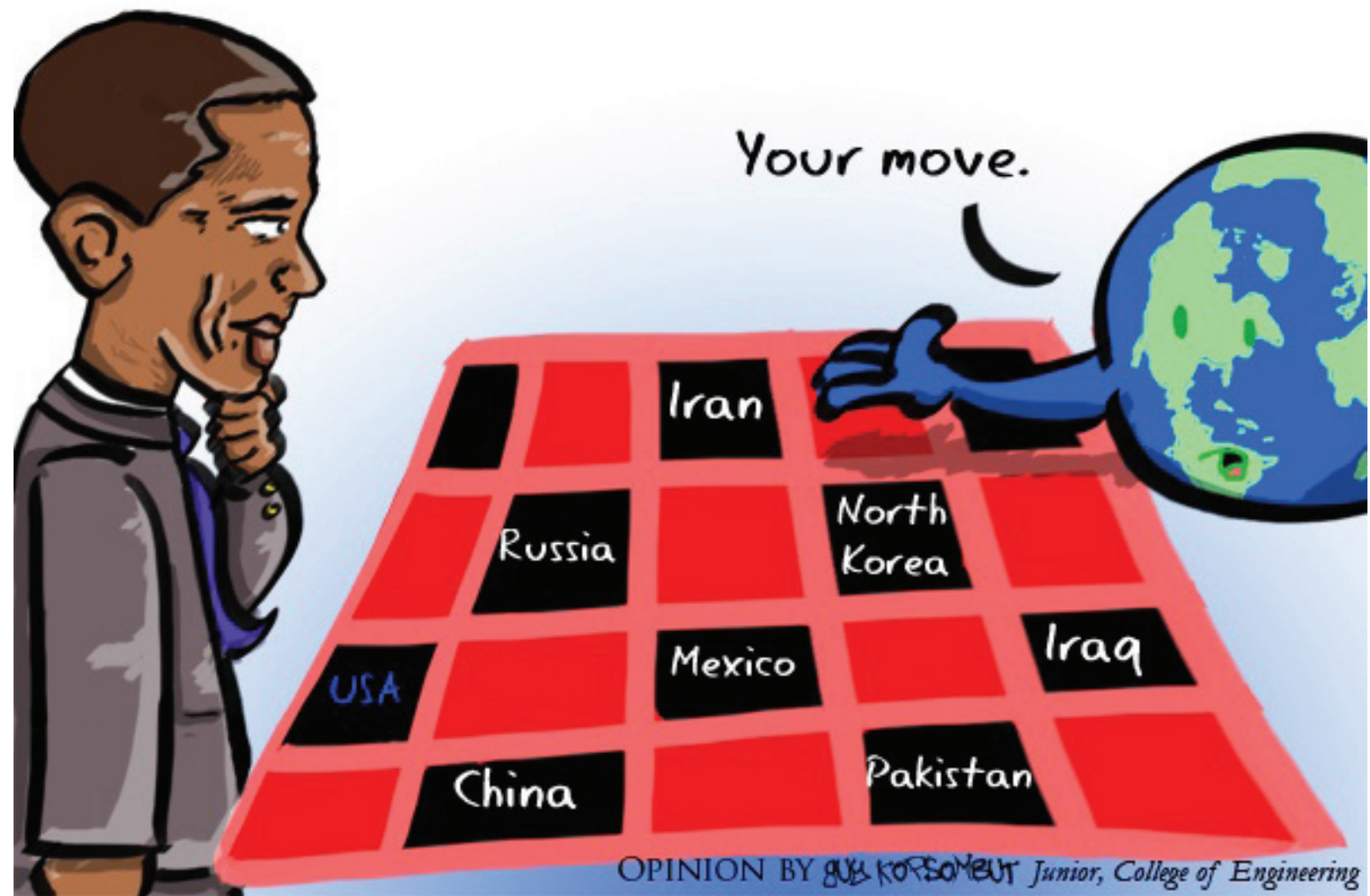


THE VANDERBILT POLITICAL REVIEW

WHAT'S NEXT FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY?



A PROFESSOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Omar Ali, Professor, The College of Arts and Science; Author, In the Balance of Power

VPR: How did you decide to write on the topic of African Americans and independent politics?

I decided to write about the topic when I was approached by Ohio University Press to produce a book that would do a sweep of the history of African Americans and their involvement with the independent political movement and third parties. It was the result of a proposal that Paul Finkleman, of the University of Baldwin Law School, gave on my behalf. I actually gave him a couple of pages of ideas and he shipped it/shopped it around. That's how the actual thing came about and I decided to write full steam ahead once I was given a contract. Before that, I had spent basically the last twenty years involved in looking at the history of African Americans and third party politics both when I began in college as a student activist and then as a scholar looking at the material. One

of the important things to understand about this is that if you want to understand American democracy, it's critical to understand the role of African Americans within it, who worked to push for change from the outside (that is, through independents and people involved in third parties). Today marks the day, the beginning of a new chapter in American history, where you have the first African American President elected and that came about as a result of decades of black political struggle with white independents trying to make a day like this happen for somebody of that stature. Barack Obama could bring together the country around issues of political reform, which is really what he is talking about when he talks about "change." He is talking about political reform changing the culture of politics, things both domestically and abroad. He is, in some ways, a product of African Americans and indepen-

dents and the mix black independents, so there is a lot of history to all of this and I happen to be the person at this point who has written about it most recently.

VPR: As a political historian, you have obviously been watching trends in electoral behavior very closely. Was the election of the first African American President of the U.S. something out of the blue, or were there specific events in our history that pointed to the fact that it would be happening soon?

In 1988, you see the beginnings of a shift among the African American electorate, which was starting to question the validity and helpfulness of the two-party system. That year, the first woman and the first African American got on the ballot in all 50 states. Her name was Dr. Lenora Fulani. It was the same year that the Reverend Jesse Jackson ran as an insurgent democrat but did not get the nomination. Dr. Fulani's campaign was to challenge the idea that the Democratic Party was most helpful for the black community than the Americans in general. And since that time, you see a growing movement away from the two major parties among Americans of all backgrounds, left, right, conservative, liberal, black, white, Latino, and Asian. And the people who have been leading that charge which crisscrosses across all these groups are the younger generation. They have been most identified as independent in survey after survey so today is also a product of the youth vote coming out from the mass to counter what people are talking about as the "Bradley Effect" and to work with other like-minded Americans to see political reform. So I would start with 1988 as the beginning of a new chapter in American history, with 1992 producing Ross Perot and twenty million people voting for an independent, and then continuing with that history, which is what I talk about in my book.

VPR: How have independents shaped the 2008 elections?

Both Barack Obama and Senator McCain were beneficiaries of the independent support that they got in the primaries. McCain's campaign was basically dead in the water until New Hampshire, where independents helped to give him his victory, and from that point on he won primary after primary. At the same time, Obama was the beneficiary of the independent white vote he got in the primaries along with African Americans. Both Obama and McCain are in some way "mavericks" in the sense that they have both challenged the partisanship of Washington DC politics. McCain, by reaching across the aisle with his legislative reforms, and Obama, by speaking

to Americans of all backgrounds. You'll note in this Election that both candidates were speaking to not just their base, but also reaching out to people who are not in their party, like Obama speaking about democrats, republicans and independents. McCain mostly talked about republicans and independents, but independents were part of that mix and that represent the political change that is necessary in this country. They in some ways are in the balance of power in the margin, which has helped to produce both sides for their candidacies and now we have the first African American President.

VPR: Historically, during the past twenty years, people have turned towards a more aggressive foreign policy. Do you think voter turnout this time around maybe have changed that?

Obama has a tremendous challenge, but just the fact that he has been elected will allow for new policies that I think will bring the war to a close. I think that he said that we can't pull the troops out immediately, but he is looking for a way to pull out over a period of time. He is quoted as saying "six months" but that might change due to conditions. However, there is definitely a spirit to get troops and personnel out of there. I think that the US, unfortunately, under the Bush administration has created a real problem in the Middle East and internationally by going to Iraq the way that we did and I think that there will be some kind of inevitable vacuum. I don't know if there is an easier or cleaner solution for this, and I think that Obama is going to have to struggle with this as the President of our nation. Clearly, a part of his mandate was anti-war sentiment in this country, which was very, very strong amongst young people.

