



LOCAL COMMENT

## Obama candidacy moves nation a long way from tension of racial past

BY ALLAN J. HRUSKA • July 17, 2008

In the summer of 1968, my neighborhood at Six Mile and Greenfield in Detroit was filled with tension -- racial tension.

Although the Tigers were doing an admirable job of diverting attention from the searing wounds of the previous summer's devastating riot, my life at Cerveney Junior High was filled with constant suspicion, verbal, psychological and physical battles, manifestations of deeply held prejudices and race-based hatred. Black and white not only didn't get along, the vitriol in the air left me with the conclusion that we never would.

I left Detroit after graduating from Cass Tech in 1975 and Michigan after graduating from college. Life took me far away, to live in Latin America for a long stretch. This has given me experiences -- and a perspective.

Last year, as the U.S. presidential race began, my Latin American colleagues were fascinated and wanted to know my views on this spectacle -- the leading Democratic candidates were a woman and an African American. Everyone, from taxi drivers to government officials, wanted to know: Was the United States really going to nominate -- and possibly elect -- either?

Because I had to give my opinion so often, I got my answer down pat -- reflecting from my head and gut, but largely shaped by growing up in Detroit in the '60s and '70s. Hillary Clinton, I said, was going to be the Democratic candidate and probably the next president, not Barack Obama, because although there's lots of sexism in the United

States, the racism is much more profound. No way was the U.S. electorate ready to elect a black man president.

Understand that in most of Latin America, race is not as black and white as it is in the United States. There are many people who don't fit into one of those categories. They may be "brown," because they have blood of indigenous people, but more likely because they are a mixture of blood from Africa, Europe and America.

That's not to say there's not racism in Latin America -- a look at the skin color of the political and business elite of most Latin American countries will quickly tell you something -- but it's just not as starkly divided or defining as it is in the United States. As the Brazilians always tell me, they think of themselves as Brazilian first and after that what race of Brazilian they are.

If, on Nov. 5, Latin Americans, along with the rest of the world, hear the news that Barack Obama is the president of the United States, a tremor will ripple around the globe. International perception of the United States will be abruptly and irrevocably changed. Even the most cynical anti-American media or commentator will be hard pressed to declare that it's business as usual in the United States.

In the last year, I've come to a very different place about the elections and Americans -- a much more optimistic spot than I dreamed possible a year ago, and stunningly different from where I was in the summer of 1968.

Now, when my Latin-American colleagues ask me about the U.S. presidential race, I have quite a different response. I confidently explain how far the United States has come in 40 years, how we've moved beyond a simple division of the world into black and white, where, just like the Brazilians who are Brazilian first, we are Americans first. We have all traveled a long way -- without denying the difficult road we're still on -- from our moment in Detroit, Michigan and the United States of 1968.

I've heard African-American parents of young children exclaim what a glorious moment this is for them and their children, because their children will grow up knowing that is possible for them to be a candidate -- and possibly the president of the United States. But it is at least as glorious a moment for my children to witness and participate in the same historic moment. For when that has become normal for them and their generation, then we will have all come a long way indeed from Detroit of 1968.

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