

## Keynote Address

Donna Brazile

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# MAKING HISTORY: RACE, GENDER, AND THE MEDIA IN THE 2008 ELECTIONS

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS<sup>†</sup>

DONNA BRAZILE<sup>\*</sup>

It is a great honor to be with you all today. Janai, I want to let you know that I am no longer afraid of frogs and turtles and possums and snakes. I got over my fear once I visited the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, where I grew up. Unlike every other zoo in the country, we in New Orleans not only give you the species – we give you the recipes. That is one way of getting over your fear of creatures.

I have to tell you, I can't wait until I get home later this afternoon and call my Dad. It's hurricane season in the Gulf, and my family, like so many others, is still struggling from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Katrina was a natural disaster; but her aftermath was a governmental disaster. Many of those just getting back on their feet from Katrina are now trying recover from Hurricane Gustav and Hurricane Ike. When I tell my Dad that I was standing in an auditorium that had windows from which I could see Hurricane Kyle, he will be amazed because normally what we do is get our candles and some water and pray and wait the storm out. I

<sup>†</sup> Donna Brazile, Keynote Address at the St. John's University School of Law Making History: Race, Gender and the Media in the 2008 Elections Symposium (Sept. 27, 2008), *available at* <http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/academics/centers/ronbrown/symposia/rm2008/videos/video09.stj>.

<sup>\*</sup> Ms. Brazile began her political career at the age of nine, when she worked on a campaign for a city councilman who promised to build a playground in her neighborhood, and has participated in every presidential campaign from 1976 to 2000. In 2000, she became the first African American to lead a major presidential campaign when she served as presidential campaign manager for Vice President Al Gore. Ms. Brazile is the Founder and Managing Director of Brazile & Associates, LLC, a general consulting, grassroots advocacy, and training firm. She is also a frequent CNN contributor and Chair of the Democratic National Committee's Voting Rights Institute (VRI).

can't believe I am standing under all these windows. I've come a long way in my fears!

There is one thing that I have never feared and that is being actively involved in the political process. I don't fear standing up for injustice and calling a wrong a wrong. I don't fear being black or female. I don't fear telling the truth to power. And I don't fear the outcome of this election.

If you saw the debate last night, you know what time it is. We have waited patiently. It's time for this country to move forward. This fall we are poised to elect our nation's first biracial president. I thought Obama did well last night,<sup>1</sup> and I am not just saying that because I am a superdelegate.

By the way, one of the best things about being a superdelegate is that I had an opportunity to write Hillary's name down to help nominate her and I also had an opportunity to vote for Obama. So, I did both. I'm a black woman. I could have been for Obama because I am black and I could have been for Hillary because I am a woman. (I tell my friends that I am not old and grumpy yet, so I am not for McCain.)

Last night was an opportunity for Senator McCain to not just change the conversation after suspending his campaign, but to also raise doubts about Senator Obama. Notice what you heard when Senator McCain and his surrogates raised questions about Obama. They questioned his experience. They questioned whether he is seasoned enough to understand the challenges that face America. They questioned his readiness. Yet I had Obama winning in all three of those areas in the debate last night.

By the way, I am not convinced that this bailout plan that we keep talking about is the right fix. I wish people knew how to break the economy down and not talk about it as legislation, but rather describe how real people are being harmed and getting the carpet ripped out from beneath them. And when we talk about the economy and the war in Iraq, we need to tie those two together and not talk about them as separate issues. We need to understand that the next president will not have two in-boxes on his desk, with one marked "economy" and one "national security." They will be in the same box. Unless we have a strong economy, unless we have job growth, job creation, and people working and spending money, then we will not and cannot have the funds necessary for national security.

<sup>1</sup> The first presidential debate between then-Senator Obama and Senator McCain took place the night before this keynote address was delivered. See *The First Debate*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 26, 2008, at A19.