VPR: Where did McCain go wrong when it came to attracting these independent voters?

I think that he did not go after them enough. What you started to see in the polls in the last week-and-a-half and two weeks was that independents were breaking by at least 12 percentage points more for Obama than McCain and I think a part of that was because McCain became hysterical. It's unfortunate because he really was the voice of independents at an earlier point, like in the year 2000, when he ran for President. Independents were very attracted to him because he had this "maverick" status and "Straight Talk Express," which was nowhere to be found in this election. It was unfortunate because he was this tragic figure who was not going after the independents. He undermined his campaign and independents, not just in terms of rightwing independents or people on the right,

but people who are also on the left who might have supported him earlier on in the campaign. He continued to isolate with his rhetoric in terms of the war as well as his pick of Sarah Palin, which people saw as somewhat reckless. I think independents did not take to her strong rhetoric against Obama and generally felt that she was unprepared for the job as President.

VPR: What's in the future for our country's political makeup?

I don't know what the future will hold, but I think what we are seeing is the possibility of a transformation of the political culture in this country, where young people have been a critical part of in this election cycle. If the country is going to move in a developmental direction,

what I mean by that is a direction where there is less partisanship, with policies that help the poor and working people, and the US being seen in a more positive light internationally, it is going to come about not just through laws but through the environment that's created. An environment where a person like Obama can reconcile with people who he may not agree with, which is a lesson that I think we can all learn from in some ways. His ability to, if you will, bring folks together and to reach out and listen to people he may not agree with and be respectful is, in some ways, critical to any healthy republic.

*Interview performed by Elizabeth Lopez
Director of Affairs, The Vanderbilt Political Review*

THE RACIAL DIVIDE: WHY THE BLACK ELECTORATE HAS ALIGNED WITH THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Ryan Stewart, Junior, College of Arts and Science

Barack Obama's historic election to President of the United States is unquestionably an amazing step for African Americans in this country. Therefore, it is not surprising that the final exit polls showed that 95% of black voters supported Obama, to only 4% for John McCain.

What is more intriguing is the fact that the African-American population has voted for the Democratic Party in significant numbers for the past few decades. In national elections from 1972-2002, black voters identified themselves as Democrats between 75% and 80% of the time, while voting Republican only 5% to 11% of the time. In fact, in the 2000 election, Democratic nominee Al Gore claimed 90% of the black vote. While conventional political theory argues that the Democrats' role in the Civil Rights movement has aligned African-Americans with the party for the indeterminable future, I challenge that this is not true, and that the racial gap today is formed by support for welfare and false portrayal in the media.

In partisan politics, the ruling party is often given credit for successes and failures on the national level, regardless of the party's actual impact. This is exactly why the Civil Rights movement is remembered as a focal point of a Democratic administration and Congress working in progressive unison. In reality, however, many Demo-

crats went above and beyond to hinder the success of the movement for racial equality. As shown in the figure below, the Republican Party voted in much greater favor for civil rights legislation than the Democrats.

The pieces of legislation in the table were some of the most essential and progressive acts in the Civil Rights movement. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed Jim Crow-style voting laws that had hindered blacks' ability to vote in the South. Similarly, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 pushed for the integration of neighborhoods, prohibiting discrimination in selling or renting of housing based on race.

Even more condemning than these statistics is the way in which congressional Democrats handled the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Perhaps the most important piece of legislation for the movement, the act outlawed racial segregation in schools and also prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color and sex. Not only did Republicans favor this act with much greater fervor than Democrats (as shown in the above figure), but Democrat Party leaders also attempted to stop the bill without passage. Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), who has held several party leadership positions including Democratic whip, along with other segregationist Dixiecrats filibustered the act for 83 days in an attempt to kill the bill. Fortunately,