

## **The Obama Effect**

At around the age of 7, Barack Obama saw a picture in *Life* magazine of a black man who had tried to *peel his skin off*, and Obama had an *epiphany*. "I imagine other black children, then and now, undergoing similar moments of revelation," he wrote in 'Dreams From My Father'. "I know that seeing that article was violent for me, an *ambush attack*."

At around the same time, the Rev. Jesse Jackson was involved in a quite different ambush attack. At Martin Luther King's side when he was assassinated by a sniper's bullet, Jackson appeared on television the next day with the civil rights leader's blood on his shirt. The *formative* events that shaped the last generation of black leadership could not be more different from those that have informed this one.

Obama was born in 1961, the year the Freedom Riders rolled through the South and were met with chains, clubs and firebombs. He was just 2 when Dr. King made his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington. By his seventh birthday, both King and Malcolm X had been assassinated, and Congress had moved to protect a right to vote he wouldn't be able to exercise for another eleven years. Obama knows those years and places only from the history books, and even that knowledge is less than reliable. When he went to Selma, Alabama, to address the Brown Chapel AME church on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday earlier this year, he credited the demonstration for enabling his parents, a mixed-race couple, to fall in love. It turned out he had been born four years earlier.

Obama is the most *prominent* figure in what has been cast as a new generation in black politics. As the civil rights movement forced open the doors of academe, corporate America and elite universities, this new generation strode through. Obama, for instance, went to Columbia and Harvard law.

The *emergence* of this *cohort* has filled the *commentariat* with joy--not just because of what they are: bright, polite and, where skin tone is concerned, mostly light--but because of what they are not. They have been hailed not just as a development in black American politics but as a *repudiation* of black American politics; not just as different from Jesse Jackson but the *epitome* of the anti-Jesse.

"[Obama] is in many ways the full flowering of a strain of up-tempo, non-grievance, American-Dream-In-Color politics," wrote Terence Samuel in 'The American Prospect' recently. "His counterparts are young, *Ivy League* professionals, heirs to the civil-rights movement who are determined to move beyond both the mood and the methods of their forebears."

There are many problems with this. Chief among them is that this "new generation" is itself a crude political construct built more on wishful thinking than on fact. Moreover, those who constructed the model forgot to build any women into it. Donna Brazile, for example, who in 2000 became the first African-American to direct a major presidential campaign, is rarely mentioned.

But the champions of this new generation have their hearts set on a symbol far greater than a more diverse *electoral landscape*. At the very least the post-civil rights cohort represents proof of the nation's *unrelenting* progress and boundless opportunities. They've lived the dream, and represent a generation of black Americans who do not feel cut off from the larger society.

Vocabulary:

peel off	- here: to tear away the skin
epiphany	- a vision
ambush attack	- an unexpected, surprising attack
formative	- with an effect on the future
prominent	- famous
emergence	- appearance
cohort	- group of people
commentariat	- experts
repudiation	- opposite of support (Ablehnung)
epitome	- embodiment (Inbegriff)
Ivy League	- a number of famous, reputable universities in the US
electoral landscape	- the (racial) makeup of voters
unrelenting	- unstoppable

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**Reading: for questions 1-8, find the best answer A, B or C:**

1. When Barack Obama was young,

- A. he saw other children peel off their skin.
- B. he had the saw a terrifying magazine cover.
- C. he was involved in a brutal attack.

2. When Martin Luther King was assassinated,

- A. Rev. Jesse Jackson was standing next to him.
- B. Rev. Jesse Jackson was giving an interview on TV.
- C. Rev. Jesse Jackson was the victim of an ambush attack.

3. Rev. Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama

- A. have had similar experiences in their youth.
- B. were born around the same time.
- C. have a very different background.

4. In the third paragraph, the author claims that

- A. history books are not always reliable
- B. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were assassinated when Obama was 17.
- C. Obama once gave an uninformed speech in a church.

5. Which of the following statements is NOT expressed in paragraph 4.

- A. Obama is prominent because he went to an elite university.
- B. The civil rights movement enabled Black Americans to get a good education.
- C. Obama is part of a new generation of African Americans.

6. Many experts support Obama and other modern Black politicians because

- A. they have achieved a lot of political goals.
- B. they have relatively bright skin.
- C. they are more moderate than former Civil Rights activists.

7. The author fears that Obama

- A. won't involve women in his political rule.
- B. might have unrealistic goals.
- C. could consider himself as a Chief.

8. Overall, the author

- A. seems to support Obama despite having some doubts.
- B. is afraid that Obama might be unreliable.
- C. is against the involvement of Black Americans in politics.