

FORUM

Your Voice Must Be Heard



Barack Obama
Guest Columnist

On May 6th, North Carolinians have the historic opportunity to decide the Democratic nomination for president. The eyes of the world will be on you.

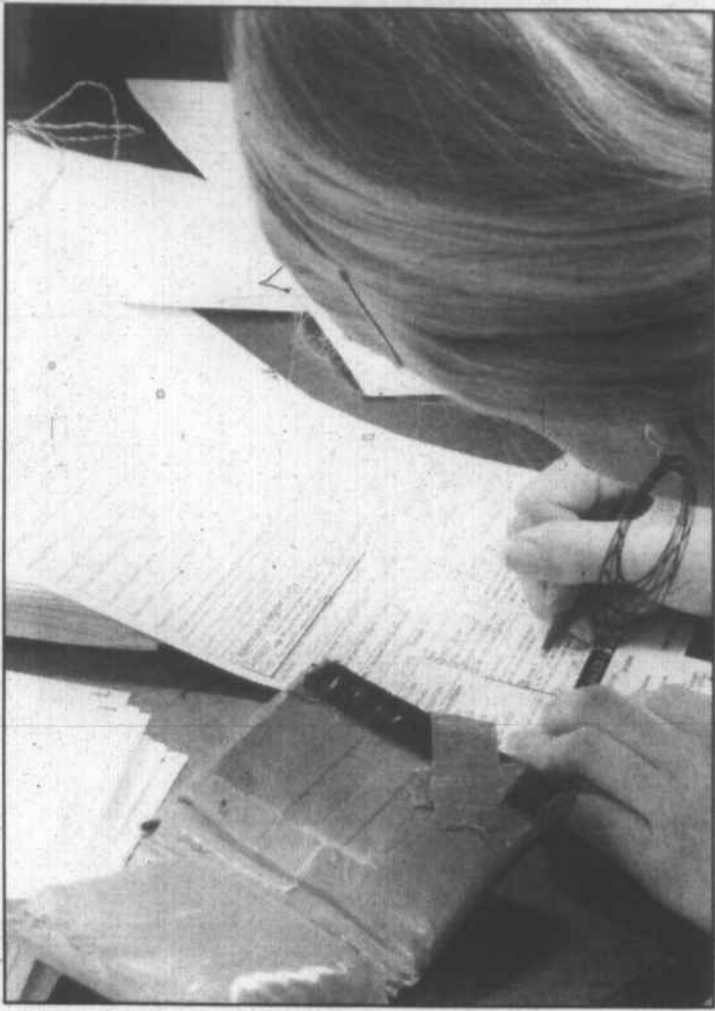
Ultimately, the choice you make isn't about either candidate. It's about our country, your community, and your family. It's about what kind of future we'll leave for our children and grandchildren. And in many ways, it's about whether we continue the same old divisive politics of the past, or whether we work together to address the great challenges facing our country.

From health care to education, from poverty to the war in Iraq, there are so many important issues we must face as a country. Yet too often in Washington, these issues get ignored - or they fall victim to the same old political game we've seen for years.

I'm running for president because it's time that the voices of regular Americans are heard in Washington - not just the powerful interests.

We cannot continue with a system where Wall Street thrives and Main Street crumbles.

People across North Carolina can't find jobs, and the jobs that are around don't pay well enough. Our government has been giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas instead of giving tax relief to working families. Folks are working too long and too hard to



File Photo

A local student registers to vote earlier this year.

find out they can't retire because the bankruptcy laws protect lenders instead of workers - and CEOs walk away with golden parachutes while pension funds are sapped. Millions of households are at risk of foreclosure and millions more have seen their home values plunge. In North Carolina alone, subprime foreclosures are expected to total over 22,000 by 2009.

That's why I have put forth an economic plan that is both timely and targeted. To reward work and make retirement secure, my plan provides a mid-

dle class tax cut of up to \$1,000 for working families, and eliminates income taxes altogether for seniors making less than \$50,000 per year. I've also proposed a \$10 billion Foreclosure Prevention Fund that would help vulnerable homeowners modify their loans to avoid foreclosure or bankruptcy.

We have to put government back on the side of regular, hardworking Americans. But that's just a first step. We also need to recognize that we're all in this together. We can restore the promise of this great coun-

try. But to do that, we'll need to harness the talents and God-given potential of every one of our citizens.

