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## South Carolina: Inside the 'Black Primary'

by BOB MOSER

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*Columbia*

You couldn't blame Barack Obama for feeling all biblical on that second Sunday in December. There he was, emerging triumphantly from the same tunnel where the Gamecocks football team spills out on Saturdays, under the warm blue sky of an afternoon that felt miraculously like spring, amid the foot-stomps and hollered blessings of the biggest campaign crowd of the year, with Oprah Herself hallooing above the din, "Bar-ack O-bam-a! Bar-ack O-bam-a!" If the skies had suddenly cracked open above Williams-Brice Stadium and God's voice boomed down "Vote for Barack" while a heavenly choir belted out "Oh Happy Day," it would have seemed like just another part of the show. Right here in Obama's must-win early primary state, where a new poll was showing him in a statistical dead heat with Hillary Clinton. Right here with the very people--mostly African-Americans and mostly women--who have given the Man from Audacity the roughest going-over of his political life. And still are.

"I am so grateful to be here today," Obama beamed, soaking up the adulation and sliding into dialect. "Givin' all praise and honor to Gahd. Look at the day that the Lord has made. I would be blessed even if I was in Chicago, but I don't mind being in seventy-degree weather." As the 29,000 cheered, he cut in, chuckling his rich chuckle: "Michelle said, 'Praise the Lawd!' It's been *coold* up in Chicago!"

For most of 2007 Obama's been feeling a chill down here, too. With African-Americans likely to make up a majority of primary voters on the Democratic side, South Carolina's contest is as close to a "black primary" as we're going to get in 2008--the only time in the entire campaign, almost certainly, when Democrats will be fighting all-out for African-American votes. Clinton's support among African-Americans, largely thanks to her husband's popularity, proved surprisingly strong at first, as did her smooth, state-of-the-art machine politics; as late as September, a CNN poll gave her a stunning 57 percent of

the black vote here, to Obama's paltry 33. That would deal a death blow to Obama's chances, not only here but in the February 5 primaries, especially in Alabama and Georgia, where large numbers of black voters are weighing their choices--and watching South Carolina.

But while the contest here has been widely portrayed as a Clinton-Obama battle for black votes--especially those of black women reportedly torn between their enthusiasm for electing a sister versus a brother--the real focus, from the get-go, has been relentlessly on Obama. In a state where the Rev. Jesse Jackson's wildly successful 1988 uprising still stands as a high-water mark for black political aspirations, Obama's cool style and post-civil-rights rhetoric went over like a lead balloon in the early months of the campaign. The trouble was epitomized by a speech he gave to the legislative black caucus in April, where he offered his joking opinion that "a good economic development plan for our community would be if we make sure folks weren't throwing garbage out of their cars." To folks like Kevin Alexander Gray, who ran Jackson's campaign here, this smacked not of fresh thinking but of "the oldest racial stereotypes. Translation: black people are dirty and lazy." Obama's middle-of-the-aisle message and delivery kept reinforcing black South Carolinians' doubts about whether he was sufficiently one of them. "I've heard people say, and I've probably said it myself, 'He's a white boy,'" says Gray. "Or he's what some working-class black people perceive as a middle-class Negro. Anyway, let's face it: you don't get a revolution from Harvard."

The tide began to turn late last summer, when Obama and his surrogates were recasting his image from that of brainy harbinger of a new "colorblind" politics to latter-day extension of the civil rights movement. The wonk became a kind of messiah lite, mixing down-home, preacherly populism into his message and proclaiming, "I'm running because of what Dr. King calls 'the fierce urgency of now.'" Black voters' qualms were recast, too, as sad examples of what Michelle Obama, speaking in Anderson in September, called "that veil of impossibility that keeps us down and keeps our children down...the bitter legacy of racism and discrimination and oppression in this country." The only proper response being "to dig deep in our souls, confront our own self-doubt and recognize that our destiny is in our hands."

Or, more to the point, in the hands of Brother Barack. "You know," Oprah said as she introduced him in Columbia, "Dr. King dreamed the dream. But we don't have to just dream the dream anymore. We get to vote that dream into reality."

