

Are Blacks expecting too much from President Obama?

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
Friday, 06 February 2009 17:28

"Hello. My Name is Freida. I am a 52 years young Black female that had three strokes and [I am] doing fine right now. I am a full time stay at home artist...I have sent you a copy of my hero, Sir Barackster. I created him on Nov. 1st because I felt he would be the hero." Those are the words of Freida Thompson of Manalapan, N.J., in a letter to the editor of the NNPA News Service.

"I really, really, really want him to take care of the health issue," Thompson said in a phone interview this week. "Medicaid, even social security, I don't think that's really enough money to live off of...I've got five prescriptions I've got to get. It's just not enough," said Thompson.

If there was one thing she would ask of President Obama, it would be "free health care." From health care to civil rights, jobs and equal justice, Thompson's sentiments reflect those of millions of Blacks - and other Americans - around the nation who know that Obama -arguably America's most inspirational president - will be limited in his ability to do everything. Yet, many hope that because of his Black experience and identification with struggle, his priorities might distinguish him from White presidents of the past.

Are Blacks expecting too much of the new president? That depends on who's being asked:

"Expecting a lot from him is a good thing," said Hillary Shelton, director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP, who monitors and lobbies for Capitol Hill legislation on behalf of Black people. "The expectations should be high. A lot of promises were also made by the candidate and now the President. And holding him to that is important, but being realistic about that and understanding that you've not just hired a commander-in-chief, but, we've elected a leader, which means we must all get engaged in helping to fix these problems," Shelton said.

Thomas Todd studied the question from a different direction.

"No where in the campaign did he really promise to handle the Black agenda - nowhere," said Todd, a Chicago-based retired U. S. attorney, known for his impassioned speeches. "I think Blacks have allowed themselves to get caught up in the euphoria and the celebration and that probably is not realistic...So, my attitude has been that Black people - once they get past the historic nature of what has happened, must hold this president as accountable as any other president."

Blacks are indeed expecting a great deal from Obama, as indicated by the USA Today survey released a few days before the historic inauguration showing that 79 percent of Blacks believe that Martin Luther King's Dream has been realized through the election of Obama, said Dr. Ron Walters, political scientist at the University of Maryland.

"There have been all sorts of wild statements, such as that we do not need Black Civil Rights leaders any more or that we do not need Black organizations such as the NAACP any more. While Whites have been the main perpetrators of these views, some Blacks have bought in to them as well," Walters said. "There has been considerable Transition Committee activity with Black organizations that have put forth agenda items before it, expecting that there will be some action on them as he also tackles the major issues confronting the country. So, there are

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strong expectations, but at the same time, there is also a realism at the heart of it that will give some room to maneuver and some time to address Black issues, but the community will also be watchful as well, in the event that it appears to be the subject of neglect."

In his first two weeks in office President Obama has:

- Visited Capitol Hill in an attempt to win bi-partisan support for his economic stimulus package.
- Signed his first bill, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, enabling more employees to challenge unlawful pay discrimination based on gender, race, age and disability.
- Reversed a string of anti-union executive orders issued by the Bush Administration.
- Established a Middle Class Working Families Task Force.

- Ordered the closing of the controversial Guantanamo Bay lockup for alleged terrorists. Across the board, there is the clear understanding that President Obama has simply inherited "a mess" from the previous administration, as described by Shelton.

But, as Walters said, Blacks in leadership positions around the country have presented the Obama Administration with proposals that are race-specific and long-standing.

"We have seen a complete degradation of our schools and a lack of investment in the public school system and a real focus on quality education beyond all of the platitudes and praises and causes and catch phrases and 'Leave No Child Behind'. That does not do it," said Albert E. Dotson, Jr., chairman of the board of the 100 Black Men of America, which primarily mentors Black youth. "We've got to see a real investment in our public school system."

Leslie Baskerville, president and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, says that in an appeal to Obama's then transition team, she made a plea for the restoration of Title 3 funding for historically Black Colleges and Universities.

"Title 3 funding is the life-blood of HBCUs...It keeps their doors open," Baskerville said, noting how the Bush Administration recommended "a whopping cut of Title 3 dollars that would be tantamount to a million dollar loss per institution that's eligible. Ninety-seven HBCUs are participating in the Title 3 Program," she said. "So we have to reverse that."

H. Alexander Robinson, president and CEO of the National Black Justice Coalition points to HIV/AIDS disparities in the Black community.

"The office of National AIDS Policy has to be reinvigorated. There hasn't been a director in that office for almost two years," said Robinson. "During that entire administration, it has been left to languish. With urgency with health care reform on the table, with the economic downturn that's facing all of the AIDS service providers, there needs to be leadership from the White House that in fact addresses HIV and AIDS."

Coming back to what the nation has said is Obama's number one issue, Julie Cunningham, president and CEO of the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials, said "Putting America

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back to work,” is crucial, but it must be done such that African American contractors get a piece of the pie and that “there is accountability and compliance tied to those dollars.”

Public policy issues notwithstanding, Freida Thompson, the artist, says her friends are discussing a historic concern that they doubt will be changed by the Obama presidency, but they hope he will at least try. That is racism.

“People are saying it’s going to be the Whites against the Blacks. They’re saying it’s not going to get any better just because he’s in the office. I really want him to say something about that. I really want us all to get along,” Thompson said.

Illustrating the depth of the problem, Thompson recalled something her seven-year-old grandson, Angelo, said: “Grandma, now you’re going to need security for Sir Barackster.”