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OPINION

President Obama's Positive Symbolism

His power reaches far beyond office

BY KENNETH J. COOPER



What has President Obama done for black folks? It's a skeptical question I've heard more than once, usually from black people with a strong activist bent. Others with a similar outlook have dismissed the "symbolism" of him being the first black president, another way of saying he hasn't done much of anything for African Americans.

This sense of disappointment in Obama springs from the high expectations that his 2008 campaign stoked, the economy's slow comeback and the politics of race, which has him so hemmed in he's wary of appearing to favor black people over other Americans.

From having covered Washington for a dozen years, I knew the expectations were unrealistic. By constitutional design, power is dispersed in the government, and change comes slowly. He is not, after all, King Barack.

The economy is recovering, not quickly enough, for sure, for people without jobs or enough work. Recent monthly reports, though, suggest that the unemployment rate may return by November to about the level it was when Obama took office in 2009.

Abundant guilt still makes some white Americans unduly fearful that Obama will punish them for the sins of their forebears by doling out the

goods to black citizens. He still can't talk about race much without a media backlash. Bill Clinton was freer to talk about and do for black people directly.

So what has Obama done for black folks, given those circumstances? A cyber-friend once raised that question to me in a Facebook chat. Since he lives in Detroit, I had a ready answer: What about saving the auto industry and the jobs of black and other factory workers in the Detroit area?

American carmakers are even starting to add jobs, though their workforces remain smaller than what they were before the Great Recession, and those jobs are not as cushy as they once were. In the 1970s, I marveled at neighbors who were getting paid for doing nothing while a General Motors plant in St. Louis was idled. That's not exactly a model of American labor productivity.

Then there's health care reform, on which Obama expended so much of his political capital during his post-election honeymoon. The law will expand access to medical insurance; African Americans are overrepresented among the uninsured. Once fully implemented—barring a reversal in the Supreme Court or Congress—health care reform will extend and save black lives.

The withdrawal of American troops from Iraq has definitely saved the lives of an unknowable

number of black soldiers, who make up about a quarter of the Army. They constitute a smaller percentage of frontline troops who were most at risk, but support personnel who transport supplies and equipment died in Iraq too.

The last item on my short list is increasing federal budgets for civil rights enforcement. The last Bush administration had been reducing funds for monitoring and compelling compliance with anti-discrimination laws. Restoring the enforcement budgets improves the employment prospects of African Americans without jobs and strengthens the job security of those who do.

None of these Obama administration actions—and black Americans certainly benefitted from others—was designed with one race of people in mind. Civil rights enforcement, for instance, also protects others, including white women and people with disabilities.

Obama has said his goal has been to help all Americans, not any one group in particular. Some black skeptics may hear echoes of the "trickle down theory." The president, however, is doing something different than, say, Ronald Reagan. Obama clearly believes in government action to stimulate the economy, rather than putting faith in the mythical infallibility of the market.

Dismissing the symbolism of the Obama presidency seems to me a strange attitude coming from any black folks, who are quick to denounce symbolism that demeans or defames an entire people. Do

Obama's black critics believe in the power of negative symbolism but not positive symbolism?

Besides being chief executive and commander in chief, a president is the head of state, a living symbol of the nation's values. Obama being a devoted father who prefers to spend time with his young daughters rather than party on the Washington social circuit has the symbolic power to perhaps increase the formation of black families—one factor behind African Americans having a higher poverty rate and accumulating less wealth.

Barack and Michelle Obama have embraced black culture—bringing entertainers to the White House and hanging visual art on its walls. Those practices add symbolic value to the creations of black artists and have the potential to enhance their market value.

As president, Obama has real powers assigned in the Constitution. But his place as the country's elected leader has symbolic power that reaches far beyond the confines of government.

Too much of U.S. history has been constructed on the subordination of African Americans, with their "place" confined to the bottom. By rising to the top, Obama has subverted that order.

President Obama has executive power and symbolic power. He has exercised both to the benefit of African Americans—indeed, all Americans.

Kenneth J. Cooper, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is a freelancer based in Boston.



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Unhealthy Perspectives on Sexual Health

Ignorance is not bliss

BY ANN L. HANSON

Yesterday, as I was preparing for work, I heard a female TV anchorperson make the statement: "The availability of contraception often times leads to unhealthy behavior and problems."

Later on in the same day, the media was awash with pictures of an all-male panel in the House of Representatives giving testimony on contraception. And, if this wasn't enough, a wealthy supporter of one of the presidential candidates made a 'joke' about how contraception was cheap in his day: "The 'gals' just put an aspirin between their knees."

Reducing issues related to women's (and men's) health to pithy sound-bites or a provocative pic-

ture does not make for a healthy perspective on sexual health.

If I had the opportunity to talk to the people involved in the aforementioned situations, here is what I might say:

Female TV anchorperson: Unhealthy sexual behavior does result in a multitude of problems. However, I contend that the availability of contraception is not the greatest cause of these problems. It's been my experience that lack of comprehensive education about sexuality, including knowledge of what constitutes a healthy relationship for people of all ages, is a larger cause. I know you have a teen-age daughter. She is bombarded by sexual images and misinformation countless times a day. Share your values with her. You want her to make choices based on education rather than ignorance, right?



All-male panel in the House of Representatives:

The overwhelming majority of women in the United States, 97 percent, use a modern method of contraception during their reproductive years. The average woman who wants two children will spend five years trying to become or being pregnant and 20 years trying to avoid pregnancy. Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended. Family planning helps to reduce the number of unintended pregnancies and abortions. How dare you assume to know what is right for me!

Aspirin-between-your-knees-man:

Don't you realize that what you said is not funny? You have hundreds of millions of dollars and can well afford to access any health care need for anyone in your family. Millions of women do not have affordable health care and can benefit

from contraceptives. It may be cheap for you, but you are privileged. And, men are equally responsible for engaging in a sexual act that may result in conception.

We must be aware that sound-bites and pictures that reflect an individual's belief may be contrary to our own values, feelings and experiences. As a multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-faith country, we need to value our common good; however, one set of religious beliefs and values should not be imposed on everyone.

Human sexuality is a complex subject. Comprehensive sexuality education is the antidote to the education that comes in sound-bites. We owe it to ourselves, our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, our world.

Ann L. Hanson is minister for sexuality education and justice for the United Church of Christ.