Many of the folks who came out to cheer their man had clearly gotten the message. "I believe anything is possible," said Obama volunteer Josie Barton. "If you say that it's not going to happen, and don't do anything about it, then nothing will change. You have to step up to the plate. Words without works is dead." But below the glinty facade of Obama's blessed day, the doubts had hardly been shaken off. "I've heard a lot of black people saying they don't want to vote for Barack," Barton's daughter Michelle told me, "because they don't believe it would make a difference. They feel that even if a lot of white people voted for him, somebody in a higher-up position would still find a way for

him not to win." Her sister and a friend, both fellow Obama volunteers, nodded their heads, "Yeah. Yeah."

But will white people vote for him in the first place? I asked. "No," they all answered emphatically.

The South Carolina campaign has opened a unique window into the fractured state of black politics in twenty-first-century America--a gumbo of bleak cynicism, wary pragmatism, frustrated progressive aspirations and messianic longings. It has been, for black voters and candidates alike, one long, extended soul search. And it ain't over yet.

It was exactly what the Clinton campaign wanted to see: the front page of the Spartanburg *Herald-Journal* featuring an oversized photo of a beaming Hillary, flanked by more than sixty applauding African-Americans in their Sunday best, under the headline Black Pastors Stand Behind Clinton. On Hillary's left, smiling, stood one of the most familiar figures in the local religious community, the Rev. J.W. Sanders, longtime pastor of two churches. Introducing the senator from New York, Sanders had called her "the right choice," a "lady who has proven herself to do exactly what should be done."

Coming just a week and a half before the Oprah-Obama rally, it was a vivid demonstration that while Clinton's support among black voters has dramatically fallen--a December Rasmussen poll gave Obama 51 percent and Clinton 27 percent--it hasn't exactly disappeared. But the photo-op did not tell the story. For all of Clinton's elaborately staged symbolism, there was plenty of messy soul-searching furiously churning away. Even in the Reverend Sanders. After Hillary gave her typically crisp, less-than-poetic spiel to the Spartanburg crowd ("I want to get us back to setting goals for America"), I asked the pastor why he'd gone with her. "We are looking for proven leadership," he said, echoing the vague line I heard from dozens of Clinton supporters in South Carolina. "We are not looking at race or gender. We are looking to do things that would help America, period."

But doesn't it give you qualms, I asked, to bypass Obama? Sanders's preacherly grin dissipated. "In a sense, it does. I'll be very candid with you: it does. Yes, it does have a tinge of conscience on our part in regards to that. But," he added, getting back on message, "we've been trying to move beyond that and support the person because of who or what they've been standing for. We don't want to be pigeonholed or put in a box."

Even less comfortable was State Representative Harold Mitchell, an early Obama supporter who'd defected to Clinton and helped organize the event. "I was originally caught up in the hoopla" over Obama, Mitchell explained. "I tuned her out because here was somebody exciting." But then, around the time Clinton invited him to testify at the first-ever Senate hearing on environmental justice, Mitchell began to believe it was more important to find someone who "can actually get it done. She is the candidate we know we can win the general election with."

Because a black man can't win? "I--*what?*" Mitchell stammered. "Let's not even talk about the fact that he's an articulate, sharp African-American. Hey, one day. But right now, we don't have time for experimentation."

From the beginning, Clinton has been the fall-back candidate for African-Americans here. She has done all the expected things to woo black voters: held forth in black churches and colleges, called for removing the Confederate flag from the Statehouse, lined up endorsements from preachers and politicians, and deployed her wildly popular husband to the state with increasing urgency. She's talked about the Bible (favorite book: James), and she's winced over the "Corridor of Shame," a particularly desperate and heavily black stretch of I-95 that was the subject of a recent documentary by the same name. It hasn't hurt that Clinton's campaign started early with a "phenomenal, highly professional organization" that Obama's more free-flowing, grassroots campaign was hard-pressed to match, said Scott Huffmon, a political scientist at Rock Hill's Winthrop University. But mostly, Huffmon said, "She's attracted voters worried about Obama's viability, or his politics, or his 'blackness.' They love Bill, and that's enough. It's not about her."

That became crystal clear in the spring, when prominent State Senator Robert Ford explained why he'd opted for Clinton over Obama. "Every Democrat running on that ticket next year would lose because he's black and he's on top of the ticket," Ford told the AP. "We'd lose the House and the Senate and the governors and everything."