We are broke. There is a reason we are broke. And it's the Republican policies of the last eight years. Last night, Senator McCain – and I have got to get this out of my throat so I can switch gears – had an opportunity to put the conversation to rest regarding who had the best experience, who was more seasoned, who was more ready. When he said, “I answered that call at 3:00 a.m.,” it wasn't a call on foreign policy that he was answering. It was a call on the economy. And you know what? He didn't answer it.

Some of my conservative colleagues have said that if the debate was deemed a tie, the tie would go to Obama. I thought that last night Senator Obama did very well. He closed the stature gap, the “what-if” gap. He showed that he has seasoned judgment and the wisdom to meet America's challenges in the twenty-first century. So, the way I scored it last night is that Obama won, and the way I score this election is that the country is waiting for change.

What does this mean in the larger context? It means that we are going to have to prepare the country for change. When we talk about race, gender and the media, it often feels to me as if we are back in the late sixties or early seventies, when the country hadn't already seen so much change take place. I felt like this at the Republican convention in Minneapolis/St. Paul when Sarah Palin was announced. The media talked about her in terms of conservatism and rallying a base and making everyone feel good. Except me. I was there, and I was really missing that moment. But you know what moment I did receive in the announcement of Palin? I felt this moment: Yes! Women have broken another milestone!

A week before Sarah Palin's announcement, Hillary Clinton was in Denver on the 88th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote and we could talk about that progress. We could talk about how only two women served in the United States Senate 20 years ago and today we have 16 in the Senate. We could talk about 79 women in the House of Representatives and a female Speaker of the House. And we could talk about all the barriers that have been broken. But a week later, it was almost as if we could not talk about the achievements of women over the last 88 years. We were yet again going backward.

August was a very interesting month. We could talk about Senator Obama in terms of Dr. Martin Luther King's long march to freedom. August celebrated the 45th anniversary of Dr. King's historic “I Have A Dream” speech. It was more than a speech; it was a movement. We could talk about all of that, and we could put it in context, from Ways and Means Subcommittee Chairman John Lewis to House Minority Whip Jim Clyburn, in terms of having an African American elevated to the leadership

of the House.

We have seen so much progress. The historical references and the milestones we've reached are so important in understanding just how far we have come. Yet the media sometimes obscures just how much progress we have made, as it did during the Democratic primary when it spent so much time trying to put women back in their old place and blacks even further back. We haven't come far enough, if you ask me.

When I was a little child growing up in the deep South, the de-facto and segregated deep South, I never thought I would see this day. I never thought I would see the day when we would have a primary contest between a woman and a biracial candidate, a minority, a black man – call him whatever you want. Just don't call him un-American, unpatriotic, or out of the mainstream. I never thought that the Democratic primary race would come down to Obama versus Clinton. And, in the closing months of the campaign, it was so disheartening to see a campaign come down to race versus gender, as if to ask who has the greatest disadvantage.

It troubled me. Every day I would go out there. Some nights I didn't want to go out there because I felt, as a black woman, that I was invisible again. I wasn't either black or female. I was both. But some people assumed that because I was black, I was for this candidate. Or because I was a woman, I was for that one. I would hear this and think, "Can I just be for both of them?" Yet we spent almost two months, *two whole months*, engaged in that conversation because there was an advantage for partisans on both sides in having a gender-based conversation and a race-based conversation. And both conversations distracted us from the historic milestone that we had achieved in American politics. For the Democratic Party, which was the last party to put the Equal Rights Amendment in its platform and the last party to push for support of civil rights and voting rights in the sixties, to have come this far is amazing.

We spent precious time debating race versus gender as if racism and sexism are not both toxic. Was there racism in the coverage? You betcha. Was there sexism and misogyny? You betcha. I saw it. I complained. I was frustrated.

