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## Black Reporters Roundtable on Air Force One

By Herb Boyd  
Special to the NNPA from the  
Amsterdam News

NEW YORK (NNPA) - When seven black journalists are invited to fly on Air Force One with the president, you know there's been a dramatic change in the White House. Moreover, the journalists had an exclusive roundtable interview with President Obama, and he was as accommodating as the commodious surroundings.

For more than twenty minutes on a flight from Andrews Air Force Base to Kennedy Airport in New York where he was scheduled to address the NAACP's centennial convention July 16, Obama fielded a range of questions.

When Kevin Chappell, a senior reporter at Ebony, mentioned disparaging comments by Michael Steele, chair of the Republican National Committee, Obama said, "I think Mr. Steele should focus on the Republican Party."

What the president chose to focus on at the moment was entrepreneurship and urban affairs, "and we must particularly target communities most in need."

Equally important to the Obama administration is the issue of health care and he told Cynthia Gordy of Essence magazine that "it is critical that we close some of these gaps in health care for all Americans, but particularly for blacks and Latinos," where the incidence of HIV/

AIDS is disproportionately high.

As the veritable flying White House touched down, Obama elaborated on health care reform in response to a query from BET.com's Pamela Gentry concerning the impact of his plans on African-Americans and the single-payer option. "We don't have a final bill yet," he began. "And as I've said before, there are countries where single-payer plans have worked well, but we have a tradition of an employer-based health care system - if people are happy with their health care, we don't want to change it."

"But for those who don't have health care because their employer doesn't offer it, then they have an option," Obama added. "And we

are confident that the bill we produce will provide a level of subsidy that will guarantee affordable health care for all Americans."

With the NAACP on his agenda, as a reporter with the Amsterdam News, I wanted to know the extent to which he would deal with race relations, reminding him of a recent comment by Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP's board. While Obama's daughters can fly on Air Force One, little black girls in the suburbs of Philadelphia are banned from a swimming pool. Bond observed,

"Obviously, this is a reminder that because of my election that racism is no longer an issue in America, and that is not true," Obama asserted. What needs to be done to eradicate the racial disparity, he continued, promising to address this issue during his speech at the NAACP, was "to improve standard schools to focus on economic parity, economic development and access to higher education."

Derek Dingle, editor-in-chief of Black Enterprise, keyed his question to the condition of small businesses and to what degree they could expect support from the Obama administration.

"First of all," Obama said, "we are focusing on small businesses already. The Small Business Administration (SBA) has increased its guarantees in terms of lending and it has been much more aggressive in trying to fill the gap as private lending contracted." He recounted a recent meeting with minority automobile dealers to discuss their plight.

"And the SBA is one of the primary tools to make sure those minority dealers are able to get the money they need to operate a show room." It was a point that was clarified by Valerie Garrett, one of his chief aids at the roundtable.

Obama believed that the main problem confronting small and minority businesses was not so much the lack of capital, despite its critical importance, but the overall dismal shape of the economy.

Foreign policy and Africa were among several issues posed by April Ryan of American Urban Radio, and the president listened intently.

"In terms of foreign policy, that's one of the reasons I just came back from Ghana," he stated, "and that was to focus attention on the fact that Africa was not just a side note in our foreign policy, but a central concern of our administration."

The encouragement of economic development and good governance are among some of the key points in providing aid to African nations, Obama stressed, and he mainly reiterated a policy he outlined during his speech before the Ghanaian parliament.

Commentator Roland Martin of CNN had the final question and he touched on the issue of vouchers and education, which the president agreed was the most important issue for the African-American community.

"If we can close the achievement gap, then a big chunk of the economic inequality is diminished," Obama noted. "We have got to get our kids up to speed. Now, how do we do that? Better teachers, greater accountability, more resources combined with more reform."

He then invoked his Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and applauded his push for more aggressive reforms.

We had been on the ground for 15 minutes and gradually he was surrounded by his aids, beckoning him for departure to the next stop in New Jersey and then on to the NAACP where much of what he shared with the reporters would be revisited with gusto at the Hilton.



In 1989 Chester Jekins became the first African American Mayor of Durham. His election was part of a life-long career in politics and community involvement. He died July 14 at the age of 71. See obituary on page 3.

## Obama to young: Aspire to surpass your role models

By Philip Elliott

WASHINGTON (AP) - President Barack Obama is telling the nation's oldest civil rights organization that government, families and neighborhoods must work together to improve communities.

Obama also planned to urge young people to aspire to surpass their role models and resist the lure of mediocrity during a speech to the NAACP. White House aides said the president did not intend to introduce new programs or policy, instead striking an inspirational tone as the civil rights group gathers for its 100th annual convention.

Obama, the first black president, plans to take a restrained tone during his evening remarks instead of a raucous celebration of his history-making campaign, officials said before he flew to New York. White House aides sought to play down the expectations of the speech, the first so directly linked with race since Obama took office.

"I think the first speech to black America, the first speech to white America, the first speech to America was the inaugural address," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters.

Implicit in the appearance, Obama is seeking the backing of the powerful NAACP and its members for his ambitious domestic agenda. For all their shared interests, White House aides cautioned that the group's leadership had not guaranteed its support of all of Obama's priorities.

"We will be the people at the end of the day who help make him do what he knows he should do. We will help create the room for (Obama) to fulfill. I think, his own aspirations for his presidency," NAACP President Benjamin Jealous told The Associated Press in an interview earlier this year.