Most folks prefer to put it a little less bluntly. At the Spartanburg rally I ask Phyllis Carter, who teaches English at a local two-year college, why she's standing in line to shake Clinton's hand. "I think she's the brightest person, doing what she's doing, and she's done it a long time," Carter said. "She's the best. I think about Obama all the time. But he may not have the experience to do what she can do. The fact that she's a woman--she's special." What about the argument that a woman can't win? "Ah, we're over all that stupid stuff," Carter said.

But what about the other "stupid stuff," I asked. Is it easier for a woman to win than an African-American? Carter paused, pursing her lips. "Maybe." She paused again. "Look at how long we've been here: 1554. Now, we didn't come on boats because we decided we wanted to come and be a part of you. We came on a boat tied left leg to right leg. The accomplishments that we've done since then are pretty amazing when you think about it. We're not going away. We're going to be voted for at some point in the game. One of these days we'll have a President."

Just not this day.

Across town in Obama's cramped and bustling Spartanburg office--a converted attic upstairs from the local Democratic Party headquarters--it was a whole 'nother story. "Pull up a chair, honey," said Carolyn Reed-Smith, an elementary teacher working the phones at a folding table. "I had been really drawn to Hillary at first," she explained. "Because I voted for her husband. I thought, 'Wow! Now we'll have him and her.'" But then in June

Obama came to Reed-Smith's church, Mount Moriah Baptist, and made a convert. "He had such a calming presence. It's sort of biblical, but I believe in men having dominion and having some sort of mystical power that God gave them," she said. "I believe Barack has acquired that."

To Reed-Smith, the questions about Obama's "blackness" actually point up one of his most important assets. "I believe that he has the best of two cultures within him. He has had such loving nurturing from our African culture, and then I think from the Caucasian culture he has the wit and intellect that's so sharp. I just think that both of those things together, it's the best of both worlds that he has within him. I just felt like I would rather work to see that he gets the presidency."

And work she does--every spare moment. Reed-Smith is one of some 15,000 true believers statewide fueling Obama's unconventional volunteer-driven campaign. While Obama has snagged his share of endorsements and sweet-talked his share of preachers--and while he's matched Clinton's top-level staffing with forty paid professionals--the focus has been on person-to-person, ground-level contact between volunteers and their neighbors. That's made it easier for Obama's campaign to calibrate its appeals to the complicated mix of black politics. "The mistake Democrats always make," says Huffmon, "is seeing blacks here as monolithic and as more liberal than they are. Obama's campaign hasn't organized around the stereotypes." Along with the usual church network, the campaign has put together a Main Street network of more than 900 black barber shops and beauty salons, among other innovations. "There's not been retail politics in the past here, at least not like Iowa or New Hampshire," says Amaya Smith, Obama's South Carolina press secretary. "People still get information from their churches, but here they're getting it directly from folks like this."

Folks like Sheila Davis. At a tiny desk by the window, the Naval Reserve officer is meticulously inking posters advertising The 'O' Factor: Obama & Oprah.

"The very first time I heard him speak," Davis says, "he said something to the effect of, 'We don't have the right to be tired.' That really hit home with me. That touched my heart. We really *don't* have the right to be tired. Because our forefathers, our foreparents, worked so hard to get us where we are now. I don't care what we have going on in our lives, we still have to make time for what's important. And this is important." It's not only the first campaign she's worked on, Davis says. "It's the first campaign I have ever had a desire to work on." While she emphasizes that she "did a great deal of research" into Obama's issues, Davis also sees something broader at stake.

"Coming from a military family, I'm used to working with all kinds of people to accomplish one mission. He wants to unite everybody. That's the type of work I'm used to doing. Working with *all* people, to fulfill a mission. So we share a lot of the same ideas--his are just on a larger scale than mine!"

She laughs, then sighs. "I just admire him. I admire him. Can I say that enough?"

At the big rally in Columbia, Oprah notched up her Obama-as-savior rhetoric by referencing a scene in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. "I remember Miss Pittman, her body all worn and withered and bent over. As she would approach the children, she would say to each one, 'Are you the one? Are you the one?'" Oprah didn't mention that Miss Pittman was looking for a black messiah. She didn't have to. "I watched that movie many years ago, but I do believe today I have the answer to Miss Pittman's question. It's a question that the entire nation is asking. Is he the one?" Tentative cheers. "Is he the one?" Big cheers. "South Carolina," Oprah proclaimed, "I do believe he's the one."

