

'Destined to Be' -- For some, the ascent of Barack Obama is not just a historical political event, but part of a bigger plan

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Even as the words - eloquent, effusive, emotional words - spill forth, those Memphians on the front lines of the civil rights struggle recognize they may sound over the top.

Forgive them, they say, but making sense out of something they never thought they would see in their lifetimes - the inauguration of a self-identified black man as president of the United States - means going to those places they rely upon to explain the unexplainable .

"We have always believed in our tradition that God sends a leader when you need him most," says Samuel Billy Kyles, the pastor at Monumental Baptist Church who was at the Lorraine Motel when Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in 1968. "That's happened throughout history, and I knew very early Barack had come for a reason. It is a fulfillment of the dream of Martin Luther King."

Look at the numbers they say, the big, round milestone numbers freighted with generational significance.

Obama was elected 40 years - two generations - after King's assassination. The inauguration will come five days after what would have been King's 80th birthday, just one day following the holiday honoring him. For those who read their Bible, for those who know King's final speech in Memphis contained the African-American embrace of Moses, they understand that Tuesday's inauguration officially anoints Obama as leader of the Joshua generation.

For Johnnie Turner, executive director of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, two more numbers stand out. The inauguration comes only 23 days before what will be the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the NAACP - and the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Turner, who will be in Washington, was also there in 1963 for the march on Washington, and she points out that Obama's Democratic National Convention speech came 45 years to the day after King delivered "I Have A Dream."

"I'm not into reading palms and those kinds of things," Turner says, "but there is so much about this that all I can say is it was destined to be. He really had no choice, that's what I believe. He had the right message and we have come full circle from three-fifths of a man to where we now are at the highest level one can be in politics."

Maxine Smith, former executive secretary of the NAACP, was one year behind King when she was at Spelman College and he was at Morehouse College, in Atlanta. She, too, remembers getting ready to have dinner with King when she got word of his murder, and it brought to mind another awful memory, of being the last person to touch Medgar Evers before he was assassinated in Mississippi on June 12, 1963. Now 79, Smith finds herself revered by many in the white community who once despised her, and taking a seat on a private jet to see a black man inaugurated.

"If I was not a good Christian, all of this ought to make me one," Smith says. "I think Obama's presidency was predestined by something much greater than we are."

For Rev. Benjamin Hooks, the NAACP's national director from 1977-1992, the Obama presidency signals the culmination of one complicated journey and the beginning of another, equally complex one. But the moment itself leads him, one of the civil rights movement's most intellectual leaders, to the most elemental of responses.

"In a nutshell, I am proud and happy to have lived to see this day," Hooks says. "Amen. Amen. Aaay-men!"

On King's shoulders

It was April 4, 2008, and as a huge crowd gathered in Downtown Memphis for a march to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, vendors on every block sold T-shirts combining images of Obama and King.

That shirt has remained one of the best-selling emblems of Obama-mania. Even if it is simplistic commercial exploitation, says Charles McKinney, a professor of African-American history at Rhodes College, that in itself is a symbol of progress.

"Frankly, I'm happier to see that one than one with Scarface," McKinney said. "If you got the one with Barack Obama and Martin Luther King, you don't have it with LeBron James or Jay-Z or some world-famous gangster."

"Barack Obama is about to become president of the United States. That's titanic. Commercial expressions of that accomplishment, I don't

see as a cheap parlor trick. It's a legitimate manifestation of people's pride."

The civil rights pioneers often talk of standing on others' shoulders, and those T-shirts are symbolic of it.

"In the minds of many, we have had two prophets," Maxine Smith says. "I think both are divinely inspired people. Had there been no M.L. (King), there would have been no Obama. One stacks on top of the other."

Kyles puts it this way: "All of our heroes shouldn't be deceased. Whereas Martin Luther King was a wonderful hero, Barack is a wonderful hero and he's alive. You can feel him and see him and touch him."

Yet, McKinney warns that lessons of the civil rights movement are too often reduced to easily packaged stories with straightforward lessons, about a hero or heroes who flew in with their capes to make everyone do the right thing.