We also need to improve our education system because every child in America should have the opportunity to receive the best education this country has to offer. We need to rebuild our crumbling schools; invest in early childhood education; and recruit an army of new teachers, and pay them better, and support them more.

As I said earlier this month in Philadelphia, 50 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, we still haven't done nearly enough to fix our schools and ensure educational opportunity for everyone. Every time a child drops out of school, or doesn't learn to read, or doesn't go to college because his or her family can't afford tuition - it's not just the child who loses; it's our country. All of us have a stake in this.

But we can only help each other if we vote for change. The problems we face are great - but if we stand together, we can make a difference. Voter registration in North Carolina is open until April 11th.

And from April 17 to May 3, you can take advantage of North Carolina's "One Stop Early Vote" option. During those two weeks, even if you're not registered or have never voted before, you can register and vote all at once. To find out how, visit my website: nc.barackobama.com.

Together, we can restore the promise of our country. Your vote, and your voice, can make the difference.

Barack Obama is a U.S. Senator representing Illinois. He is seeking the Democratic nomination for president.

Quality Black Leadership Begins at Home



Gary Flowers
Guest Columnist

Upon my return from the recent commemoration of the life and death of Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis, the lens through which I viewed leadership was made clearer. I saw men, women, Blacks, Whites, poor and wealthy marching together.

As Dr. King's former aides such as the Rev. C.T. Vivian, Dr. Joseph Lowery, Dorothy Cotton, Ambassador Andrew Young, Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, and Rev. Jesse Jackson shared the tragic and triumphant events of the 1950's and 1960's, I considered the question: What made Dr. King a good leader?

Dr. King began his march for justice with the personal challenge: "if not me, than whom?"

A sense of Godly duty to end the isms of the world - racism, militarism, totalitarianism - was his battle charge. As an aspiring leader, Dr. King's pursuit of the "Beloved Community" was propelled by preparation. After all, he apprenticed

under intellectual giants such as Dr. Benjamin Mays, Dr. Vernon Johns, Ella Baker, and his father Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr.

He used the isms of the world to inspire him to move beyond academic analysis to aggressive action through membership in the NAACP and the formation of institutions which included the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Progressive Baptist General Convention. The idea of challenging unjust policies of the U. S. government through well-organized institutions rested on hypocrisy of this nation's words as opposed to its ways relative to the denied and dispossessed.

Dr. King's "dream" envisioned a day when America would breach the "broken promise" of equal protection under the law and life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness for all citizens, regardless of race, religion, or resources. Forty years after Dr. King's example of leadership, today's leadership model is being re-birthed.

For example, the Black Leadership Forum, Inc. (1977), an alliance of 35 national Black organizations - such as the Congressional Black Caucus, The Links, Inc., National Urban League,

100 Black Men of America, NAACP, The Hip Hop Caucus, Rainbow PUSH Coalition, National Council of Negro Women, Operation Hope, TransAfrica, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and the National Black MBA Association - is actively addressing issues in the Black community on a national and state level.

The renaissance of African-American leadership is shifting the paradigm from a pyramidal model (one leader; many followers) to one in which leaders share a conversation circle - a forum - to affect policy change for Black people, based on their respective areas of expertise. The circular frame ensures that each national leader has an equal value radian to the center of change.

In Dr. King's day and now, the quality of Black leadership is measured by harnessing the collective competence, courage, compassion, and commitment of informed leaders toward common-ground goals. The horizontal connection of BLF member organization, one to another, is critical to the further development of a virtual, vertical wall - defensively to protect the policy interests of Black people; and offensively to

clearly convey a consensus policy agenda. Like Dr. King, today's model of leadership must reach ordinary folk who become leaders in their locale.

Conversely, the responsibility of ordinary folk who deride Black leadership must begin where Dr. King did: What am I doing to change the Beloved Community? Individuals who are not a member of a civil rights organization; have not founded an organization of change; or do not contribute to a civic organization relinquish their right to criticize. All of us are leaders in one way or another. We all have talents, resources, and ideas needed to rid the world of the isms.

But, Leadership begins in the mirror. Leadership is inspired. Leadership is institutionalized. Leadership is idea-oriented.

If it is true that ideas are intellectual currency, than all who dare to care must deposit their ideas in the bank of truth, justice, and righteousness, and invest in building a better world, beginning with self. Leadership begins at home.

Gary Flowers is the executive director and CEO of the Black Leadership Forum.

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