When Efia Nwangaza heard that, she could only wonder: "He's the one for who, and what?" Nwangaza, a longtime activist and onetime Green Party US Senate candidate, is among the many black (and white) progressives left cold by the symbolic standoff between Clinton and Obama. But it didn't stop her from driving from Greenville to witness the Sunday spectacle. "I had mixed feelings," she told me afterward. "I was really moved by it. By the yearning of the people who were there to have someone representing them and their interests. I understand the yearning, in that I am also tired. Having been a civil rights-cum-human rights activist all my life, having had movement parents, I would be so relieved to know that there is a fruitful end to those efforts, and that some candidate embodied it. But I don't think that's what's happening with Barack Obama."

Or Hillary Clinton. "When I look at what both Obama and Clinton say, and what they do, they are not it. They are both chameleons. They are both opportunistic. They both come from the overcompensatory 'being first' frame of reference. Which means that they will be more white male than any white male, including George W. Bush, would ever be. My feeling is that people across the board are being sold a bill of goods."

Kevin Alexander Gray, who's working on a book called *The Decline of American Politics, From Malcolm X to Barack Obama*, seconded the point. "People say they're voting for Obama because they want a change. A change to what? This is people thinking that the cosmetic is more important than the structural. Obama is a candidate who happens to be black. That's his prerogative, and it's fine. But it's not what we need. Obama's campaign is not a movement. It is someone running for office."

Gray fears that Obama might be just the ticket for self-proclaimed colorblind white people to prove their mettle. "To the extent that the Democratic Party is using Obama to cancel its debt to the African-American community, I am concerned," he said. "I'm thinking about calling my next column 'Niggers, Nooses and Obama.' There is this mentality of, 'Well, I'd never use the word nigger, and I am outraged by nooses, and I like Obama.' So everything's OK with race now."

Even so, Gray can't ignore one ticklish fact: "The brother *is* black." And while he prefers Kucinich's liberalism and Edwards's populism, Gray admitted that he just might "end up being guilted into voting for the brother." He frowned, debating out loud. "But a movement has to be *about* something. I have my problems with Reverend Jackson, but when you look at the construction of that campaign, the way the elements came together-

-that was a movement. Or the start of one. Because we organized around a progressive platform that was coherent and consistent."

The Jackson campaign was the last time Marjorie Hammock, a longtime social worker who does expert defense testimony in death-penalty cases, allowed herself to get swept up in politics. Hammock's first campaign was Adlai Stevenson, she said, laughing. Originally from Brooklyn, she worked in the inner circle of Shirley Chisholm's pathbreaking 1972 run. And then she moved to South Carolina--"a whole new planet," where the Jackson campaign came just in time. "That was exciting," she said, and it "paved the way for a number of people to get active in politics. By the same token, though, another kind of apathy developed as a response to the fact that Jackson didn't win. That maybe if we had someone who was that powerful, with that much organization, and he didn't win, it was hopeless. A kind of depression set in. And what we didn't do was say, 'Where do we go from here? What do we do now?'"

Like many progressives, Hammock is leaning toward Edwards--one reason he's jumped into a competitive position in recent polls after lagging far behind the front-runners for most of 2007. But just the night before, she'd gone to an Obama focus group to see what was what. "I must say, there really are a number of African-Americans here who are terribly excited about Obama," she said. "Because it looks like the closest you're ever going to get.

"He's viable, in many kinds of ways. He's got some good positions on things that are important. He's not a black candidate. He truly is a candidate of the people, and that's good." What makes Obama not a black candidate? "I think his life," said Hammock. "I mean, I think he's interested in black people, no question about it. He demonstrated that in terms of his work in Chicago. But for me, in part, and this may sound petty, but who do you cite when you talk about things? Frederick Douglass? Du Bois? Ida B. Wells? No. We hear from Kennedy a lot. Now, I can't blame Obama for that. What were his references growing up? But I'm just identifying what I think I see. And it ain't bad. It's just not what I would call a black candidate."

But she doesn't pooh-pooh Obama's claim that, as the Democratic nominee, he'd bring out 30 percent more black voters and put deep red Dixie states like Mississippi, and possibly South Carolina, into play. "I can see that," she says. "We can sometimes get real loyal. But there are a number of people who don't want him to win, because they're scared that he'll be dead the very next day. I have heard that so much! He can't win, but even if he does, he'll never be President. Not in these United States. I hear that more than anything else. That's the fatalism we feel about this place, clearly. I mean South Carolina, of course, *and* America."