"I don't think anything magical is going to happen because he is president of the United States," says McKinney. "He is not going to wake up one day and call the civil rights community and say, 'OK, you won. Let's knock all this out before lunch.'"

"This is something King understood in his bones. He understood that adage attributed to Frederick Douglass : 'Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.' King understood that every accomplishment, every advancement, was made by a group LBJ didn't just wake up one day, have some toast, scratch his dog and sign the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Pressure was brought to bear on the federal government."

And that took hard, persistent, courageous work.

"People say, 'Did you ever think?'" Smith says. "That wasn't even our thinking process. You didn't think about a black person being President. You just thought about getting a policeman, a fireman. Can we just get one in the firehouse? That was hard."

Winning new battles - Smith mentions incarceration rates of black men, as well as inequalities in education and employment - will require similar vigilance, even if the victories are no longer as easy to define as winning the right to vote or access to public accommodations.

"That dynamic tension between civil rights advocates and the federal government is not going to disappear because the guy who is President happens to be African-American," says McKinney. "What do people think is going to happen now? Barack Obama becomes President and suddenly the rate of convictions of African-Americans will drop? And the unemployment rate of African-Americans will drop?"

"These things are not going to happen without persistent advocacy. We are not going to cure these things that ail America in general and African-Americans in particular just because the President is a black guy. We have to be mindful of that history."

Post-racial? Really?

In the days following Obama's election, the satirical comedian Stephen Colbert, on his show, insisted on celebrating, despite the fact that the character he plays opposed Barack Obama. Why? "Racism is over!" Colbert proclaimed before balloons dropped all around him.

Turner, the NAACP director, is well aware that sentiment is genuinely held, and in fact has heard it plenty in Memphis, where African-American politicians now hold the top political posts in many areas.

"We have to deal with complacency and apathy that will surely come by those saying, 'You have a black president so you ought to be satisfied,' " Turner says. "In some ways, it makes our jobs even more difficult because we have to deal with that variable."

Another new variable concerns how those advocating for African-Americans exert pressure on Obama to confront issues of race. When Jesse Jackson made his off-color remarks about Obama on Fox News, thinking he was off the air, he was referring in part to the perception that Obama avoided public-policy issues regarding race and instead gave lectures.

On Father's Day, for instance, Obama spoke at Apostolic Church of God in Chicago and emphasized personal responsibility. Though he mentioned things like more cops and fewer guns on the streets, more money and better teachers in the schools, more jobs and job training, Obama's message centered on personal accountability, especially from black men.

"But we also need families to raise our children," he said. "We need fathers to realize that responsibility does not end at conception. We need them to realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child - it's the courage to raise one."

So in some ways, those who say they are seeking social justice and equality face a double whammy of critics who tell them racism is over because there is a black president and a black president who may shy away from race because of politics.

"I see two strands there," says McKinney, the Rhodes professor. "No serious contender for the Democratic nomination can get it without wagging his finger at black people. Bill Clinton showed us that."

"The second thing, is that for all intents and purposes, Barack Obama is Jackie Robinson. This is a level of political access that has

never, ever happened before. Much like Jackie Robinson's first season, as he's getting spiked as he slides into second, getting cussed at and spat upon, he knows he can't respond to that. Because then he runs the risk of wrecking the whole experiment. He's got to be the uber-Negro."

Kyles also points out that some grumbling aimed at Obama came from black citizens, mentioning a group of pastors at the Democratic Convention irked at him for not giving them more access.

"I told them, 'Whatever difficulties you have, you hold them out until Nov. 4, and then you can get you a picket sign and whatever you need to do. But he's winning, man,' " Kyles recalled. "He stayed on point and would not be pulled off point."

Having seen race play such a toxic role for so many generations, Hooks admired the way Obama balanced the issue and perhaps even turned it to his advantage.

"How can he avoid race when every time he stands up, every time he brushes his teeth or catches a plane, it is there? When you are black, it is with you every moment of your life," Hooks says. "But I think he played his cards just right. He tried to say, 'I understand how bad America has been but I'm not gonna spend all day talking about what you didn't do. Let's talk about what you can do.'

"Whatever America did is done. You can't change it to save your life. But you can change 2012 or '13."