I will never forget that afternoon in January when the conversation was about Senator Clinton tearing up and whether she up to the job. Was she too emotional? I thought this was crazy. Mitt Romney teared up three times – and I am talking about tears flowing, not just getting emotional – and no one questioned whether Mitt Romney was having a PMS moment. Yet that evening on CNN, two of my male colleagues talked about whether Senator Clinton was having a PMS moment, and I had to remind them that

I was the only one who truly understood PMS and that when Senator Clinton got choked up in January, that, my friends, was definitely not PMS.

Of course, I enjoyed talking throughout the entire primary season as to who was black, and what constituted black, and was black black enough, and was black too black, and, my favorite, can black people attract white people? Or, why are all of the black people in Mississippi voting for Obama? Some commentators asked, "Do black people only vote for black people?" I would explain how black people just got the right to vote some forty-three years ago and how prior to that we didn't have the right to vote, so we couldn't vote for anybody. I also had to explain that for the first thirty years after having that right, we primarily voted for white people because it was hard to get black candidates through the pipeline just like it was hard to get women through the pipeline. I had to sort of explain it. And I am still explaining it. Had it not been for white people, Senator Obama would not have won the nomination. Nor would he have been a United States Senator because Illinois, the last time I checked, is eighty percent white.

But, of course, we keep losing this conversation because many of our correspondents and pundits, even our campaign personnel, don't understand racial and gender dynamics in American politics and how you must avoid playing to the old stereotypes that basically say women are weak. That we don't understand foreign policy. That we can't multitask by raising our families and working at the same time. Or that if we are too strong and too determined then somehow or other we are unacceptable because we then become that "B" word and, worse, that "C" word.

I could say that because, as a former presidential campaign manager, I went through every one of those stereotypes. I also went through my black stereotypes, and those are always the best ones. The stereotype that we are lazy. People would say to me, "Donna, you work so hard!" Maybe I learned that work ethic from my parents, who worked hard to put eight out of their nine kids through college. My mother was a maid, my father a janitor. We never had the luxury of sitting around being lazy. Of course, we also get the stereotype that black people aren't competent or experienced. You know I love it when you take care of a campaign that has used up its resources and you only have nine million dollars left for the rest of the campaign and the candidate you are running against, George Bush, has a hundred million. They asked me, "How will you do it by May?" And I told them, "Trust me, I know how to budget." My mother taught me how to budget.

And, of course, I faced stereotypes as a woman. I would hear, "Well, we

have to make strategic decisions about how we allocate our resources in states and use gross rating points to determine the kind of media penetration.” All of the metaphors used are sexual. Penetration. That always gets to me. I used to sit in a room and notice how the guys would cross their legs when I spoke. And I’d think, “I don’t want that.” I want you to explain what points you are planning to use and what group of people we are going to go after.

I saw misogyny in this campaign and it saddened me because Hillary Clinton was the best prepared, most viable female candidate ever – and we have seen many viable candidates. Shirley Chisholm took a crack at that glass ceiling. So did Geraldine Ferraro, Carol Mosley Brown, Elizabeth Dole, and Pat Schroeder. Many have taken a crack at it from both parties, Republican and Democrat. Every time we run, every time we increase the visibility of women in leadership positions, we take a crack at that stained glass ceiling. It is not always just clear glass. It’s stained. It’s stained with the blood and tears of so many who fought, often ignored, often left behind. So yes, I see the racial dynamics in this election. We are already telling certain voters that Obama may not be doing everything for you because he is going to be doing everything for other voters.

In this election we have also seen a new media narrative, one that really wrinkles my skin. (My hair is already gray, so what is left is my skin.) And that new narrative is: Will black people be disappointed if Obama loses? And I look at the media and I say that I think the country will be disappointed if we don’t vote for change after eight years of failed policy. Was the country disappointed when Al Gore came up short one vote in the Supreme Court? When John Kerry came up 75,000 provisional ballots short? Of course. But why are we making this a black thing? Again, that’s playing into old stereotypes. The stereotype that blacks may be violent and they may not take it well if Obama loses.

