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The Obamas and Washington D.C. Statehood

By Jean Damu

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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News item: In a press release dated Feb. 2, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced the theme of this year's African American History Month as "The Quest for Black Citizenship in the Americas."

In a recent Washington Post column that focuses on local issues it was noted that on the Sunday preceding the inauguration, the Obama family, in their search for a new family church, attended services at the 19th St. Baptist Church; the same church of which the mayor Washington, D.C. Adrian Fenty, is a member.

Furthermore, the apparently unprecedented outpouring of U.S. public emotion at the swearing-in ceremonies of President Barack Obama has inspired an uncountable number of responses to the event that one syndicated columnist noted exceeded the public display of emotion at the conclusion of World War II.

How to account for this? Clearly the combination of the departure of the Bush regime and the restoration of hope signaled by the arrival of the first African American president is part of the foundation for the events that transpired during Inauguration Week. It was, among other things, a clear repudiation of past racisms.

Perhaps it was more than that.

In his inaugural address Obama briefly touched on the issue of race, an issue he only directly addressed once during his campaign. He said to the attending multitudes that he was becoming the nation's first black president in a city where only a few short decades previously his father wouldn't have been served at a Washington, D.C. restaurant.

True enough but perhaps the issue is far greater than Obama acknowledged. Is it possible Obama's ascendancy represented, in the deep recesses of public sub-consciousness not just the repudiation of racism but also the repudiation of the entire dark side of America's founding and her founders?

If that is true, and without attempting to predict what will be the final sum of Obama's presidency, what is the connection between the Obama family's search for a black church and the nation's emotional release?

Simply everything that has come before-dating all the way back to the founding of Washington, D.C., the only national capital in the world that explicitly and specifically was created to accommodate slavery.

What passes for popular history informs us that Washington, D.C. was created in the wake of a 1783 insurrection of Revolutionary War veterans. They were angry they had not been paid promised back pay. The vets stormed Congress that was then located in Philadelphia. When the Pennsylvania governor refused to mobilize the state militia because he supported the demands of the insurrectionists, members of Congress were forced to flee across the Delaware River and take refuge in Princeton N.J.

It is this event we are led to believe that led directly to the establishment of the new capital.

Though all the above events are true the fact of the matter is the discussion of building a new capital preceded the veterans' militant demonstration by a significant period of time. And that discussion had nothing to do with the physical safety of Congress but rather the protection of southern congressmen's property-slaves.

The first documented discussion of building a new capital occurred in a New York City restaurant during a dinner table discussion between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Jefferson was complaining to the younger Madison that every time he traveled to Philadelphia to attend sessions of Congress, some of his slaves who regularly traveled with him, would attempt to escape, as slavery was illegal in Philadelphia. The more we learn about Jefferson the more disagreeable he appears.

What was particularly galling to Jefferson at that moment was that he had recently spent a small fortune sending one of his slaves to France to learn the art of French cuisine. Now the ungrateful fellow was threatening to run away unless he, Jefferson, acceded to several "unreasonable" demands. It is not recorded what these demands were.

It was then that Madison suggested creating a new capital, one that would geographically be part of the south but in close proximity to the north-a capitol that would allow southerners to safely bring their human property. It was unseemly, for instance, said Madison, for president Washington to be in violation of Pennsylvania law by having his slaves attend him in Philadelphia.

The northern Congress members went for the deal when southerners agreed to contribute to northern states Revolutionary War debt payments; debts southern states had already eliminated.

The argument that the war veterans rebellion underlined the need for a new capitol was simply a ruse-designed to salve the feelings of all those who even then believed slavery was wrong.

Since the founding of Washington, D.C. in 1790 until 1971, when residents were allowed to elect a local governing structure, the city was run as a ward of Congress, an institution dominated by southern legislators until recent times. To this day Washington, with a black population in excess of 56% enjoys only an "observer" status within the federal government. Residents of Washington were not allowed to vote in presidential elections until 1961.

All of this brings us back to the 19th St. Baptist Church.

Even should the Obamas decide to join a church other than 19th St. Baptist Church, you can believe whatever church they decide upon, it will be a black oriented church and its membership will include influential and powerful members of Washington's black communities.

This is the first time in the nation's history when African Americans with political power, particularly local politicians, will have some formal and informal access to the chief executive and the first lady. How should that access be utilized? Here is a suggestion that relates to African American History Month and president Obama's recent declaration that this year's observances should be dedicated to "The Quest for Black Citizenship in the Americas."

President Obama can begin the quest for black citizenship just outside the front door of the White House.

The issue of statehood for Washington, D.C. has been around a long time. It is not necessarily a race specific issue even though it is often framed as such and African Americans have been in the lead formulating the issue. But without a doubt making Washington D.C. a state would go a long way toward extending democracy and at the same time make some recompense for past discriminations; and it directly addresses the issue of black citizenship.

Perhaps in terms of importance D.C. statehood does not rank very high on most peoples lists of burning issues, especially for those who find it difficult to chew gum and walk at the same time.

But it is an important issue nonetheless and important voices should promote it at this unique historical juncture because an African American first family will feel the importance of the issue in a way that other first families more than likely could not.

It remains to be seen, however, if the local politicians in Washington who in fact develop some access to the Obamas are willing and able to frame the issue in a way that on one hand addresses our history of slavery while at the same time arguing for a more complete extension of democracy to include all of Washington, D.C.'s residents.


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Jean Damu is the Acting Western Coordinator for [N'COBRA](#), the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America and he chairs the California Coalition for H.R. 40, Congressman John Conyers' African-American Reparations Study Bill. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Damu.

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