

Book Review

Gwen Ifill

Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama

New York: Doubleday, 2009

For those who are attentive to political life, this has surely been the year of Barack Obama. Even though the subtitle of journalist Gwen Ifill's new book suggests it is about Obama, it isn't just about Obama. Except, of course, that these days everything is about Obama.

Let me explain.

Ms. Ifill's deeper narrative concerns an apparent generational change in US politics that is most obviously symbolized by the presidential election of Barack H. Obama. She tries, however, to go beyond this single, unique story as if to say that, even in Obama's absence, something dramatic is happening, perhaps what political scientists call a "realignment."

In *Breakthrough*, the author presents a series of extended vignettes. She writes at some length about Barack Obama, but she gives considerable attention to a new cadre of Black leaders including Newark NJ mayor Cory Booker, Alabama congressional representative Artur Davis and Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick. Others come in for honourable mention, including San Francisco district attorney Kamala Harris, Columbus OH mayor Michael Coleman and South Carolina state representative Bakari Sellers. She also opines on matters of race and gender, identity politics and the demographics of the new Black elite.

They are generally middle class, urban, well-educated and easily at home in multi-racial settings. They are not very much like Martin Luther King, much less Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael, and much, much less like Huey Newton and H. Rap Brown. They have parted ways with Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. They are "post-racial" and "post-ideological." No one could imagine Barack Obama raising his fist in a "black power salute."

President Obama's lengthy campaign is illustrative. It's not that he sought to deny his origins. He just did not bring them up, unless necessary and then only briefly. On the campaign trail, he rarely addressed exclusively Black audiences. His campaign video focused on his white Kansas heritage, not upon his African father. He remained relentlessly calm, measured, articulate and displayed no sign of anger and resentment about his treatment as a Black man; instead, he spoke "inspirationally" about his being the embodiment of the American Dream. Even as he accepted his nomination as the Democratic candidate for the presidency, he thanked only an unnamed Atlanta preacher whose civil rights work had made Obama's romance with America (and much of the larger world) possible. The Rev. Martin Luther King went unnamed.

Some people are distressed by this cultivated persona. Some spoke of his extraordinary eloquence, but had trouble with what he actually said — beyond, of course, the slogan, “Yes, we can!” Some chant the mantra “Change!” without taking care to question: Change for what? Change to what?

Obama was helped a great deal by the incompetence of his opponents and the vile slanders of much of the mainstream and the “informal” media. “He is a Muslim!” “He is a socialist!” If such shouts had any effect, it was probably only to solidify his support. However, even those who were inclined to vote for him had reservations. These included a distrust of the candidate’s sincerity in supporting “progressive” reforms. Obama is nothing if not a realist and a pragmatist, and his commitment to building a broad coalition seemed eerily similar to the “brokerage politics” of an earlier era. Nothing he has done in the transition or in office has — including empowering a decisively hawkish group in foreign and military positions — off-set that perception.

As well, there was a certain reticence among Blacks and especially those who had been involved in the civil rights movement as much as fifty years ago. Jesse Jackson’s ill-tempered comments about wishing to remove Obama’s personal parts is a case in point; but, in the end, Jackson was in the crowd in Denver with tears streaming down his cheeks.

The outstanding problem for Obama is also a major problem for Ifill. The fact is not that Blacks and other visible minorities failed to vote for Obama, but rather that white, working class males voted with their skin colour and not with their economic self-interest, no matter how much Obama’s actual commitment to class issues may be.

If the Republican Party had not been doomed by the previous Bush administration and by its 2008 candidates’ electoral misfirings and simple foolishness, the race (so to speak) would likely have been much closer and talk of post-racial, post-partisan politics would consequently have had less credibility.

Ifill does, of course, recognize that “race still matters, as do class and gender.” It would also be rather churlish to speak too pessimistically about the politics of hope (that might be better called the politics of relief, in light of the last eight years, to say nothing of the enormous problems that President Obama has inherited from his predecessor.

