

Rethinking the past 40 years

I have to admit that I had to reconsider my outlook on America recently. Looking back at the past 40 years, I realize now that I was a pessimist. I saw the glass half-empty. After his death, deep down, I thought that Dr. Martin Luther King was... a dreamer. I believed that the stain of racism was so deeply embedded into the American fabric that it would never be eradicated without a major alteration. And although there were brief moments of justice and equality shining through the darkness, I feared that America could not purge itself of racial prejudice and discrimination without violence in the streets.

The current political season has caused me to re-examine my personal beliefs about my country, the United States of America. Specifically, Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign has opened my eyes to new possibilities. His candidacy has made me dust off some old assumptions about White and Black America.

My first assumption to be examined was my own survival instinct. As a Black person in a post-World War II America, I was constantly aware that some of my White countrymen hated me. As a teenager I saw Black people assaulted at lunch counters on TV. I, too, was denied service at an ice cream parlor in Biloxi, Miss. in 1965. And although I served my country with distinction during the Vietnam war, I felt betrayed and became doubtful about reaching my American Dream due to widespread racial discrimination. During those years, I witnessed urban riots, massive demonstrations and political assassinations.

To survive in what I perceived as an anti-Black America, I had to gird



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myself against all possible attacks. I closed down my heart and was suspicious of all White people. I reasoned that they couldn't be trusted. Each White person that I met was a potential racist and bigot. Generally speaking, I was outnumbered and out-gunned. Whites had power. I was careful not to offend them. For me, trying to earn a living was like tiptoeing through a minefield. I rarely talked about race on the job.

Don't get me wrong; I have white friends. Eventually, I was able to let my guard down and open up to them. We may have different opinions about racial issues but I can freely discuss my views with my white friends safely.

So, you can imagine my surprise to see my fellow White Central Pennsylvanians cheering for Barack Obama at the town hall meeting in Williamsport Friday. As politicians go, Obama is typical. He says what people want to hear. But as a leader, he has a potent charisma. He possesses that indefinable quality that touches the hearts of the masses. People, White and Black, believe that he can move mountains.

I watched the crowd as Obama gave his speech. I saw mature women giddy with excitement. I saw parents bring their toddlers to witness something historic. I saw Blacks and Whites hug each other in pre-primary celebration. I saw prominent local Republicans nod in agreement with his remarks and clap their hands in approval.

An Obama volunteer, a black man, asked me, "Did you ever think you would see a day like this?" I answered, "No."

In Obama's local headquarters in Williamsport are two portraits of the slain Kennedy brothers, President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Both were populists, both had charisma, both wanted to change the direction of the country and both were assassinated. I can still remember the tragic news reports of those dark days.

At the town hall meeting, a Secret Serviceman brushed past me. I focused on his distinctive lapel pin. He took notice of me watching him. The guardians of presidents are keenly aware of every gesture in the crowd; they have to be. Early in the campaign the Secret Service was assigned to guard Sen. Obama, which suggested the receipt of credible death threats.

I told the volunteer later that my political heroes usually ended up marginalized, disgraced or dead. Perhaps, that is the genesis of my negative attitude about "America living out its creed." The promise of equality is still unkept, racial economic disparity still exists and Dr. King's dream is yet to be realized.

As for Sen. Obama, I do not claim him to be a hero of mine. Perhaps that will keep him safe. I cautiously hope for a new day in American politics and continue to wear my armor against racial prejudice.

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