

# OPINION

## Obama's Message Vs. Cosby's

Opportunity expands with government's role

BY DEDRICK MUHAMMAD

I'd like to invite Barack Obama and Bill Cosby over for dinner, and listen to them hash out their differences about the causes of black poverty.

In his keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, the senate candidate from Illinois had a healthy balance between public and individual responsibility; a balance that eluded Mr. Cosby in his tirades against African American parents and youth.

Obama did call for holding up high expectations for our children, decrying "the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white."

Mr. Cosby reinforced the stereotypes used ever since enslaved Africans were first brought to the shores of the United States, that white Americans were more prosperous because they worked harder and upheld better moral standards. He claimed that low-income African Americans are not taking advantage of the opportunities the Civil Rights movement brought them.

When sociologist Dalton Conley analyzed educational outcomes, he found that family net worth, not race, was the best predictor of high school graduation and college enrollment. At a given level of assets, black students are actually



slightly more likely to graduate from high school than white students. The drop-out rate for black students has declined 44 percent since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King.

African Americans with graduate degrees are two to three times more likely than whites to engage in the rough-and-tumble world of entrepreneurship with small business start-ups.

Yet African Americans have not been rewarded for all this effort. For every dollar of per capita white income, black families had 57 cents in 2001, up from 55 cents in 1968. The racial

by three-quarters in the 1980s, and the majority of families of color have been unable to achieve the American dream of homeownership.

Direct discrimination still exists in the job market, as evidenced by recent studies. One found that job applicants with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely to be invited for an interview than applicants with black-sounding names.

Another found that white applicants with prison records are more likely to be hired than black applicants without a record.

*The United States has never invested in African-American communities in the same way it did from the late 1930s through 1950s to create the white suburban middle class.*

wealth divide is even worse: the typical black family has less than one-tenth of the median white net worth of \$120,000.

In the decades when white income and wealth soared, it was not only due to hard work and talent. Those factors are present in every race and every era. It was because of public investment in a ladder of opportunity. The New Deal and the generous post-WWII veterans' benefits largely excluded people of color.

Affirmative action and the Great Society programs of the 1960s and 70s helped create the first large black middle class. But since that time, public investment in opportunity has eroded. Federal spending on affordable housing was cut

These obstacles are not African Americans' fault. The United States has never invested in African-American communities in the same way it did from the late 1930s through 1950s to create the white suburban middle class.

Barack Obama's hopeful vision of America will only come to pass when African Americans and all Americans focus their energy on improving both their own behavior and on expanding society's infrastructure of opportunity.

*Dedrick Muhammad is the Racial Wealth Divide Coordinator at United for a Fair Economy and co-author of UFE's report "The State of the Dream: Enduring Disparities in Black and White."*

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## Letters to the Editor

### Voting Empowers Black Citizens

Black people are continually degraded by the dominant society because blacks placed in "head positions" do the cause of keeping blacks down and beaten by those within the dominant society.

There are no logically and truthful reasons for James Jahar Perez and Kendra James to have been murdered, and for the dominant society to say the police are in their rights to shoot unarmed persons.

Historically to keep blacks out of education, employment and housing, the dominant society has always found a "spokesperson" to keep blacks "in their place."

If blacks really want to get ahead in their lives, they will have to get rid of "spokespersons" and "leaders." Blacks must be more politically influential in voting to elect the proper person for all people.

The black race is the only race of people who've suddenly had "leaders" to appear to speak for them. Malcolm X encouraged black people to be independent.

*Walter F. Morris Jr., Northeast Portland*

## Where is our Outrage? Assault weapons back in business

BY MORNA MURRAY

Gun manufacturers are eagerly ratcheting up their military assault weapons production lines as they count down the final days of the 10-

year-old Federal Assault Weapons Ban. Congress is scheduled to be in session for a mere four days before the ban expires on Sept. 13. Soon after, these deadly killing machines

will be back in business on the streets of America, just as our children are returning to school.

The 1994 Assault Weapons Ban came about in response to horrific

mass killings: 21 killed and 19 wounded at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, Calif. in 1984; six killed and 14 wounded in Palm Bay, Fla. in 1987; five children killed and 29 children and one teacher wounded in Stockton, Calif. in 1989; eight killed and 12 wounded in Louisville, Ken. in 1989; two killed and three wounded in Langley, Va. in 1993; four killed and 16 wounded in Waco, Texas, 1993; and eight killed and six wounded in San Fran-

cisco in 1993.

Since the ban went into effect, child and teen deaths from firearms have dropped 50 percent. Overall, gun deaths have dropped nearly 25 percent.

Child and teen death rates from firearms had increased every year from 1983 through 1994, but have decreased each and every year since the ban.



Morna Murray

Overall, crimes involving assault weapons have dropped 79 percent since 1994.

President George W. Bush has stated his support for the ban, saying, "It makes no sense for assault weapons to be around our society."

But when the U.S. Senate renewed the ban in March, the president stood idly by while the National Rifle Association snuffed out the underlying bill.

