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Obama, community organizer, on race

Mary Barron | Mar. 20, 2008

Barack Obama began his career as a 24-year-old community organizer, working in neighborhoods one block at a time, building coalitions for change. In the most critical moment yet in his campaign for the presidency, when issues of his race and religion threatened to peel away supporters and leave the would-be unifier with a fractured shambles, Obama took to the stage in Philadelphia and set to work community organizing on the issue of race on a national scale.

Community organizing is a process, and a somewhat decentralized process at that. It isn?t accomplished immediately through one speech; it moves outward in ripples. But given the success Obama has had with the process throughout his campaign, Tuesday?s oratorical exercise in community organizing ? subtly woven into the speech he called ?A More Perfect Union? ? could shore up the candidate?s support in a way that grows over time. It might even advance understanding among Americans across the racial divide.

?You know, you throw a rock into a pond and those ripples will go out,? Obama said on ABC News Nightline afterwards. ?We don?t know where those ripples will go. I have no idea how this plays out politically. But I think it was important to do.?

Initial indications are that the ripples are spreading far and wide. The New York Times reported March 20 that the video of the Obama speech had been viewed ?more than 1.6 million times on YouTube and is being widely emailed.? The paper also reported that church groups and universities were using the speech to spur the discussion Obama had requested of the country,

Part of the appeal of the Obama campaign has been its success in adding new voices to the political mix. Beginning with the Iowa Democratic Caucuses, college-age voters found a reason to caucus. As the campaign rolled on, it became even more apparent that Obama was winning support from people who were not necessarily traditional party voters or who live in states the core Democrats have tended to write off as less vital.

In many cases, the new or newly-involved voters were brought into the process by small cadres of determined young community organizers. The night of the Colorado caucuses, I sat in a Colorado Springs brewpub with an Obama precinct captain, a middle-aged CPA who had never campaigned for anyone before. She appreciatively pointed out Colin Walsh, 22, a Colorado College graduate and official organizer for Obama. With a handful of equally youthful peers in ?Got Hope?? T-shirts and blue jeans, Walsh had taught the city?s precinct captains to organize and helped hand Obama a 2-to-1 victory over Hillary Clinton statewide.

Another part of the appeal for Obama supporters has been the sense that they are rejecting old-form politics and making their voices heard as part of something new. Into this setting came the voice of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., Obama?s friend and former pastor, in a video-loop mash-up of his most appallingly divisive moments in the pulpit of Chicago?s Trinity United Church of Christ. That was not a voice many Obama supporters were prepared to hear.

In a speech that sought to uplift the discussion of race, rather than tamp it down, Obama took steps to move

supporters past the jarring dissonance of Wright?s resentful words. In effect, he opened a virtual roundtable on race.

The first step of a roundtable is tried and true. It's the same step the Obama organizers employed to start their work with the precinct captains. Everybody in the circle takes turns telling their own personal stories of ?why they are here.? In this national roundtable, Obama went first.

Certainly, he took the time in his multi-pronged address to condemn Wright?s distortions of reality and to place the minister?s anger and suspicion of white America in historical context. But Obama also had this to say: Pastor Wright, the black community, and Obama's own white grandmother, flawed though each may be, are all part of why Obama is here. "These people are a part of me," he said. ?And they are part of America, this country that I love.?

Speaking first to the black community and then to the white community, he laid out three more steps toward a more perfect union that people can take after hearing one another?s stories.

Number one, he said, we have to acknowledge the reality of everybody else's history and how it has brought them here. After acknowledging the historic differences, we can explore current similarities and form a bond ? actively binding our common hopes together and taking common action on them. And finally, we can adjust our thinking about the future to make room for one another, rather than behaving as though one race can win only if the other one loses.

?I chose to run for president at this moment in history,? Obama said, ?because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction: toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.?

What works to organize a room full of volunteers, or a neighborhood in trouble, may not do much of anything when lofted out over the public airways, but then again, it might. Already the video of Obama?s big speech is being followed on his website with emails from supporters who want to tell their own stories. As community organizers know, that?s where the process starts.

(Mary Barron is a freelance writer from Colorado who is covering the Democratic Party for NCR during this year?s presidential race.)

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