

# Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Obama Racial Legacy: Pride, Promise, Regret – and Deep Rift

By **SHARON COHEN and DEEPTI HAJELA**, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — He entered the White House a living symbol, breaking a color line that stood for 220 years.

Barack Obama took office, and race immediately became a focal point in a way that was unprecedented in American history. No matter his accomplishments, he

seemed destined to be remembered foremost as the first Black man to lead the world's most

Obama's racial legacy is as complicated as the president himself.

To many, his election

post-racial society. He was dubbed the Jackie Robinson of politics. African Americans, along

“He knows poverty. He should have done more. But I think if you look at ... all the factions that he had to deal with, he probably got as much as he could get done. So he didn't do enough for poverty, but I don't blame him

powerful nation.

But eight years later,

was a step toward realizing the dream of a

with Latinos and Asians, voted for him in record



In this Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009 file photo, Dixon Elementary School student Khaliyah Davis listens to the national anthem before celebrations for the inauguration of President Barack Obama in Chicago. Fredrick Cornelius Harris, director of the Center on African American Politics and Society at Columbia University says, “President Obama represents the face of the future — multicultural America. Donald Trump represents the old racial order of the black-white divide.” ... And for the next decades to come, there will be a battle between those two viewpoints of what America is.”

numbers in 2008, flush with expectations that he'd deliver on hope and change for people of color.

Some say he did, ushering in criminal justice reforms that helped minorities, protecting hundreds of thousands of immigrants from deportation, and appointing racially diverse leaders to key jobs, including the first two Black attorneys general. These supporters say he deserves more credit than he gets for bringing America back from the worst recession since the Great Depression, the killing of Osama bin Laden, and a major expansion of health care that secured insurance for millions of minorities. They celebrate his family as a sterling symbol of Black success.

But Obama also frustrated some who believe he didn't speak out quickly or forcefully enough on race or push aggressively enough for immigration reform.

And his presidency did not usher in racial harmony. Rather, both Blacks and Whites believe race relations have deteriorated, according to polls. Mounting tensions over police shootings of African Americans prompted protests in several cities and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Perhaps most strikingly, the president's successor, Donald Trump, is seen by many as the antithesis of a colorblind society, a one-time leader of the “birther” move-

ment that spread the falsehood that Obama was born in Africa. Trump's strong reliance on white voters was in sharp contrast to the multiracial coalition that gave Obama his two victories.

“President Obama represents the face of the future — multicultural America. Donald Trump represents the old racial order of the black-white divide,” says Fredrick Cornelius Harris, director of the Center on African American Politics and Society at Columbia University. “And for the next decades to come, there will be a battle between those two viewpoints of what America is.”

It took more than two centuries for America to elect a Black president.

It will take many years after he leaves office to sort out what it all meant.

“If he can do it, I can do it, too.”

—Cheryl Johnson, of Chicago's Altgeld Gardens public housing project, on Obama as a lasting symbol.

### Two iconic images of the Obama presidency:

The president patiently bends over as a 5-year-old Black boy touches his head, after the child asked Obama if they had the same kind of hair.

A 106-year-old Black woman joyfully dances with the president and first lady, beaming as she declares: “I am so happy. A Black president. Yay!”

Born a century apart, these two visitors to the White House convey the potent symbolism of Obama's presidency, a luster that hasn't dimmed. For many Black Americans, it's not so much what policies Obama proposed but his mere presence in the Oval Office that has mattered most.

“You can't put a price tag on that,” says Loretta Augustine-Herron, a former community activist who worked with Obama in Chicago's Altgeld Gardens in the 1980s. “If he never did anything else for African-Americans, just the fact that he occupies the White House, it lets us see ourselves in a different light. ... We see a chance for us to fit into the United States soci-

See OBAMA on page 10



## WHEN WE COME TOGETHER, DREAMS COME TRUE

Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream burns brightly in hundreds of Kaiser Permanente employees. In January, we honor his legacy by volunteering to make our communities healthier.

Over four days, we'll lend a hand at book banks and food banks. We'll help refurbish a homeless shelter and provide care to low-income, uninsured adults. And we'll pause to reflect on Dr. King's message of service, equality, and community.

“Everyone has the power for greatness, not for fame but greatness, because greatness is determined by service.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

#GiveServeThrive



All plans offered and underwritten by Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Northwest. 500 NE Multnomah St., Suite 100, Portland, OR 97232. ©2016 Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Northwest