"If he aspires to be the next Abraham Lincoln, I aspire to be his Frederick Douglass," Jealous said, referring to the slave-turned-abolitionist who pressed a cautious Lincoln to issue the emancipation proclamation.

Every president since 1909 has visited the NAACP at least once, although some more frequently than others. President George W. Bush skipped the first five meetings before eventually addressing the group in 2006. For Obama, skipping his first invitation and the centennial festivities was not an option.

White House aides said Obama's speech would celebrate the organization's history and briefly touch on the debate about what the NAACP's next century should bring.

Jealous has pushed his organization to expand its civil rights work beyond black causes to broader human rights. Some members of his organization have resisted, arguing that much work remains to create racial equality in this country.

"The president being black gives us no advantage," Jealous told the AP.

"Our agenda as we head into our second century as a civil rights organization is also to revive our legacy as a human rights organization," he said.

White House aides cautioned that Obama wouldn't wade too deeply into those decisions, aware his role was not to dictate the organization's mission but to celebrate it, similar to a message Obama shared by video with the group earlier this year.

"It's humbling to think of the progress made possible by ordinary folks who refused to settle for the world as it was and instead stood up and fought to remake the world as it should be," Obama said. "It's humbling to know that it is only because of the men and women of the NAACP, only because of those freedom riders and civil rights workers, those protesters, preachers and teachers, that I can come before you as president of the United States."

Instead, he would seek to reinforce the early pieces of an urban agenda he outlined at the convention.

"I think black America has watched this president work on the economy," Gibbs said. "I think black America has watched this president work on health care - an issue of great concern - (and) education."



BLACK REPORTERS ON AIR FORCE ONE

## Sotomayor would lend different experience to court

By Mark Sherman

WASHINGTON (AP) - Sonia Sotomayor might find it was easier to disarm Republican senators who have one eye on Hispanic voters than to sway Supreme Court justices who have lifetime appointments.

She would be the new kid on the block in a group that values seniority and relationships built over years, even decades.

But Sotomayor's self-assured performance before the Senate Judiciary Committee suggests that her very presence in the high court's private conferences could change the conversation, in the same way though perhaps not as much as Thurgood Marshall, the first black justice, did 42 years ago.

Four days of Senate hearings put the 55-year-old federal judge on the verge of becoming the first Hispanic and the third female justice. The Senate is expected to vote on her confirmation in early August.

Sotomayor displayed an easy way with her questioners.

She joked with conservative Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., in an exchange about gun rights and told a story about her mother's disbelief when Sotomayor left a high-paying private practice to become a federal judge.

She told senators she was a "really good litigator" who has been successful in persuading colleagues wherever she has worked.

"I am mightily impressed," Coburn told her as he wrapped up his questioning.

To the court Sotomayor would bring life experiences in many ways totally unlike those of the other justices, even though nearly all, including her, are products of Ivy League colleges or law schools.

She grew up in public housing in the South Bronx, the daughter of working-class Puerto Rican parents who made their way to New York during World War II.

But unlike Justice Clarence Thomas, a product of the segregated South, and Marshall before him, Sotomayor never felt the sting of legalized discrimination.

Like her would-be colleagues, Sotomayor served as a federal appeals court judge. But she would be the only justice with experience as a trial judge and one of two - Justice Samuel Alito is the other - who was a prosecutor.

These practical differences could matter as much as her life story, and not in a predictable ideological way, said Washington lawyer and court watcher Thomas Goldstein.

"As a successful Hispanic woman coming out of Yale she could have done absolutely anything and she went and became a prosecutor," Goldstein said. "It's not the story of someone who is a liberal trailblazer."

There is little doubt among conservatives and liberals that Sotomayor's votes on the Supreme Court would look a lot like those of retired Justice David Souter, the man whose seat she would take.

But her influence within the court by virtue of her defining experiences is much harder to gauge.

The other women who have served on the court, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, have described the importance of having another woman on the court: It gives the public a better picture of the institution and makes it harder to ignore a woman's voice in internal deliberations.

Ginsburg recently said it was common several decades ago for a roomful of men to "tune out" when a lone woman spoke. There is less of it now, "but it still exists," she said in an interview with The New York Times.

O'Connor has spoken of the profound influence of Marshall, who had been a justice for 14 years when O'Connor became the court's first female justice in 1981.

"At oral arguments and conference meetings, in opinions and dissents, Justice Marshall imparted not only his legal acumen but also his life experiences, constantly pushing and prodding us to respond not only to the persuasiveness of legal argument but also to the power of moral truth," O'Connor said in a tribute to Marshall.

But O'Connor and Marshall often were on different sides of civil right cases during their overlapping years on the court. Only later in O'Connor's career did her votes seem to reflect the influence she described. She wrote a majority opinion in 2003 that upheld affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan's law school.

Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., encouraged Sotomayor to "battle out the ideas that you believe in." Those fights often play out in the justices' majority opinions and dissents.

But it might take years to find out whether Sotomayor would be an effective negotiator and conciliator who can draw a wavering justice to her side.

On the current court, firmly divided between conservatives and liberals on so many cultural issues, Justice Anthony Kennedy is the only one whose vote could be described as up for grabs.

"Might she persuade Kennedy to come out differently than what Souter could persuade him to do?" Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the new law school at the University of California at Irvine, said before the hearings. "Can Sotomayor by virtue of her life experiences move Kennedy to join the more liberal bloc more often?"

Chemerinsky said at week's end, "There's really no way to know at this stage."