There's widespread and diverse support for the ban, including an overwhelming majority of citizens, active duty and retired military families, NASCAR fans and a clear majority of gun owners. Every major law enforcement organization and nearly 900 police chiefs from across the country support banning these military-style guns.

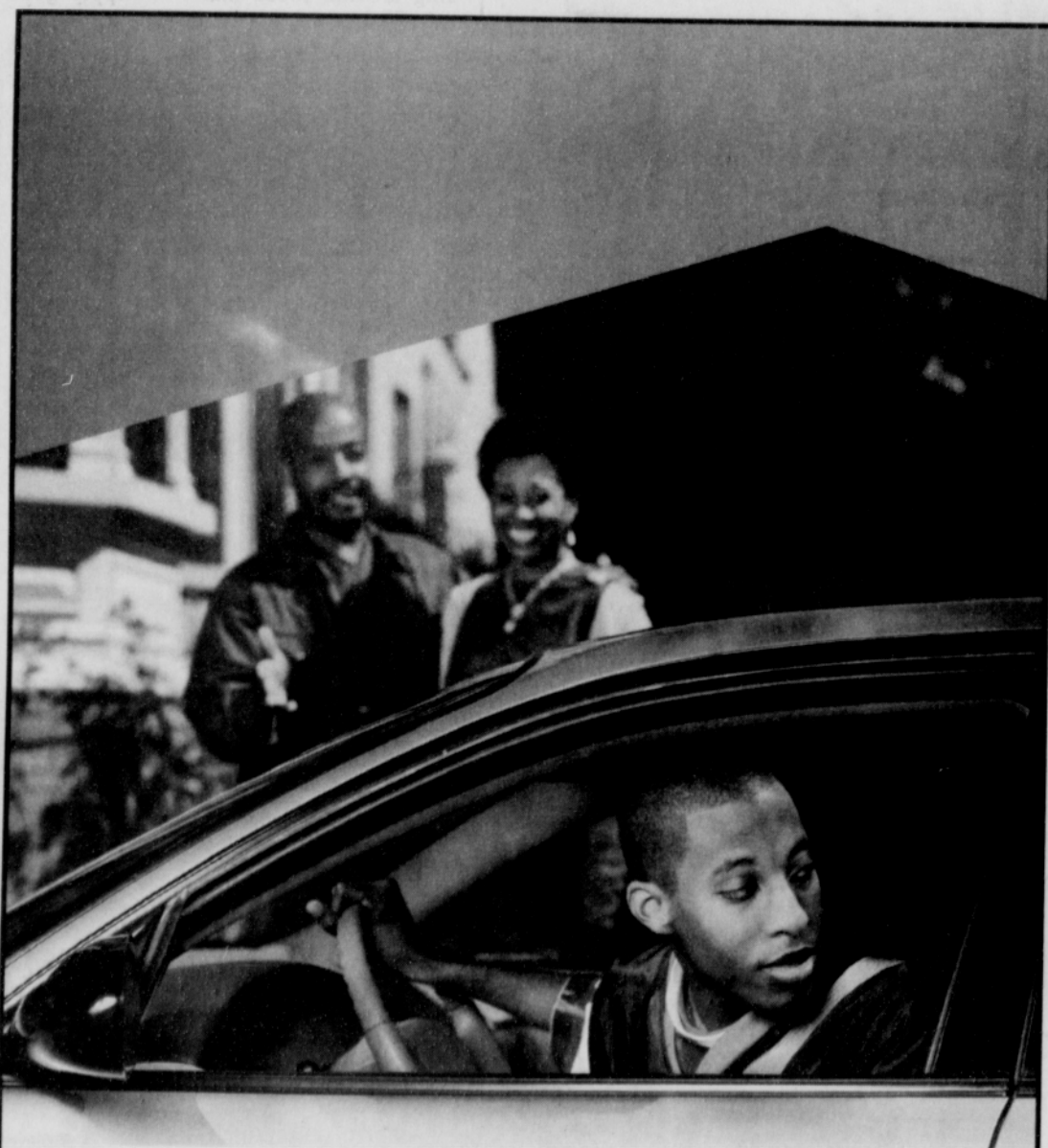
Assault weapons are designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to kill the maximum number of human beings as quickly and efficiently as possible. They are not hunting weapons. They are not necessary for protecting one's home and family.

Sounds like renewing the Assault Weapons Ban is a no-brainer, doesn't it? But even this kind of overwhelming support can't force the passage of the utterly common sense legislation that will extend the ban. Not in this country, not with the financial backing and power of the NRA.

Our political will has been manipulated, subverted and hijacked by an extraordinarily well-organized lobbying group that contributes millions of dollars to members of Congress and whose message is at best, non-representative, and at worst-deadly.

Where is the president? Where is the Congress? Where is our outrage?

*Morna Murray is co-director of Education and Youth Development at the Children's Defense Fund. Found on the web at www.childrensdefense.org*



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