

OBAMA'S AMERICA

Barack Obama takes office after eight years of a disastrous administration. Two bungled wars, a record-setting deficit, a near-economic collapse, and a government that isn't trusted at home or abroad have become the legacy of not just George W. Bush's presidency, but of the nearly unchecked ascent of conservative ideology in government.

As he charts a new course, Obama's starting-point is the America he inherits from George W. Bush. While many magazines and journals are taking the opportunity to look back at the politics and policies of the past eight years through the standard metrics of economic growth, poverty rates, programs passed, and the like, we at *Democracy* set out to do something unique: to assess where America stands as measured by the values that define our nation—equality, opportunity, community, democracy, and liberty.

To do this, we asked some of the nation's most distinguished progressive thinkers to offer their take on the state of America at the end of the Bush presidency with regards to these values, and what that means for the next president. We gave them wide latitude on how broadly or narrowly to define the question,

but we asked them to think deeply about how much America has changed and what needs to be done to reinvigorate these ideals. Taken together, these essays paint a picture of where America stands as we look toward a new political era: Obama's America.

Equality

Orlando Patterson

Barack Obama's election to the presidency highlights a profound paradox at the heart of American race relations. After centuries of exclusion, black Americans have been almost wholly accepted into the public sphere of American life, and they are central to the nation's definition of itself as a political and social community. Obama's presidency is the culmination of this amazing national transformation. Today we find racial equality in its political, civic, and cultural forms at a level that far exceeds any other advanced society, or even any of the large plural societies of the developing world. The National Urban League, one of the nation's preeminent African American interest groups, has documented this achievement in its annual *State of Black America's* Equality Index, a composite "measure of the relative status between blacks and whites in America." The one bright spot is in the area of "Civic Engagement," which it claims "is the only area in which African Americans exceed whites."

Yet, at the same time, black Americans remain remarkably excluded from most regions of the nation's private sphere: They are now more segregated than ever, have astonishingly few intimate friendships with non-blacks, and are the most endogamous group in the nation. The Equality Index shows either stagnation or decline in economic, educational, health, and social justice measurements comparing blacks and whites. This apartness prevents America from achieving true equality, and it has worsened even as blacks' public integration has progressed apace, a contradiction magnified by the policies of the Bush years. Will things change with Obama's election?

African Americans have always been critical to any assessment of American equality. As Gunnar Myrdal observed 64 years ago, the condition of blacks posed a terrible dilemma for the nation's founding creed, namely that America was a land of equality and respect for individual rights. Myrdal

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