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Human Rights Hero - President Barack Obama

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humanrights hero

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citizens roughly equaled the turnout of whites, and for the first time, African American turnout was higher than for whites among those between the ages of 18 and 44. See Sam Roberts, *2008 Surge in Black Voters Nearly Erased Racial Gap*, NEW YORK TIMES, July 21, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/politics/21vote.html. These statistics represent important progress in the journey of more than four decades since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed to help sweep away Jim Crow-era laws designed to impede voting by African Americans.

Obama's election also provides the nation a critical opportunity to move beyond the racial politics and dynamics of the past. It is not an easy task, as evidenced by the debate in September touched off by former president Jimmy Carter's suggestion that some of the strident criticism of Obama stemmed from racism. But on the rare occasions when Obama has discussed race, his vision

has been one of looking ahead in the journey. "What I hope to model is a way of interacting with people who aren't like you and don't agree with you that changes the temper of our politics," he said in an interview published the day before his inauguration. "And then part of that changes how we think about moving forward on race relations. Race relations becomes a subset of a larger problem in our society, which is we have a diverse, complicated society where people have a lot of different viewpoints." See Michael A. Fletcher, *President Elect Sees His Race as An Opportunity*, WASHINGTON POST, January 19, 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/18/AR2009011802547.html.

Obama's election is a way station because the African American journey, of which he is such an important part, is far from over. There is still much ground to cover, but as a Human Rights Hero, President Obama is in a position to lead the way.

Stephen J. Wermiel is chair of the editorial board of Human Rights magazine and a Fellow in Law and Government at American University Washington College of Law.

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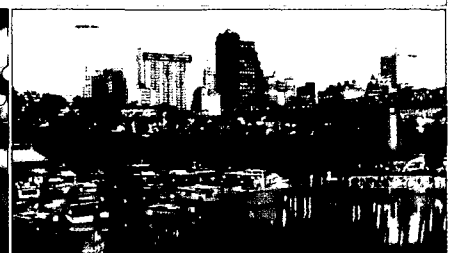
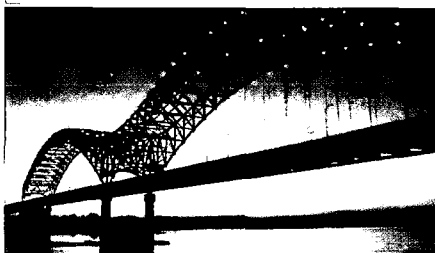
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human rights hero

President Barack Obama

By Stephen J. Wermiel

We could have selected many people as the Human Rights Hero for this issue. African American history is filled with heroes: civil rights leaders who pioneered with vision, commitment, and even their lives; historic figures who blazed trails or opened doors for others; everyday people who decided they would no longer stand for American apartheid and who stood up to race discrimination. Indeed, perhaps the choice of Barack Obama as our Human Rights Hero seems anticlimactic after he won the Nobel Peace Prize. But we are not honoring Barack Obama for his policies or politics. We have chosen to honor Barack Obama because his election as the first African American president of the United States represents a profoundly important way station in the African American journey on which this issue of *Human Rights* is focused.

The basic biographical details by now should be well known. Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961 to a black father from a village in Kenya and a white mother from a town in Kansas. His parents divorced when he was two years old. He grew up in Hawaii, and for a few years in Indonesia, raised by his mother and his mother's parents. He graduated from Columbia University, worked as a community organizer in Chicago, and went to Harvard Law School, where he was the first African American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. He returned to



Associated Press, AP

Chicago to practice civil rights law and teach at the University of Chicago Law School. He married another Harvard Law School grad, Michelle Robinson, whose roots have been traced back five generations to slavery. Obama was elected to the Illinois state senate, where he served for eight years, and then to the U.S. Senate, where, two-thirds of the way through his first term, he was elected president.

Obama's election is deserving of Human Rights Hero recognition on numerous levels. First, while Obama won with support across a broad spectrum of voters, his election marked a high point for the importance of African American voters. According to Census Bureau reports, the turnout of African American voters among voting-age

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