

Free at Last?

Obama takes us one step closer to future hope

At this point, every aspect of Barack Obama's election and inauguration has been covered like a heavy rain on a parched landscape. His taking office as the first black president is deemed a racial breakthrough. And it is a unique moment, one even most civil rights advocates thought would not occur in their lifetimes. But the question that history, even fairly recent history, requires that we ask: Is Obama's elevation to the White House more than just another unique moment when the fervent hopes of blacks coincide with the needs of whites and other nonwhites?



In our celebrations, we should not confuse progress with fortuity as we have while celebrating so many earlier unique moments that appeared to signal significant racial advances. Obama is enormously talented, ran a great campaign and successfully conveyed that he could be the change the country wants and needs. An important component of his victory, though, is that the country is domestically in the worse shape since the Great Depression and in international terms, as bad as it has ever been. In addition, the nation's leadership over the last eight years has simply been dreadful. Obama came along at just the right time.

A similar situation existed when Brown v. Board was decided in 1954. Again, civil rights lawyers had worked diligently for 20 years to overturn the "separate but equal" doctrine of racial segregation, but they made little headway until the early 1950s when it became clear to national policy makers that the nation had to improve its international and domestic racial image against communism that appeared a threat both at home and abroad. The court's decision, urged by the Justice Department, was intended to improve our image abroad where we were competing with communist nations for the hearts and minds of peoples of color emerging from long years of colonial domination. And it served as reassurance to blacks at home still living under segregation that our subordination, while long ignored, had not been forgotten.

But when the force of fortuity gave way to the realities of racial subordination and exploitation, opposition to meaningful racial reform was resisted loudly in the South and more quietly but no less effectively in other parts of the country. Surely, much has been done, but it is hard to deny that Dr. King's cry, "Free at last," remains a future hope, not a present reality.

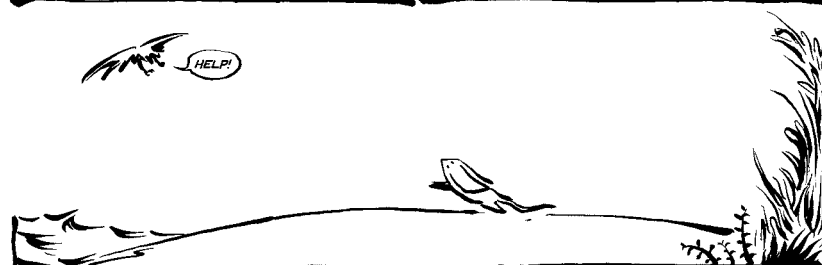
The comparison of 1954 and the years that followed with the Obama election are not exact, but the similarities are certainly there. It remains to be seen whether the old resistances to change, whether racial or economic, can be diluted by an Obama whose leadership of the nation must prove as effective as that of the campaign. But it behooves those who want his administration to succeed to contribute as much effort and support to President Obama as they did to get him into what is clearly the most challenging positions any president has ever faced.

Derrick Bell was the dean of the UO Law School from 1980 to 1985 and is currently a visiting professor at New York University Law School. He came here from Harvard Law School where he was the first black tenured law professor and a teacher to President Barack Obama. As a young lawyer, he worked in the civil rights division of the Justice Department in the late 1950s and on the legal team at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. He was assigned to Mississippi in the midst of the civil rights movement.

How to Be Happy

UGLY ISLAND 4 OF 8

by Shannon Wheeler



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WALKER'S BLIND SPOT

Vicki Walker plans to log state forests. Walker (state senator, 7th District) spoke about her plans for the 2009 legislative session on Jan. 8 at a North Eugene High public meeting. She has positioned herself on committees in order to provide revenue to education by logging Oregon's state forests. She said she wants to cut 'em, plant 'em and cut 'em again. When asked by a colleague if she would leave nothing, she said she wouldn't cut the tree in his backyard. She said the environmentalists wouldn't like it but she wants to use all of Oregon's natural resources.

Sad to see a bright, accomplished person with such a blind spot — the education senator with an educational deficit. Is she really a person who doesn't understand that forests are not natural resources (just for human exploitation) but natural ecosystems that make life on Earth possible? So if one cares about children and their future, why would one so carelessly desecrate their environment?

Maybe she's using the trees-don't-vote-or-contribute-to-her-campaign strategy. It's the all-too-common political coward's strategy. It's too dangerous to make the case to tax the rich (like we used to do), because the rich will use their money to defeat you. Looks like it's up to us tree-huggers, some of whom did contribute to and vote for her, to let her know she has a bad idea. Write to sen. vickiwalker@state.or.us

Jan Nelson
Crow

are created. We also have the former Hynix plant, which could be turned into a solar panel manufacturing plant.

The truth is, with the recession, peak oil, climate crisis, pollution, population growth and species extinctions, we have to change our way of life. One large component to change is transportation. We need comprehensive mass transit systems rather than building more roads for individuals' vehicles. The days of "homes on wheels" is screeching to a halt and the sooner the industry understands this the better. The consumer culture cannot continue. The recession is not going to go away soon. We will more than likely see many businesses close that offer items of extravagance. Mass transit, farming, energy conservation, alternative energy, (universal) health care and truly sustainable forestry are the sectors that will endure.

Keep in mind what Gandhi said: "There is enough for everyone's need, not everyone's greed."

Take a walk in an old-growth forest rather than a shopping mall to help get your priorities straight.

Pam Driscoll
Dexter

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

Approximately three years ago (2/2/06), EW published an excellent news article about a far-reaching and speculative UO/city of Eugene real estate development scheme. It was written by Alan Pittman, and the title was, "UO Eyes Franklin: Consultant's Proposal Would Mean Big Buildings." For reasons that are very unclear, the Weekly has provided no updates on the implementation of the redevelopment proposal for Fairmount called the Farkas Report. UO Athletic Director Pat Kilkenny donated \$1.5 million to create the report. The "urban village" envisioned by the report has a price tag of more than a billion dollars, and it looks quite risky. I am going to list some of the most important and revealing excerpts from Pittman's article here:

PARK THE RVs

The recent news on the struggles of the local RV manufacturing industry reminds me of a suggestion at a forum on the future of transportation at Harris Hall. A person asked the panel if it would be possible to retro-fit the RV industry to make rail cars. This is the type of innovation that could keep people working. For every billion dollars spent on the rail industry, an estimated 30,000 jobs

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