

OPINION

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Smith, Dungy and Obama: Breaking barriers at the top of their fields

BY MARC H. MORIAL
 For the first time in history, not one but two blacks - the Chicago Bears' Lovie Smith and the Indianapolis Colts' Tony Dungy - are leading their teams to football's premier contest - the Super Bowl.

And another black man - Illinois Sen. Barack Obama - took the first step toward throwing his hat in the ring in the ultimate political contest - the battle for the nation's highest office.

What a delightful coincidence that these historic developments would occur in the month that celebrates the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Obama's hardly the first African American to vie for the presidency: He stands upon the broad shoulders of the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, the Rev. Al Sharpton, Carol Moseley Braun and others.

Not since Jackson in 1988 has a black been considered a serious contender for the Oval Office. But, unlike his predecessors, Obama probably stands the best chance of becoming the first African American to win his party's presidential nomination in 2008 or beyond.

In a recent Zogby poll, the Illinois Democrat led the field in New Hampshire, a historic testing ground for presidential candidates, with 23 percent of voters favoring

him compared to 19 percent for Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards. Up until 1992, the candidate who won the primary usually made his way to the White House. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have defied that trend in recent elections.

That Smith beat out his mentor Dungy by a few hours to be the first black coach to guide his team into the National Football League's

populating the coaching ranks. In 1989, Art Shell became the first African-American head coach in the NFL's modern era.

In his own way, Dungy, a former Pittsburgh Steeler who got his coaching start in 1981, played his own role in diversifying the profession by recruiting Smith to be line-backer coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1996.

The institution of the so-called

that that is changing. Their success gives an additional impetus of the continuation of that kind of change."

In a recent television interview, Bears fan Obama made a great point about these two men that speaks less to the color of their skin and more to the content of their character, to invoke Dr. King. "What makes it even better is that they're both men of humility. They're both men of God. They never trash talk. They're not yellors or screamers on the sidelines. They're a couple of class individuals," he said.

In a Letter to the Editor to his local paper, Hal Nelson, executive director of secondary education for the Sarasota County School District, wondered if divine intervention played some role in bringing two black coaches together in the Super Bowl to "illuminate the potential of the American experience" and underscore the importance of three key qualities exhibited by Dungy and Smith - competence, character and tenacity.

Smith, Dungy and Obama are positive role models for future generations to aspire to. They give our children hope that the American Dream is possible for all members of society to attain.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.



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crown-jewel game makes up for the fact that his Bears handily defeated my beloved New Orleans Saints to get there. I'll forgive Lovie this year because it is truly a great day in history when two black coaches meet at the pinnacle event of professional football. I cannot make promises for next year, though. If Lovie robs my Saints of their Super Bowl dreams next year, I'll have to take it personally.

Roughly 66 percent of National Football League players are African Americans but blacks have long faced formidable obstacles to their

"Rooney Rule" broke down barriers in the NFL's 'old-boy' network by requiring teams to consider at least one minority candidate in their hiring processes. By the start of this year's season, there was a record seven black head coaches.

"For years and years, the coaching decisions and many other decisions in professional football really followed the old way of doing things," Darrell Millner, professor of black studies at Portland State University, told the Oregonian newspaper recently. "These two black coaches today are reflection

Demand More Education Spending

Reform starts with financial commitment

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

5 years ago, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind law. This piece of legislation was intended to improve the public school system by increasing the penalties for schools that didn't meet academic standards.

If a student was struggling, he/she could receive free tutoring and, if the school continued to fall short of expectations, students are allowed to transfer schools. Schools that repeatedly fail were subject to harsh penalties, including closing.

Though controversial, the law was an attempt to provide America's public school children with a quality education. There was one huge flaw with the bill, however. Expectations for schools went up, but federal spending on public education didn't increase sufficiently.

Without adequate funding, schools couldn't implement the strategies need to improve their schools. They were doomed to fail



and, in turn, so are our children. The No Child Left Behind Act is up for renewal. With the Democrats exerting their recently won power in the Congress, now is the time for progressive thinkers to fight for an increase in education spending.

School systems have, for years, routinely used standardized tests to gauge student progress. But, with the passage of No Child Left Behind, these tests went from being an assessment to, in many cases, being the deciding factor in whether or not a student will move on to the next level.

For students in under-funded, i.e. poor, school districts, passing these tests is next to impossible. The odds are stacked against them. Many of those affected by this biased system are black.

Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., has proposed a plan that calls for states to work to develop consistent academic requirements for students; this would ensure students, regardless of where they live, would leave school

equally prepared for college or the workforce. Kennedy has also called for an expansion of social programs for poor children; social workers will be in every school that has a large population of students living below the poverty line. When students living in urban areas are able to emotionally and psychologically 'deal with' the violence and poverty that may surround them, they learn better.

If federal and local governments were to adequately fund the nation's public schools, the schools could implement the programs needed to ensure student success. Instead, the country has poured its money into the criminal justice system and defense spending, leaving our children, our future, vulnerable and unprepared for an increasingly competitive society. The public education system needs to be reformed. Real reform starts with a financial commitment from the federal government.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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State of the Union Brush Off

Letter to the Editor

BY RALPH B. EVERETT

The President's State of the Union address was an opportunity to get a glimpse of his domestic priorities for his final two years in office.

I applaud his call for a bipartisan approach to issues of pressing importance to people of color, particularly health care, education, and retirement security. But I'm concerned that the war in Iraq has diminished his administration's ability to address these issues.

For so many Americans, particularly people of color, security is about having a job to support your family, living in a safe community, having access to quality education and health care, looking forward to a decent life in retirement, and being able to cast one's vote without intimidation and have it count.

To be sure, the war in Iraq is a matter of deep concern for us all, and we must do everything we can to support our troops and ensure that they come home safely. But the obvious constraint of the domestic agenda that the President put forth makes it

clear that the Congress will have to demonstrate both leadership and innovation to ensure that issues of economic security, hope, and opportunity are addressed in a substantive way.

I was dismayed that the President made no mention of New Orleans or the broader issue of poverty in the United States. We recall his pledge, made in Jackson Square a few days after Hurricane Katrina came ashore, to "do what it takes" to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.

We remember his promise of "bold action" to address the persistent poverty that exists in the region and has its roots in racial discrimination. Given the absence of this subject in the State of the Union address, African Americans and other Gulf Coast residents who have suffered so much can be excused for wondering if their federal government has forgotten about them.

Ralph B. Everett is president and chief executive officer of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a group dedicated to improving the socioeconomic status of black Americans and other minorities.