

# *The Harbour League*



## POST RACIAL AMERICA?

*By: Herbert I. London*

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There is little doubt that the French are enthralled with President Obama. The presumption is that a new era in French-American relations has been launched. Since it is too early to assess the president's policies, I have asked my French friends what accounts for their enthusiasm. Although the comments vary, there is a central theme: a man of color will lead us forward.

Despite the sincerity of this claim, I find it curious. On the one hand, commentators on both sides of the Atlantic argue Obama has ushered in a post-racial period in which racial attitudes are irrelevant. Yet they also suggest that the color of his skin is critical in the assessment of his presidency.

Needless to say, hypocrisy is not restricted to the Obama presidency. However, black celebrities who have been interviewed invariably say that at long last they can believe in a president and now they "have come to love America" (vide: Beyonce). Presumably a black American or for that matter an Algerian residing in France couldn't admire an American president or the nation until a man of color became president.

It is one thing to identify racial pride, but the attitude on display suggests that many Americans deriving all the benefit and privileges the United States confers did not appreciate or understand these conditions until a black man was elected president.

Either this suggests remarkable ignorance or a willful disregard for the unique qualities America possesses. American liberty wasn't born with Obama. Moreover, despite errors in the past and the

mistreatment of blacks through a substantial portion of the national history, politicians in both parties have attempted to redress the wrong of the past over the last half century.

History did not begin with Bill Clinton, did not cease with George W. Bush and was not resuscitated with Barack Obama. Remarkably that is not the way the Obama era is being treated.

Every French bookstore has books on Obama prominently displayed. His picture is far more prominent in France than President Sarkozy. In fact, every breath the new American president takes is recorded for posterity. This fascination with Obama has reached ridiculous proportions especially when one considers that his presidency is about a fortnight in duration.

Some French commentators rather patronizingly say it is about time Americans had a black president. I usually greet this comment with a question: When will France have an Algerian president or perhaps one from Cote d'Ivoire? My question is usually met with silence accompanied by a frown.

As I see it, the Obama election demonstrates how far we've progressed and how little we've progressed. On one level, Americans can elect a president notwithstanding his race. On another level, race was an overarching factor in his election and in his international standing.

Suppose for the sake of argument, Obama serves two terms and is succeeded by Eric Holder, the Attorney General designate who is also black. In sixteen years a teenager at the moment will have known only black presidents during this formative period in his political life. Would he in the middle of 2024 suggest that its time we had a white president? Or would he note that he couldn't appreciate the quality of American liberty until a white man were elected to the highest office in the land? On any level these questions are absurd, but are they any more absurd than the chant echoing through contemporary life that America can finally be appreciated because a black man has been elected? Is race – either as a positive or negative – a national obsession? And from my point of view, isn't it time we gave it a rest and truly got beyond the racial question completely.

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