I don’t really get involved in the “Sarah Palin is incompetent” narrative. I don’t do that one. But I think her record is fair game. Her record in office, the budget she submitted, the things she cut out of the budget, her time in office as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska. By the way, I was in Alaska in July and it’s a beautiful state. I don’t know if I could see Russia while I was there, but I can tell you that I did see a lot of salmon, and I ate a great deal of it. I’ve been to forty-seven states – three more and I will be Mrs. U.S.A. without the bikini.

I think it is important to understand we cannot use these old narratives where it seems like we are trying to play “gotcha” by catching the candidates doing things that we can fit into the stereotypes. We do this

when we ask if Sarah Palin has the right kind of experience. I think this is ridiculous because we have lowered the bar for so many men running for public office. We have lowered the bar so much so that some men just had to show up in a blue suit and a red tie and we would put him in office. In fact, I have worked for many of them to get elected. We could not get qualified candidates. We could not get qualified candidates because when new, super-qualified candidates would seek the job, especially minorities and women, we would raise the bar. Higher scrutiny and expectations do not give the public the comfort that they want in their elected officials. This raising of the bar for women and minority candidates has made it difficult to get qualified women and minority candidates elected. So I try to avoid this and instead keep my focus on Palin's values and whether we agree on them. I try to keep my discussion on her record in office. I try to keep it on the fact that as a Christian conservative who does not support my values, especially my right over my body, I disagree with her. And I can be disagreeable without demonizing her. But I think it's important to understand the political context of the 24-hour cable news gab-fest/hate-fest often distracts people from the main issues.

We have to be very careful about how we deal with both racial- and gender-based stereotypes and how we treat candidates, especially those who are new to the political scene. I say this because it is always ironic to me when people ask, "How come Senator Obama is not attracting more of the white vote?" I look at them and say, with a straight face, that I have worked on seven presidential campaigns – I peaked too soon – and that every white candidate I have worked for at that level never achieved the number of the white votes we are now expecting Obama to win. I didn't work for Lyndon Johnson, and he was the only one who garnered the majority of the white vote. Every other white presidential candidate has tried to get 40% of the white vote. That was always the goal. We call that "Go get your people." We would spend a hundred million dollars to get only 40 percent of the white vote. And now, all of a sudden, we have changed the paradigm so that Obama has to achieve 50 percent.

And we saw in the Democratic primary process, where Senator Clinton's decision to stay in the race beyond February 5th was treated as an attempt by her to change the dynamics of the race. This was not true because anyone who knows anything about Democratic Party politics knew, and I kept saying this even throughout the whole talk of "she lost this state or that state," that the race is still on. Sorry. That is the nature of politics in the Democratic Party because of the way we grade; we have a proportional representation system. You can't just run people out of the game because

they lost twelve states when everyone knows that with big states coming up the race could change at any moment.

Well, the dynamics didn't change. But May 6th could have been a game-changer. Had Senator Clinton won both North Carolina and Indiana, I guarantee you that many of us, and this pundit included, would have said that the game changed. She would have been the nominee. But by losing North Carolina and barely winning Indiana, it wasn't a game-changer, and so we knew at some point that in March the race would end and it would be over. And I resented that from May 6th until June 3rd I had to defend the media about sexism. I said we had already seen the misogyny. It exists. It exists in the culture. Now it's about six more races and can you change the dynamics of this race? No. It has nothing to do with gender. It has everything to do with proportional representation. The race is essentially over because you cannot move the numbers.

So where do we go from here? I think the pipeline of minority candidates and women candidates will grow even bigger in the years to come. We have already seen that with women candidates this year. We will see more women elected at the federal and statewide levels, and we will see more minority candidates elected at the federal and statewide level. We will see money as less of a barrier because the Internet has done a great deal to democratize our politics and campaign finance. We saw that in the race in Maryland, where Donna Edwards took on an incumbent. She is now a congressman from the State of Maryland and the first black woman ever elected in Maryland. She defeated Al Wynn, an incumbent. We will see an even larger number of voters in the electorate open up to women and minority candidates. Not just as reform candidates or change candidates, but as candidates who can actually govern and do things to change the political landscape overall. Will the media catch up with it? No. The media will continue to cover campaigns as if we're in the 20th century. It's an anomaly. Will we have only one race like this one? Is Hillary is a once-in-a-lifetime candidate? Is Barack a once-in-a-lifetime candidate? No. They are now part of a growing trend of non-traditional candidates capable of running for the presidency.

