

Audacity of Hoping

African-Americans have an especially long wish list for the new president. How we can balance our expectations against reality. And why we must be patient.

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As soon as my jam-packed plane hit the ground in Washington, I instantly felt a kind of shift in the air. D.C. has long been called the "chocolate city" for its large number of African-American residents. But on this particular weekend—the historic one before the swearing-in of the first African-American president—the city was transformed into a sort of chocolate Disney World. The streets were filled with thousands of smiling, almost giddy, brown faces. Young and old wandered joyfully and endlessly in the freezing cold, searching for any souvenir with Barack Obama's face on it. "This is what hope looks like," I remarked to one of my friends as we walked by a man selling T shirts with a picture of the White House and the slogan THE BLACK HOUSE.

Ever since Barack Obama and his family hit the national scene two years ago, African-Americans have balanced our greatest hopes against our fears of disappointment. Would he run? Would he win the nomination? Would he, could he, win the presidency? On the broadest level, Obama has fulfilled our dreams just by taking office. African-American boys I know in South-Central Los Angeles who wore cornrows and once dreamed of nothing more than living to the age of 18 without being shot down are now entering barbershops to ask for the no-nonsense Obama haircut. Teenage girls I mentor who once yearned only for a date with someone who lived "the thug life," are now giving the nerd in the front of the class a second look.

It's a transformation so mind-boggling that no one could have convinced me it was possible even a year ago, particularly in low-income areas of African-American communities where "hope" and "possibility" are words rarely heard. "I just feel so much like the rest of my life can be different now," says 23-year-old Elise Ryan, a high-school dropout, single mother of two and resident of the Jordan Downs housing projects in Los Angeles. "Obama's message was always about hope from day one, and at first I was like 'whatever.' But the more I saw him and his family, I was like, OK, maybe he can make things better for me. Maybe he can change the way black people get treated."

Obama fueled dreams like Ryan's with his lofty campaign rhetoric. And African-Americans—many of whom long ago lost faith in politics—listened. We became willing to believe again in a government that hasn't always treated us fairly. But the strange and sometimes dangerous thing about hope is that it can disappear even faster than it arrives. Now that President Obama is a reality, we have to confront a whole new kind of calculus. As he settles into the Oval Office, Obama faces two international wars and the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, with job losses that soar by the week. With desperation, Americans of all races and backgrounds are counting on him to solve their problems. Depending on our expectations, African-Americans may be in for a stinging reality check.

Though Obama never promised us anything specific, we just assumed that because he's African-American, he will put our interests near the top of his agenda. "Obama didn't run as a black president," says jazz musician Wynton Marsalis. "The media did that. He didn't run on a black platform, so it makes no sense to expect anything other than him being the best man for the job and being able to do it well. That's all we can expect from him as black people." Indeed, his top issues *are* our issues: joblessness, home foreclosures and lack of health care all resonate within the African-American community.

But there are other, more-parochial issues that many African-Americans will expect Obama to acknowledge at some point. There's the "three-strikes rule" that lands more than its share of young African-American men in jail in many states. The tougher and longer prison sentences blacks receive for sometimes minor drug offenses. And the growing number of black women with the AIDS virus—now the fastest-growing segment of those infected. "Those are things I'm sure Bush didn't give a hoot about," says 34-year-old Lisha Crenshaw, a Chicago elementary-school teacher I ran into in D.C. "The number of jails we're building to put our young men in instead of investing that money into their future and schools to educate them is so sad. And the AIDS epidemic was big news when white men were dying of it. But when black women have it, no one cares. Obama needs to care."

Crenshaw says she and her family have never believed there was someone in a major position who understood exactly what they were facing until now. "Clinton was called the first black president, but he put some of those three-strikes rules on the books," says Crenshaw. "So I never bought into that. Now we have someone who really gets it like no one has before and it's overwhelming for us."

