

# FOREWORD

It was nearly 6 years ago to this day that America elected Barack Hussein Obama as its 44th President, thereby making him the first African-American to hold the nation's highest position as Commander-in-Chief. Despite the fact it has been over 2,100 days since "Election Day 2008," I can still vividly recall my very emotional reaction to announcement of the final results.

It would've been November 4, 2008. I lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, at the time. And, with advice from family and loved ones, I decided to await the election results in the privacy *and safety* (emphasis added) of my town-home on the west side of the city rather than join thousands of others who were "free" to watch the election results on large jumbotrons and flat-screen televisions at local bars "out east," restaurants "up North," World's Fair park downtown, or other locations throughout the city. Their advice was wise and informed as it acknowledged both the modern-day salience of my social identity – as a young Black male – and the historical significance of my geographical placement – as a resident of the very same southern state in which Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Taken together, it was clear to "the village who loved me" that I could be placed in harm's way once the news broke that America might have elected its first Black president. And despite my college degrees and natural propensity to resist constructed boundaries or imposed limits, I too felt they were on to something ... that history would be made that night and I would "benefit" from being alone at home away from the crowd.

Shortly after 11:00pm, the first news station declared "Barack Obama has won the national election, making him the 44th president of the United States of America." Thinking it a bit too early for a winner to be identified, I flipped channels looking for additional evidence from other newsworthy sources to confirm what I heard from the "early alert" station, a form of data triangulation that I deploy when presented with inconsistent evidence or things I simply don't believe. No other station declared Obama victory so I dismissed the news as what I *wanted* to hear, not what they really had said. With remote in hand, ready to turn back to the previous station to interpret what I had heard, the "breaking news" banner broke across the

top of the screen: “Change has come to America: Barack Obama Elected 44th President.” Now every station was in celebration – a global party of sorts – indeed, Barack Obama had won the election.

Moved to paralysis by the news, I sat there mannequin-like in my ottoman sleeper and a million thoughts rushed through my mind: was this real? Was I dreaming? Had Obama won the election? And could this country move beyond its racist past to elect a qualified African-American man as Commander-in-Chief? Overwhelmed with questions and unparalleled excitement, I stared at the screen as a well of tears broke through the levies in my eyes ... and I cried. I was stunned and sat motionless, without words for nearly 30 minutes. Texts, tweets, and phone calls were pouring in from all over the world: “Obama won,” “Yes we can,” and my favorite from a republican friend, “Congrats, Terrell, I know this means a lot to you.” Still no text, tweet, or call could push me from paralyzed disbelief to active acceptance. I was in shock as President-Elect Obama spoke to the world just after midnight. His words were erringly prophetic and personal: “If there is anyone out there who doubts that America is a place where anything is possible [I nodded in full agreement ‘guilty’], who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time [my nods became more vigorous], who still questions the power of democracy, tonight is your answer ... it’s been a long time coming, but tonight ... change has come to America.” Indeed, it had.

The next day brought not only acceptance of the news but also excited reflection on what this would mean for the country. I wondered what this new “era” under President Obama’s leadership would usher in for the great experiment of democracy.

As a race scholar, I anticipated that some would place expectations on Obama, who ran the race as a technocratic change agent (not a born-again 1960s civil rights activist), to be our “Great Hope,” a panacea to our social ills, especially “all things raced.” A fallacious assumption, no matter the lens. Do raced people necessarily know the solution to race problems? No more than women necessarily know the solution to all female problems or children know the solution to child poverty! Though they often masquerade around as truths and respect for the agency of others, essentialist notions of this kind often assume that group membership somehow endows one with unique perspectives and consequently more effective solutions to problems which is hardly ever the case. And though optimistic about “the change” that had come to America, I knew better than to expect a single election – or even two terms of an administration – to solve the intractable problem of race and racism in this country.

As an education scholar, I wondered how the Obama administration would address some of the most serious education problems of our time, ranging from identity-based achievement disparities in K-12 education to erosion of public confidence in the social contract, or the declining support of public universities to the growing need for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degrees. I found myself optimistic about what was to come in the education sector, especially given Obama's espoused commitments to education and its role in ensuring homeland security, increasing technological innovations, providing global economic stability, and shoring up our efforts in other sectors of public life.

Now here, 6 years after that historic "Election Day," I find myself interrogating my own erroneous assumptions that lead to such optimism. Would a non-education person (i.e., a Harvard-trained lawyer) necessarily know effective solutions to education problems? Or perhaps even more appropriate, would someone outside of education necessarily know what's needed when making presidential appointments, executive orders, or decisions? Perhaps. This would be especially true if and when one has a keen understanding of the education problem in America. But, admittedly, I like so many others, underestimate the seriousness of the education problems and what it will take to fix them.

First, a quick recap of sorts. Over the last few years, the Obama administration has taken several steps to attempt to address the "education problem" in America. Obama's education policies and reform efforts include "Race to the Top," "Education for all," America Competes, gainful employment guidelines, and several college degree completion campaigns, to name a few. *Race to the Top*, for instance, placed a premium on standardized test scores as a way of determining student, teacher, and school success. It has several good intentions. *Race to the Top* placed much-needed attention on individual teacher effectiveness and periodic assessment of student performance in core subjects. It also fueled state versus state competition that, in a few cases, led to creative statewide coordinated efforts and innovative data systems. Still there were a number of not-so-good consequences that might be considered "unexpected" by those outside education – for instance, federal grants that spur cross-state competition inhibit interstate collaboration. And as much as *Race to the Top* is seen as part of a move toward value-added measures of accountability, it also has been criticized hotly for penalizing schools and teachers for students' performance without taking into account appropriate controls or confounding factors such as ability, poverty, to name a few (see chapters in this volume).

And, after so many efforts, a single assessment of the condition of education in the United States is appropriate – paraphrasing Charles Dickens’ infamous line from the great American novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, I believe these are the best of times, and the worst of times educationally speaking as we draw near to the close of “The Obama Administration” and its education efforts. Best of times because of the many innovative reform efforts (e.g., HBCU Initiative, gainful employment, degree completion campaigns) that have been mounted that hold promise for producing equitable and meaningful educational outcomes. Worst of times in terms of our ability to respond nimbly to opportunities and new challenges, the legal environment for pursuing inclusive excellence in education, and the funds available to support our creative capacities.

What’s offered here in this volume is a balanced treatment of this subject with a focus on the entire educational enterprise. I commend Dr. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher for undertaking such an ambitious assignment to edit a high-quality volume that critically examines what has happened in the country over the last eight years in terms of educational reform. Bringing together 32 authors from over 18 colleges and universities and 3 state departments and organizations is no easy chore but, as I like to say, hard work is no excuse for retreat. Dr. Zamani-Gallaher and her colleagues have done the hard work of reviewing an expansive literature base, analyzing national-, state-, and local data for various sectors of education, and critically examining reform efforts with an eye on protecting the interests of students, families, and those most in need. This is a must-read for anyone interested in education reform, connections between politics and education, and scholars who want to know where we’ve been, what’s happened, and what’s possible for the future.

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