



The winds of change blowin'

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**How many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?**

Blowin' in the Wind — Bob Dylan

WHEN Barack Obama accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for the US presidency, African Americans in the crowd did not applaud or cheer. They cried.

Those tears will flow in torrents should he make history by becoming the first black president.

More than the novelty of achieving something for the first time is behind those emotions — it's where African Americans have come from, and the violence they overcame to get here.

It does not matter that Obama is not descended from African Americans, but the son of a Kenyan man and a white American woman.

The colour of his skin, and the reactions it provokes, links him indelibly to blacks whose ancestors were slaves.

The US Constitution, the document that founded the nation, accepted the enslavement of African men and women, denying their very humanity and treating them instead as property.

But the nation advanced the ideal of equality, and blacks strove to close the gap between promise and reality.

The Civil War (1861-65) brought them freedom, but not equality — most whites in the North as well as the South believed blacks were inferior to whites.

Within five years of the end of slavery, African Americans used their newly won votes to send black representatives to Congress, only to have Southern whites violently drive them from politics, and obstruct black voting for more than half a century.

Whites also wrote histories that portrayed the first black politicians as incompetent and ignorant, and blacks as happiest as slaves, an image most famously presented in the 1939 film, *Gone with the Wind* but still evident as recently as the 2000 film *The Patriot*, in which freed slaves choose to stay working on Mel Gibson's plantation.

When the civil rights movement succeeded in having the legal obstacles to black voting removed in 1965, whites again responded with violence — attacks on civil rights activists in the South, destructive efforts to keep blacks out of white neighbourhoods in the North. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

King's 1963 "I have a dream" speech in Washington's Mall was already a civil rights landmark, but it did not win him Southern white respect. Bob Dylan — an iPod favourite of Obama's — sang that day at The Mall.

King's birth is now celebrated in a public holiday, TV and movies feature black leaders, even presidents, and Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell have represented the US abroad.

However, African Americans have generally won political power only where enough black voters existed to elect them, causing them to be seen as representing only blacks.

Very few have been elected to state-wide office, which requires winning white votes. There have been only two black state governors, and Obama is only the fifth black US senator.

But if Obama is elected president, millions of whites will have voted for him. In that office he will represent not just blacks but all Americans.

His election will provide a powerful symbol that African Americans have

thrown off the final shackle of slavery, have overcome the racism that has kept whites from recognising them as fully, equally, American citizens.

The power of Obama as a symbol of racial equality has caused some whites to spew the same racial hatred that greeted black politicians in America's past. Bigots make an interesting story, so journalists seek them out, but there's little evidence they exist in large numbers.

The huge crowds coming out to see Obama even in traditionally Republican states and the millions of ordinary Americans who donated money to his campaign suggest that these racists are the rearguard of a fading culture, not the vanguard of another white backlash against blacks.

Even if there is a "Bradley effect" (though it seems the polls actually got it wrong in 1982, not because whites lied about voting for the African American Bradley but because absentee voters were not included), it encompasses only a small proportion of white voters.

Nonetheless, some Americans will judge Obama's presidency in racial terms: if he does not solve the nation's problems, it will confirm black inferiority, regardless of the failed war and collapsed economy he will inherit.

For many more white Americans, a President Obama will provide a reason to refuse to think about race.

He will confirm their belief the US is a "post-racial" nation, and there are no grounds for race-based affirmative action or efforts focused on the high rates of poverty and imprisonment, and low levels of educational achievement, among blacks.

That attitude is a major reason why



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Obama himself rarely talks about race and why as president he will not be able to deliver African Americans much more than a symbol.

But symbols do matter.

President Obama as a role model would overshadow rap musicians and athletes in a way that Oprah or Colin Powell can't, helping new generations imagine wider possibilities.

Obama's symbolic impact extends well beyond the US. The rest of the world tends to perceive the US as racially oppressive, and argue that, however bad race relations in their nations might be, they could be worse.

In a recent US Studies Centre survey of Australian attitudes, only 32 per cent of people had anything favourable to say about American race relations.

President Obama would set a new standard, one that challenges rather than reassures the rest of the world: what does it say about Australians if Americans can elect a black President, but we have not had an Aboriginal PM?

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