inherently are able to represent everyone.

Last night's colossal win by Barack Obama has changed the course of America's troubled racial history, and brought the 800 pound gorilla into the limelight. His election as the 44th President, and the first African American, to enter the White House as the leader of this country will go a long way to heal the disenfranchisement that occurred during the post-Reconstruction period between 1870 and 1877 when 16 Black men served in Congress (http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081103/foner). It will go

a long way towards fulfilling the dream of the late Martin Luther King, Jr. , which he expressed that as American citizens we should be judged by the content of our character rather than by the color of our skin.

But while individual prejudice may wane and disintegrate, racism does not disappear overnight, especially its institutional forms. We still have a two-tiered education system, where expenditures for schools in poor, urban, most often Black neighborhoods, are far less than those for schools in middle-class, suburban, most often white, communities. Our justice system has become a prison industrial complex, where we believe it is better to build more prisons and incarcerate youth than to rehabilitate them. The “zero tolerance” attitude that infiltrated the social fabric of this country under the Reagan era has diverted our attention away from how to resolve social problems to an attitude of hiding social problems away in jails, in underemployment, and in unequal access to education.

Yesterday, the American people spoke with one voice and numerous votes: Enough. It is time for a change not only on the global front but in our own backyard. Americans of every hue, language, and faith reached across the chasms that have divided us historically and spoke with enormous power and urgency. We answer the call to embrace an “unyielding hope” and follow a leader who can guide us towards a more united America.

Congratulations President Barack Obama, and first Lady Michelle Obama. Congratulations America, you are learning to live up to the principles of democracy and the Constitution of the United States that formed this country. And may I say, for the first time in a long time, I am really, really proud of all of US.

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