

'The Speech'

by *Marc_H._Morial*

In Philadelphia, with the eyes of a nation upon him, Sen. Barack Obama gave a great speech recently. In the tradition of Jefferson, Lincoln and King he spoke to the heart of this country. He made us listen.

Many of us hoped that this historic presidential election, with the first truly viable woman candidate and black candidate, would not deteriorate into another ugly street fight over race. But, I suppose it was inevitable, especially given the comments made by former Rep. Geraldine Ferraro, D-N.Y., and Obama's former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Obama rightly denounced the pastor for his hateful comments. But, he also used this moment to call for a more mature conversation about America's historic and ongoing racial divide. He urged us to stop shouting and fighting each other. He asked us to respect both justified and unjustified perceptions on all sides. He spoke of the need for personal responsibility. He called us to walk the walk of reconciliation.

It wasn't an angry speech. He didn't use it to attack Geraldine Ferraro. As he's said before, it's simply ridiculous to imply he has an unearned advantage being a black man named "Obama" running for president.

It was a speech that made it plainly clear: the old, entrenched "us vs. them" racial arguments have had their day. Unprecedented numbers of Americans from all walks of life are now united in the belief that the only way to solve our common problems is to put aside our differences and come together.

I was particularly struck by Obama's thoughtful analysis of the roots of anger in many black, urban communities. He spoke of the legacy of legalized discrimination where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, obtaining housing and business loans, joining unions or getting jobs. This helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many urban and rural communities.

We talk about this every day in black barbershops and churches, but too many in the larger society just don't want to hear it.

The National Urban League has been trying to get the larger society's attention for 98 years. At this pivotal moment we need every American and every presidential candidate to continue this dialogue. We must close the gaps that divide us along color lines.

And, we must recognize that urban America is center stage in this struggle. Millions of our citizens are finding it increasingly difficult to earn a decent living, secure health care and raise their children in major cities across this country. That's why the League has invited Sens. John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Obama to participate in a joint discussion around the need for a comprehensive urban agenda at the National Urban League annual conference to be held Aug. 1 in Orlando, Fla.

Obama gave a great speech. It's now up to him, the other presidential candidates and all Americans to take up his challenge. Together, we can and must expand opportunity and build a stronger, more united nation.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Â© Copley News Service

'The Speech' by Marc_H._Morial