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## Commentary

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# Commentary

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**Kenneth J. Cooper**

Barack Obama has made history by dispatching to the dustbin another usage for the tiresome phrase “first black.” As president, he is also going to make the future, both during his term and long after. The country’s racial-ethnic landscape, with its dangerous crevices and sheer mountains, is about to change in monumental ways.

His presence in the White House will promote more interracial dialogue, for one, and for the good of the country. This will not be a small change. The novelist Richard Wright once explained that he chose exile in Paris in the 1940s because he could not have an honest conversation about race in America. Though interracial contact and discussion has increased since then, not enough has come with candor. To enter a truly “post-racial” era, a period when race is recognized but does not shape attitudes, people will need to talk more and more honestly. President Obama and his black nuclear family, and his white, Kenyan, and Filipino extended families, are quite a group for stimulating that kind of conversation. Not all will be pleasant, if it is honest, but better that resentments are spoken aloud than squelched to smolder inside.

The conversation about racial identity among African Americans will change too. A black man who grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia and was raised by a white mother and white grandparents has expanded the definitions of blackness and the black experience. One recent poll found most African Americans interviewed agreed there is no single black experience. For too long, a pinched view of blackness has prevailed, rooted in the Black Power and Pan-Africanist ideologies of the 1960s but running against the grain of much of African-American history. W. E. B DuBois, who acknowledged his full lineage as being African, Dutch, and French, helped found the Niagara Movement and NAACP. William Monroe

Trotter, cofounder of the Niagara Movement with DuBois, claimed he was descended, through his mother, from Thomas Jefferson. Blond-haired, blue-eyed Walter White rose to executive secretary of the NAACP. White faced criticism about his appearance, but no one showed him, Trotter, or DuBois the door for supposedly not being “black enough.”

Obama has opened the social space for African Americans who have other blood streams to embrace and talk about their full identities, with less fear of being branded self-hating or in denial. The one-drop rule should be finally laid to rest. It always ignored the law of proportions and is not a black idea anyway, conceived as it was in colonial Virginia to deny inheritance rights to the slave children of white masters. The geography of the black experience, located in most of the creative output of African Americans in the urban North or rural South, has also just been stretched. Obama proves you can be born in the state farthest from either region and still be positively black.

More than the changes in the texture of racial conversation, African Americans expect to share the economic benefits of an Obama presidency. Will more opportunities open? Some African Americans have worried that having a black president means that business leaders will conclude race is no longer an issue and, therefore, affirmative action is no longer needed. The opposite is likely to be true. People emulate the powerful. Big business has incentives to curry favor with any president, particularly in bad economic times, given the regulatory reach of the government and the huge value of federal contracts. Without being told, a company sending representatives to lobby the Obama administration for anything will figure its prospects for success will be better if the delegation is not all-white. Of course, one response could be wanton tokenism. In an Internet age, it will be much easier to sniff out.

Obama not only becomes the chief executive, but he, Michelle, Malia, and Sasha become the American royal family. For as long as he governs, their lifestyle will shape American tastes in food, fashion, recreation, and speech. For the first time, the First Family will have a black style. Obama has been photographed wearing sunglasses, not a stock presidential image. To relax, he plays basketball, rather than jog, clear brush, or chop wood like his immediate predecessors. He was unflappable in the presidential debates, a posture some commentators mistook for

detachment. He is cool, not detached. His style and his family's will balance out the black style that has come to dominate the media, the ghetto-centric, trash-talking, streetwise, violent, and often profane or misogynist vision of rap music. The rest of America will get a real-life view of black middle-class family, loving, educated, urbane, and secure. Other African Americans will have a prominent, wholesome model to affirm them or strive to emulate.

Two changes in the racial landscape will last far beyond Obama's presidency. He is a Baby Boomer, and as such does not represent a new generation in politics, but his appointments will seed a new generation of leaders who are now in their thirties or even twenties. As they age, they can be expected to take on more responsible positions, in government or civic life. Having more African Americans serving as political appointees will make government more representative. But the impact will be broader. Like the past two administrations, Obama's can be expected to be more diverse than the previous one. Blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans will work side by side in a black-led administration. It will be a formative experience. In later years, this cadre of Obamaites is likely to lead, in whatever capacities they assume, in a way that is inclusive, tolerant, and cooperative across racial-ethnic lines. That is a change that will reverberate for decades.

Another beneficial by-product of Obama's victory is the inevitable lifting of black aspirations. In recent years, African-American candidates have been winning more often in white-majority districts. More are likely to see political opportunity in contests for statewide offices, for example, and to find in Obama's national campaign guideposts for how to win. Perhaps most important in the long term, young African-Americans will be inspired to raise their sights. Compared with black boomers, who came of age as the civil rights movement opened doors to opportunities, members of subsequent generations have assumed they have fewer possibilities and less societal support for high ambitions. From now on, any older adult who hears a young African-American uttering the self-limiting words, "I can't," can point to the improbable ascent of Barack Hussein Obama and paraphrase the first black president: "Yes, you can!"