

# OPINION

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## White Recession, Black Depression

### Our racial wealth divide

BY DEDRICK MUHAMMAD AND MICHAEL BROWN

During this Black History Month, the nation and the world anxiously watch the living black history that is taking place with the first African American president.

Yet at this very same moment the future of black America is in an exceedingly precarious condition.

The State of the Dream 2009: The Silent Depression, a recent report by the Institute for Policy Studies and United For

A Fair Economy, highlights how the current economic recession impacts the racial wealth divide in this country.

As the U. S. delves further into a serious long-term recession, African Americans are facing the challenge of coming from a seven year silent recession into a depression for disenfranchised communities that includes most African Americans.

Between 2000 and 2007, before the country was officially in a recession, black employment decreased by 2.4 percent and African Americans saw their incomes decline by 2.9 percent.

Between 2000 and 2005, the median family income of African Americans decreased and fell more steeply than that for whites or Latinos. To a large extent, African Americans never emerged from the 2001 recession. With blacks having 15 cents of every dollar of white wealth and nearly 30 percent of black households having zero to negative net worth, the decline of the overall American economy promises to submerge African Americans into a depression.

What is a depression? A depression is a long-term and severe recession. It is already clear that African Americans have been through a long-term

recession. Let us look at the severity.

The unemployment rate for African Americans is already in the double digits, 11.2 percent, and is expected to increase to 20 percent or more. It is estimated that a deep national recession, which increasingly looks like what the national economy is going through, will decrease the black middle class by a staggering 33 percent.

The nation is well on its way to its most severe recession since the Great Depression and African Americans are faced with even greater economic challenges.

As the election has shown,

Americans are looking for change we can believe in. We can find examples in Great Britain.

In 2002, Britain implemented the Child Trust Fund. This program allocates start up savings funds for families with the birth of a child. It is an attempt to assist and develop more of a wealth building society which is a change greatly needed in the United States. Britain, a wealthy country with the greatest decline in income inequality and poverty since 2000, is also in the midst of discussing a proposal called the "social mobility white paper" to make all government funds and programs focus on decreasing

inequality.

This comprehensive approach is also necessary in the U. S. As President Obama orchestrates mass government investment to help the economy recover, he must make a centerpiece of this plan, the end of economic inequality of all groups.

President Obama has the opportunity to not just be a significant piece of black history, but more importantly and with the support of Congress, make racial inequality a piece of black history.

*Dedrick Muhammad and Michael Brown work for the Institute for Policy Studies.*

## President Obama, the Ordinary Person

### Opportunity is the key to success

BY ERVIN MILTON

Like so many Americans, I am proud of the recent election and inauguration of President Barack Obama. He was certainly a formidable candidate and I believe he will prove himself to be a strong president.

Many people, however, seem to have the impression that President Obama is some kind of super man. I have heard people make such comments as, "President Obama is intelligent" or "he's so articulate."

To me, those comments



sound as if they are saying that the President is not a "normal" person of color. They certainly cannot mean that a person has to possess those qualities in order to be President. I have seen Presidents in my lifetime that did not possess those qualities. Perhaps they mean that a person of color has to possess those qualities in order to be President.

While President Obama is intelligent, well spoken and possesses many other admirable leadership qualities, he is not unique because many people of color possess similar traits.

There are many other persons

of color who are also qualified to lead this great country. The key is having access to a good education, developing the skills needed for strong leadership and

gain experiences that make them well-rounded citizens of a global world.

The accomplishment ceiling has not been raised for President

*I would like to see President Obama known, not for eloquent speeches or his above-average intelligence, but because he has tried to make this a more just world.*

using the innate gifts that God has provided.

Everyone needs the opportunity to get a good education and

Obama alone, but it has been raised for every child, regardless of that child's background or their race. I want to see children

of the world have the tools needed to succeed and make their parents, their race and the whole world proud.

Moreover, I would like to see President Obama known, not for eloquent speeches or his above-average intelligence, but because he has tried to make this a more just world.

I believe President Obama can give children of color the hope that they can do something worthwhile with their lives and live out their own dreams, just as he is living out his dreams.

All Americans have been promised the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This right is promised, not as a result of our "articulation" but

as a result of our right to dream and then pursue and live out our dreams.

I would ask you, if you have made assessments about people of color that would indicate that they are above others within their race, that you rethink your actions. If such statements or comments are made to you, I invite you to challenge the speaker to move beyond their thinking and make the evaluation that almost anyone who is given the educational opportunity and a chance to succeed can do it.

*Ervin Milton is a team leader and director for Justice Ministries in the United Church of Christ.*

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## Race Still Matters in America

### Black History Month needed now more than ever

BY MARC H. MORIAL

The perennial debate about the need for Black History Month has intensified this year as the shock and awe of America electing its first Black president still reverberates across this land.

Even before Barack Obama achieved that extraordinary breakthrough, there were some who questioned the necessity of a special month to recognize the many unknown and unsung achievements of African Americans.

With Obama as President, the logic goes, we have now achieved Dr. King's dream of a non-racial America where everyone is judged by the content of

their character, not the color of their skin. I wish it were so.

All one needs to do is look at the glaring disparities between blacks and whites in in-

come, employment, incarceration rates, educational achievement and health status to see that race still matters in America. Equal opportunity is still part of the unfinished business of American democracy.

In 1926, after centuries of blacks being excluded, not only from the mainstream of American life, but also from the textbooks in our schools, the African-American historian, Carter G. Woodson did a service to all Americans when he created

Negro History Week, which was expanded to Black History Month in 1976.

Woodson's vision was one of unity and inclusion. He said,

*Equal opportunity is still part of the unfinished business of American democracy.*



"What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race, hate and religious prejudice." That is a goal that America is still struggling to achieve.

In fact, legislatures in a number of states, including New York and New Jersey, have recently passed laws mandating or encouraging teachers to broaden their history courses to include more ethnic, racial and gender diversity.

That is why we still recognize March as Women's History Month, May as Jewish American History Month, September 15 to October 15 as Hispanic Heritage Month and February as Black History Month.

These celebrations serve a dual purpose: first to build self-esteem among historically oppressed people; and second to

remind all Americans that in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, our diversity is our greatest strength.

It is fitting that the first Presidential Proclamation issued by Barack Obama is one that recognizes National African American History Month. He writes, "The belief that...the dreams and the promise of our nation... might one day be realized by all of our citizens gave African American men and women the same sense of duty and love of country that led them to shed blood in every war we have ever fought, invest hard-earned resources in their communities with the hope of self-empowerment, and to pass the ideals of this great land down to their children and grandchildren."

Eight years after the horrific events of Sept. 11, the American spirit is again being put to the test with an economic crisis that is being compared to the Great Depression.

We need to look no further than the lives of great men and women like Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Thurgood Marshall, Whitney Young, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Barack Obama for a sense of certainty that this too, "we shall overcome."

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

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