

Obama grants exclusive Black press interview during historic 'whistle stop' train tour



Then President-elect Barack Obama is interviewed by NNPA News Service Editor-in-Chief during a break in the "Whistle Stop" train tour after his final stop in Baltimore.

By Hazel Trice Edney
NNPA Editor-in-Chief

BALTIMORE (NNPA) - In an exclusive interview with this reporter of NNPA News Service, the Black Press of America, who was among members of the press traveling aboard then-President-elect Barack Obama's historic "Whistle Stop" tour train Saturday from Philadelphia to Baltimore, Obama described plans to use his presidential "bully pulpit" to challenge the Black community to strengthen itself from within, while also pushing public policies to deal with inequities that have long plagued African-Americans from without.

"In terms of the African-American community, one of the things that I want to make sure that everybody's clear about is - to paraphrase JFK - 'Don't ask just what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for yourself.'"

He was responding to a question about how his administration will address social and economic ills that have historically and disparately plagued Black Americans.

He continues, "I want fathers to start being part of their children's lives. I want our children to stop spending so much time watching

television and hit the books. There are a lot of things under our control that can make our communities stronger and can open up opportunities for all of us. And I want to make sure that I'm using the bully pulpit to send that message loud and clear throughout my presidency."

Nevertheless, Obama, a civil rights lawyer, who made 100 percent on all NAACP Civil Rights Report Cards as a U. S. senator, recognizes that systemic racism and White supremacy have caused the African-American jobless rate to remain nearly twice that of the national average.

"Because African-Americans and Latinos are often the last hired, it also means they're the first fired," he says. "That's why getting the economy moving for everybody is so important because they're disproportionately impacted going up and going down."

One way to address the economic woes of America's general population while specifically improving the employment rates of Blacks and Hispanics would be to focus on jobs in urban communities, Obama said. More than three-fourths of African-Americans live in inner city or urban communities.

"I do think that we've got to focus on economic development in our urban areas...That's not a race-based program. That's a recognition that, 'Cities and suburbs, we're all in it together.' And we can't just deal with one without dealing with the other," he says.

Obama reminded that his economic recovery plan, now before Congress, calls for special training at community colleges to help people obtain so-called "new energy" or "green" jobs. Illustrating, he said, high school drop outs could be trained at a community college to help weatherize Baltimore homes.

"We think that we could have a big affect on our unemployment rates for all people."

Obama says his administration will maintain an open door to African-American organizations and community groups that desire to influence public policy, but who are also willing to make progress through service outside of government.

"We want to have an inclusive administration where all voices are heard," he said. "My job for all of my team is that they're constantly reaching out and listening to all voices. And so, we're going to have a very aggressive public liaison."

The White House Office of Public Liaison is headed by Valerie Jarrett, a long time friend of the Obamas, who is one of his senior advisors and among his leading African-American staffers.

"It will be constantly accessible to groups outside the White House and we want to make sure that every voice is heard in this process," he says.

The first African-American to hold the office of president, Obama has risen to leadership during tumultuous racial issues and incidents, including criminal justice inequities that have sparked protests over the past two years, race hate crimes, Black on Black crime, and a string of controversial police shootings in African-American communities.

Crime escalation is often the result of economic recession, Obama said. His economic recovery package includes more police on the streets to help deter crime. But, unjust police practices will not go unheeded either, he said.

"It is important that police officers receive

effective training. And I think that my Justice Department is going to be in a position to work with local and state officials to provide the kinds of training that allows for effective law enforcement, but also fair and just law enforcement."

Obama appointee Eric Holder will soon become the nation's first Black attorney general to head the Justice Department if he is confirmed by the U. S. Senate.

Obama assumes power during one of the most tumultuous moments in American history. The U.S. is engaged in war in Iraq and Afghanistan and there is escalating conflict in the Middle East. The military conflicts serve as backdrops for the nation's economic crisis and a constant threat of terror.

Asked if he is ever fearful, he said in a deeply serious tone, "The only thing I worry about is obviously the problems we face are huge. I worry about the speed with which Congress gets our recovery plan passed; then we can start dealing with the home foreclosure situation," he says.

He credits his faith and a supportive and loving wife and family for keeping him "cool" as some have described him. Their daughters, Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, joined him on the train tour, bouncing onto the stage together in Philadelphia.

"They're handling this transition wonderfully. And Michelle is so steady and so supportive," his voice lowers with affection. "Faith makes a huge difference; and then just confidence in the American people."

Preparing to take the presidential oath of office Jan. 20, he said he will be forever grateful for the civil rights struggles that put him there.

"Thanks to all our ancestors and earlier generations that fought, struggled and some died to give me this opportunity," he says.

Among those warriors was the historic Black Press, which will celebrate its 182nd year of existence during Black Press Week in March this year. Reaffirming a commitment to host a White House event in honor of the anniversary, Obama said, "We'll look forward to it."

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