As for Ifill’s work, there are some criticisms that do seem fair. As Chuck Leddy wrote in the *Boston Globe*, her book “reads like a series of magazine articles.” Her portraits of emerging Black politicians are sometimes engaging, but there is little that could be called analysis to ground either her sketches of the new leaders or their place in the future of American life. This is partly to be excused, for Ms. Ifill is not a professional political scientist. She is a journalist and cobbling together pieces that are superficially interesting but shallow nonetheless is pretty much what journalists do. They write for a mass audience and their appeal ought not to be overly sophisticated or unfathomably deep. A little more thought, however, would not have spoiled the project and its possibilities for high sales figures.

One thing should not be criticized, however, and that is Ms. Ifill's political and professional integrity. Shortly before she appeared as the moderator of the "debate" between Vice-President Joe Biden and Sarah Palin, some rascally right-wingers went on the attack. Led by Matt Drudge and echoed by the "fair and balanced" team at Fox News, they insisted that Ms. Ifill was a profoundly partisan Obama supporter and ought to be removed from the debate. Her impartiality was impugned and her personal integrity was called into serious question. She would, it was commonly said, at worst "throw" the debate to Biden and keep Ms. Palin from performing well (a complaint Ms. Palin would later make about Katie Couric and others in the media which, she insisted, would shortly endorse Caroline Kennedy's efforts to assume Hillary Clinton's place in the Senate). Neither accusation had merit.

What this episode does reveal, however, is an increasingly distressing aspect of American politics (and the US is plainly not alone). Barack Obama actively campaigned for twenty-one months. The interim election cycle culminating in the House and Senate elections of 2010 are taking off. And Sarah Palin seems hard at work preparing for her run on the White House in 2012. Politics and government are on display as a constant struggle for advantage with prizes being awarded every two, four or six years.

Meanwhile, the genuine questions such as voter realignment, which Ms. Ifill's title portends, are left to others to discuss. These issues are already being discussed in book form, and will no doubt take up their space in professional and serious popular magazines. Larry M. Bartels, for example, has produced *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, which analyses the effects of public choice on the poor and, increasingly, the middle class. He writes that economic inequality has grown in a fairly steady pattern since World War II with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer "under each of the six Republican presidents in this period ... [whereas] four of the five Democratic presidents — all except Jimmy Carter — presided over declines in income inequality. If this is a coincidence, it is a very powerful one."

In *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics*, edited by Ruy Teixeira and published by the well regarded Brookings Institution, a number of new twists are recorded in the political landscape. A consideration of white, working class male voters revealed that Bill Clinton won this demographic by 1% in each of his victories in the 1990s. Al Gore lost them by 17% and John Kerry by 23%. Obama, with a new operational definition of working class that controlled for income but stressed education, rebounded a little and lost by "only" 18%. Of importance, however, is that the proportion of white working-class "no college" voters has decreased by 15% in the last two decades. If a corresponding increase in institutional education betokens a future trend, then Obama's efforts to redesign the electoral map may have some prospects for success, whereas a Republican fusion of the wealthy and the poor, who nonetheless vote according to conservative social values may be in some trouble. The hoped-for change may therefore be piecemeal, but a new political order may be in the works. Who knows? Perhaps an articulate and progressive woman is even now waiting politely in the wings to join the emerging "rainbow."

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Scott Martelle recently borrowed an insightful quote from Tina Davis: “White voters had to ask themselves if they wanted a really smart young black guy, or a stodgy old white guy from the same crowd who put us in this hole.” As someone whose age is almost precisely half way between the two, I am sensitive to the “ageist” implications of such a remark. It may, however, be of some importance since time is on Obama’s side, as well as the side of the new Black elite, who may be close to fulfilling at least some elements of Martin Luther King’s dream (who should probably be mentioned by name).

About the Author

Howard A. Doughty teaches in the Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Science at Seneca College, Toronto, Canada.