

White House not only for white boys

by Pam Adams

"Auntie Pam, can only boys be president?"

The question hung in the air, and then in my head, for days afterward.

"Can only boys be president?"

My great-niece repeated herself. I fumbled with the rearview mirror, messed with the radio knobs, stalling for time while an 8-year-old waited for a clear answer to a question she shouldn't have to ask.

My gut told me a simple response "Of course not" was not enough to erase the little seeds of doubt I heard in her voice. If president was a boys-only job, then girls need not apply.

My brain could not download relevant bits fast enough to fashion the glorious, affirming and democratic gift of an answer she deserved. A woman named Hillary will probably run for president next time around? No, that didn't feel right. Of course, honey, a woman will be president some day? That didn't hit me like thunder, either.

Dang kids and their confounding questions. Always asking the right thing at the wrong time. Where'd this child get this question from, anyway? What are they talking about at school nowadays? And why did it come up on the day I pick her up from school? Besides, I'm too young to be a great-aunt.

It wasn't her fault I was having such a hard time coming up with a suitable answer. It's an unbelievably obvious question for an 8-year-old girl to ask. For an 8-year-old black girl, I might add, the question could easily be made more precise: Can only white boys be president?

With or without the color-coded adjective, it's the most pertinent question related to the 2008 presidential race to date. It is, after all, the real question behind all the tortured what-if media reports on the emergence of two U.S. senators, Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, as contenders for the Democratic nomination for president.

Headline writers, magazine covers and media roundtables practically scream in shock. What? A woman

(white)? And a black (man)? Running for president? At the same time? Could it be? How strange! Is America ready?

More than one opinion-page writer has already called a potential Hillary-Obama primary duel "novel." Maureen Dowd, the New York Times columnist, began a recent piece, "So the question of the moment is: Which would be a greater handicap in a presidential bid, gender or race?"

A novelty? A handicap?

From where I sit, a presidential bid from Hillary or Obama in 2008 is neither.

One might be the first non-white-male president. And that's the cause of the if-and-or-but agonizing over who has the best chance of winning the White House.

What's truly strange is that in a "free" country, reared on a national mythology that anybody can grow up to be president, it would take over 200 years to treat a black man and a white woman as valid, viable candidates for president. The question is not "Is America ready?" but "What took America so long?"

At some point, in my stumpled, stalling search for an answer to the great-niece's question, the light bulb turned on. If I limited myself to the United States, the only honest answer would be, "Honey, at this point, it looks like only boys can be president. Only white boys, but not white boys who are Jewish or Muslim, either. It was a big deal when a white boy who was Catholic got elected. But maybe things are about to change."

I wasn't about to tell her that particular truth. I relaxed my shoulders, took a long breath, turned toward her and smiled. "Well dear," I told her, "there have been girl presidents all over the world for a long, long time. Ireland, India, Israel, Canada, Chile, the Philippines, Liberia and lots more. Black girl presidents, too."

She seemed satisfied for the moment. I figured I'd leave well enough alone.

Weeks later, her 4-year-old sister and I went to her classroom. There was a Santa Claus decoration, a white Santa decoration, hanging in the hallway. The younger girl huffed, dismayed by the sight. No agonizing questions in her head.

"They coulda least had a black Santa, too."

Happy holidays, no ifs, ands or buts.

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