But will Obama ever be able to do enough to satisfy us all? On the evening before the national day of celebration of his father's birthday, Martin Luther King III was surprised to get a call from the then president-elect. Obama told King he'd pick him up at his Washington hotel early the next morning to do some community-service work. The two men ended up painting walls at a D.C. shelter for homeless teens. King took the opportunity to press Obama to go further on his signature issue: poverty. "It isn't just an African-American issue, but clearly our numbers are out of proportion in that area," says King. "But during the campaign there was really only focus on the middle class, not poverty, and that bothered me."

Just watching Obama prepare to walk down the Capitol steps, you could almost see him shoulder the nation's problems. He looked somber and unsmiling. "I think the honeymoon was over a while ago," says King. "He knows everyone wants something at this point, and someone is going to be disappointed."

But not if some popular radio personalities have anything to say about it. Highly influential African-American talk-show host Michael Baisden was an early supporter of Obama and passionately encouraged the 4.6 million listeners of his syndicated show to get out and vote for the then Illinois senator. But shortly after Obama's win in November, Baisden also began warning his listeners to rein in their wish lists. Not only does Obama have enough to deal with, Baisden says, but he's got to be president of all of America—not just black America. "It's normal for a group to expect things when they work so hard to win," says Baisden. "But of course—because of our history and current state of affairs—African-Americans want more because we need more." Baisden plans to continue urging patience on the airwaves.

Other supporters worry about whether Obama, like his predecessor George W. Bush, will fall victim to the isolation of the White House. If he's out of touch with the world beyond 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, will he lose touch with black issues? "African-Americans feel very close to Obama and his family, and that's something they want to continue," says basketball legend and businessman Magic Johnson. "They don't want to feel that he's untouchable. They want to see him out at events and sometimes events that are about African-Americans. That type of connection will be the most important thing there is to keeping us happy."

Obama's successful attempt to hang on to his BlackBerry shows that he's worried about losing touch, too. But being cut off may be inevitable. Obama friend James Lassiter, who is actor Will Smith's manager, is already feeling out of the loop. Lassiter hosted one of the first Hollywood fundraisers for Obama's 2004 Senate run in his home in the wealthy section of Hancock Park. The two men then developed a chummy friendship, but Lassiter says that since Obama won the election, all the phone numbers have changed. "I'll have to find another way to get to him and I will," Lassiter says. Even if Obama himself is swallowed up by official Washington, many hope his family will provide some perspective. As my friend Tangi Miller, a 41-year-old lawyer from Pasadena, Calif., likes to say: "Michelle is the last person Obama will see at night, and she won't let him forget us."

Some African-Americans also worry about whether Obama has been given Mission: Impossible—and how it will reflect on them. "I thought about that a lot," says 52-year-old Hosea Nelson, a carpenter from Brooklyn, N.Y., whom I met in the D.C. crowd. "You know the country finally agrees to put a brother in the White House when everything has gone to hell. I'm happy he's there, but, God, it's almost like he's been set up to fail." And many blacks are grappling with what it means to have one of their own in such a high-profile, high-stakes position. Do his failures—as well as his successes—reflect on us all? What does it mean when his Inaugural Parade runs late or he has to retake the oath of office?

We all understand that Obama can't change the world in the first day—or even the first 100. We can be patient. "It's our job to help him do his job," says Johnson. "He can only do so much, but we as African-Americans now have the inspiration to do more for ourselves, and that's key. That's to our benefit for his time in office and key to his getting more than four years in office. Because we don't want four years—we want eight years, because it's going to take four years to get us out of the mess we're in."

But for me, and for many of my friends, Obama and his family have already brought us a long way. To see the countless pictures of young African-American boys staring at Obama with such awe and wonder as he visited their schools was enough to make my heart melt. Watching hip-hop stars like Mary J. Blige and Usher perform for the new president was a signal that this is a very new day. Maybe, for now, that's more than enough.

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