

# Presidential choice could fix America's reputation

## The Big Idea

By Han Park | Commentary | Story updated at 5:18 pm on 10/25/2008

As I traveled around the world recently, I encountered many people who had a common question: Is America really ready for a nonwhite president, let alone an African American? Europeans are skeptical because none of them is prepared even to raise the question as being realistic in their own political cultures. Asians in China, Japan, and even North Korea showed disbelief at the possibility of Barack Obama's ascension to this country's highest office.

It is hard for many abroad to believe Americans may have transcended the historical legacy of slavery and overcome the racism that still is vivid in the memory of senior citizens. The demographic divide between Obama's supporters and his opponent's supporters may suggest we still are very much in a culture where race matters.

To the extent the "Bradley effect" still lingers, all the opinion polls favoring Obama could be deceiving. Those who may feel they can't vote for Obama simply because of his skin color may not wish to reveal their racist sentiment. They may try to hide it behind disguised words and behaviors, just as many others hid themselves behind white hoods and robes. This behavior, however, suggests racism is felt almost universally as being shameful and socially unacceptable.

While we may be approaching the eve of electing our first black president, it's sad to note racism actually may be gaining steam as it finds itself on the biggest stage of American politics. Isn't it amazing that only 36 of the 2,380 delegates to this year's Republican National Convention were black, while the Democratic National Convention showed almost excessive diversity?

Indeed, the current presidential election has brought out the best, and worst, among us - from cries for service and unity to hate-filled YouTube rants; from calls for courage to embrace the unknown to vicious, ethnically charged scare tactics from those who would undermine Obama's presidential bid. With reports of unprecedented new voter registration, players on both sides of the racial divide have found their voices in this election, and the ensuing shouting matches are inevitable.

However, the re-emergence of racism into the mainstream is a necessary step toward its eradication. Racism should not remain veiled, but should be brought into the open and actively debated. One encouraging fact is that more-educated and younger people are likely to be less racially sensitive. This suggests the country is moving steadily in the right direction, and the future is bright. But when is the future?

It could well be as soon as this election. To the rest of the world, this election gives the American electorate a unique and uncommon opportunity to show the stream of history washes away the blood stains of slavery, discrimination and racism. In this sense, this presidential election could well carry profound impact and far-reaching significance. It will be remarkable if America can demonstrate to the world its constitutional doctrine of human equality is not just lip service.

Should Obama be elected, it will mean to the world that the American people, especially the young Obama supporters, have achieved a mature political culture so that even the racism that has tarnished America's image can be buried in memory. It will elevate the cultural prestige of Americans, and may help subdue the anti-American sentiment so pervasive in recent years.

Race is and should be a vital issue in this election, and we should be proud of having come this far: A nonwhite American really can aspire to be president.

At the same time, as ironic as it may sound, the true reason for Obama's success thus far is that he has never run his campaign on race. As a product of a racially mixed family, he embodies his message of transcending racial and ethnic divides. As one who has risen from modest means to

great heights, he also embodies the American dream. Obama's ideas and ideals for a fundamental change in politics resonate loudly with the world's people. This premise of change is shared by many all over the world.

As Obama declares his familiar message of changing America and the world, the world finally is paying attention to American politics and looking for leadership in steering the world in a new direction.

The world has defied the American paradigm of domination and hated the arrogant policies of Washington. In the process, the world has suffered from unnecessary wars, deaths, destruction and lawlessness. When Obama attracted large numbers of people in Europe, many Americans wrongly attributed that popularity to his "celebrity" status. It is the message of change that intrigues them, the kind of fundamental change that will restore human dignity through peaceful accommodation rather than military domination, and bring about a proper relationship between humans and their environment through sustainable development. This change is not about tactics or even morality in Washington politics. It is about a strategic shift and a cultural change in which America's value system must evolve.

My comments shouldn't be interpreted as suggesting Americans should elect a black president just to demonstrate cultural maturity. If America elects Obama based purely on his qualifications, that he happens to be black can only elevate America's image throughout the world. This undoubtedly will create a more favorable attitude toward American voters, who may need to redeem themselves after having twice elected a most unpopular president who is regarded widely as the guardian of militarism, imperialism and the destruction of human lives.

The remaining days of this election lead to a historic crossroads where the American electorate will make a pivotal choice. One of the choices once again will make America the envy of the world by demonstrating the maturity of our political beliefs and showcasing values that supersede racial and ethnic enclaves. That's a lesson badly needed by the world.

Originally published in the Athens Banner-Herald on Sunday, October 26, 2008