

The Hutchinson Report: How Obama Took Race Off The Table

By: Earl Ofari Hutchinson

In a speech on Feb. 10, 2007 on the steps of the Old Capital Building in Springfield, Illinois, then first-term U.S. Senator Barack Obama quashed months of doubts, speculation and rumors over whether he was running for president. He said he was, and that touched off obsessive chatter over whether race would ultimately derail Obama.

Obama made sure it didn't. In his 25-minute presidential candidacy announcement, he used the word "race" exactly one time. And he did not use it as a direct racial reference. He used it to make the point that people could come together across all lines for change. The rest of the speech touched on ending the war, affordable health care, economic uplift, energy independence. These became the stock themes of his stump speeches. Obama did his political homework well. He correctly gauged that many white Americans still harbor racial biases and views about African-Americans. Polls during the campaign showed that many whites, even those who passionately backed him, still clung tightly to the some of the old shop-worn negative stereotypes about blacks.

Yet, when it came to judging the worth of a candidate, race is only one often fuzzy factor that voters considered in making a vote decision. The other compelling factors are their political loyalties, educa-

tion, income, gender, sense of economic well-being or hardship, and good feeling or foreboding about the future and the direction of the country. There are still more compelling factors, such as a voter's personal convictions, religious beliefs and visceral likes and dislikes. In some ways, race has even begun to slip in relevance and importance to big segments of voters.

In the last two decades, significant numbers of whites have voted for black candidates in senate, congressional, state legislative, gubernatorial, mayoral and city council races, even voting for them when their opponents were white. Obama was elected to the Illinois house, Senate and the U.S. Senate with heavy white support.

Obama did more political homework and looked at what worked and didn't work for previous Democratic presidential contenders Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. They had three glaring liabilities. They were widely perceived as mostly protest candidates. They appealed almost exclusively to black voters. And they were old line

civil rights leaders. This stirred fear, even hostility, among many whites. If Obama had given even the slightest hint of a racial tilt in his campaign, his candidacy would have been dead at the starting gate. Obama prepped the political ground so well that he convinced a majority that his campaign was solely about the issues that mattered to the broadest numbers of Americans.



In his 25-minute presidential candidacy announcement, Barack Obama used the word "race" exactly one time. (AP)

That paid huge dividends later when he faced the potential campaign killing crisis over his tie with his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. His anguished, bare-the-soul speech, positing that Wright did not speak for him and that he was appalled to hear Wright's rants at the National Press

Club, was a tour de force. His supporters and even detractors accepted his explanation and refused to believe that he and Wright could have anything in common. The media, which could have dug deep and probed into Obama's 20-year connection to Wright and inflicted a big wound on his campaign, bought his explanation and dropped the matter.

There was also much talk in and out of John McCain's campaign and Republican circles about snatching at Obama's racial

jugular and pounding him on his Wright connection. Other than a mild, tepid, half-hearted occasional mention of Wright, McCain largely steered clear of the controversy and the issue. When VP running mate Sarah Palin took a shot at Wright-Obama, McCain scotched any effort to beat up on the issue again. That, of course, didn't stop the GOP independent groups from hammering away with their last gasp saturation ads trying to smear Obama with Wright. But the smear didn't take, and there was no evidence that McCain or the Republican National Committee winked and nodded at the cheap shot attacks. Not that it would have mattered; the attacks changed absolutely nothing. If anything, they probably angered many voters and made them even quicken their steps to the polls to back Obama.

There was incessant talk that the so-called Bradley Effect, the penchant for whites to lie to pollsters about their true racial feelings and vote against a black candidate, would damage Obama. But he had made race such a non-issue, that the talk spun to a reverse Bradley Effect in which some whites would vote for him because he was black. This was pure speculation, but even floating that notion told much about how race had been stood on its head.

This was final testament to the solid job Team Obama did in insuring that race wouldn't and couldn't hurt the campaign or his presidency in the cradle. They'll do everything they can to make sure it stays that way.

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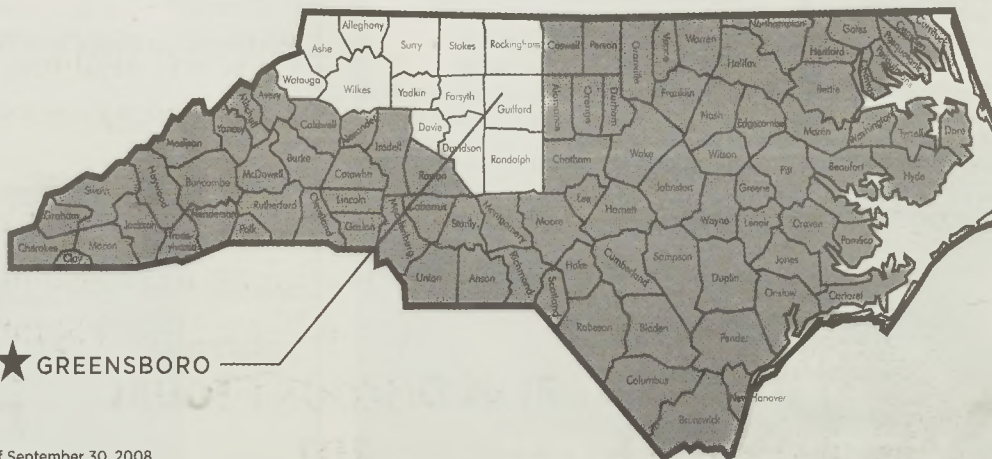
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