Tough row to hoe

Let it be noted too, say these titans of the Movement, that few presidents have ever inherited the country in such poor condition.

"The overriding issue of our time is economic and if we don't solve it, none of the rest will matter," Hooks says.

During the long campaign, the rapper Mos Def, a regular on Bill Maher's HBO show, predicted Obama would win precisely because of the country's poor health.

"I know he's going to be president," he said, "because the country is in worse shape than it's ever been. And you know what happens when that goes on. When there's any institution, on any(thing) going down, they're finding the black dude: 'It's your account. You are head of the department.' "

Yet Smith points out that it is not just African-Americans with so much invested. Obama could not have won his landslide - 8.66 million votes more than Republican John McCain, the largest margin ever for a nonincumbent - without passionate support from voters of all colors.

Patience, she preaches.

"I just hope we see a little bit of change by 2012," she says. "I'm hearing it already, 'Why hadn't he said something? Why hasn't he done anything?' The man is not president yet. Give him a chance.

"This country, we all have got to realize, it wasn't done overnight and it's not going to change next week or the week after next. Once he gets in, we will see the earnest effort and understand it more."

Promised Land

So many of them heard King's now famous promise, on the stormy Memphis night before he died: "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

They are 40 years older now, some of them in poor health, but they will not be deterred. They want to be there when a black man puts his hand on the very same Bible on which Abraham Lincoln swore to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

Maxine Smith says she will carry memories with her as fresh and felt as the January air - coming back to Memphis with husband Vasco at age 25 and beginning to organize voters, telling Medgar Evers to keep the faith, helping escort James Meredith to register at Ole Miss.

Benjamin Hooks cannot help but think of growing up at his father's Beale Street photography studio when he thought the greatest job in the world would be working at The Peabody - because it was the only way he could fathom getting even a whiff of what it meant to be white and privileged.

Johnnie Turner turned down a chance at an inaugural ticket because she wanted to be in the mall again, among the people, like that day in 1963 when she was a teenager and a preacher promised that generations to come would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

And for Billy Kyles, the wonderful moments have been many - he remembers tearing up to see Obama and Harold Ford Jr. campaigning together in 2006 - but how could anything erase the awful memory of that late April afternoon in 1968?

"I feel blessed and honored because often pioneers are not there to walk trails they blazed," Kyles says. "And here I am and Ben Hooks and many others, but they are leaving fast. But here I am."

Hooks, who recently retired from full-time pastoring, gets the final word here.

"We've come a long way and this is a victory I never expected to see in my lifetime," Hooks says. "I hoped it would happen. I thank God I lived to see it."

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Maxine Smith, civil rights activist

"All of our heroes shouldn't be deceased. Whereas Martin Luther King was a wonderful hero, Barack is a wonderful hero and he's alive."

Samuel Billy Kyles, pastor at Monumental Baptist Church

• Caption: Photos; Drawing - By Shane McDermott The Commercial Appeal On Aug. 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington. This week that D.C. mall will be filled for the inauguration of the nation's first black president. (Associated Press files) Forty-five years to the day after King's "I Have a Dream" speech, - Aug. 28, 2008 - Barack Obama addressed the Democratic National Convention in Denver. He'll be sworn in the day after the national holiday honoring King. (Paul Sancya/Associated Press files) "We have always believed in our tradition that God sends a leader when you need him most. That's happened throughout history, and I knew very early Barack had come for a reason. It is a fulfillment of the dream of Martin Luther King." - Samuel Billy Kyles, pastor at Monumental Baptist Church (Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal) "We have come full circle from three-fifths of a man to where we now are at the highest level one can be in politics." - Johnnie R. Turner, executive director of the Memphis NAACP branch (Lance Murphey/The Commercial Appeal) "In a nutshell, I am proud and happy to have lived to see this day. Amen. Amen. Aaay-men!" - Rev. Benjamin Hooks, Former National Director of the NAACP (Brandon Dill/Special to The Commercial Appeal) "I think Obama's presidency was predestined by something much greater than we are." - Maxine Smith, Civil Rights Activist (Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal files)

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