So what's going to happen on Tuesday, November 4th? It is going to be a very interesting race. First, we are going to see a turnout like we have never seen before because this election season has really energized young people across the board. Both Senator Clinton and Senator Obama energized the electorate. We are going to have a long Election Night. Don't go to bed early. People will be in line in Montana until 4:00 a.m. Second, we will also see, as I mentioned, an even larger crop of women and

minority candidates elected at what I call that first and second tier; they're in the pipeline now as a result of Senator Obama and Senator Clinton putting more people out there to run as delegates, more people out there in the electorate. You will see even more sheriffs, city council members, and mayors who are minorities and women. We will break that glass ceiling. We will remove the stain in it. People are already filling the pipelines. Third, you are going to see, and again the media will not capture all these dynamics, that when we do the exit polls and we ask the American people why they voted for Senator Obama, or for even John McCain, that race will not be a big factor. There will always be racial dynamics, but it will not be the overwhelming factor in this race. People will, of course, go to the ballot box wanting change, a different economy and a different outlook. That is what will dominate the conversation.

Will race still be discussed if Obama loses? Of course. People will try to say that a certain group of white folks and a whole bunch of other people were not ready for a black president. And I am going to have to say that that is not the case. If you go back and analyze the same exit poll data from 2000 and 2004, Democrats had a hard time with this group of voters. We've had a hard time with certain groups that are culturally conservative; call them Reagan Democrats if you want. I won't call them that. I will not call them Clinton Democrats. I just say that they're Americans because, you see, I am trying to be very gentle. I grew up in the same culture as these voters. I come from the deep South. I respect their beliefs. I don't agree with them. I grew up in a Catholic Church, and I know that Democrats have a hard time with white Catholic voters. Does that make me believe that white Catholic voters are somehow anti-black? No. It makes me believe that they believe that if you don't support the church's positions on all issues, then you should not be in office.

I can rationalize why they will not support Obama. I understood why they didn't support Al Gore. Even my Dad told me that if Al Gore took away his gun, he would shoot me first. I had to convince my father that Al Gore was not trying to take away his gun. I kept thinking, where is he hanging out? Or did he change beers? The reason my father was saying that was because he had heard on the radio that Al Gore wanted to take his gun. And I am sure that at some point in the coming weeks he will call me about Barack Obama wanting to take that same rusty gun away. We can't reach some of those voters, but we should continue to try to appeal to them. They are valuable. They are important in governing once we get a new president.

I want to take some time out to answer all your questions and your comments. And if you have any recipes, I'll take those too.

I am proud that my party, the Democratic Party, has moved forward and is pushing more women and minority candidates through the door. I am proud that the Republican Party finally recognizes women as leaders and has finally put a woman on its ticket. I don't believe that she represents the kind of change I would like to see, but that's what voters will decide this fall – whether that ticket represents change. I think the ticket I will support represents change, and I will say it again for the sheer joy it gives me: I never thought I would see this day.

When my mother, Jean, and my father, Lionel, would call us into their bedroom at night and, in order of our birth – Cheryl, Sheila, Donna, Chet, Lisa, Demetri, Kevin, and Zeola (we are a Catholic family) – tell us that we could be anyone or anything we wanted to be when we grow up, I knew that certain doors were closed to women and minorities. Now, parents no longer have to lie to their children. Now, children won't giggle behind their parents' backs. We have seen a lot of change already this election season. It is just that the best change, or the change that we really need as Senator Obama would say, will not occur until we actually break that stained glass ceiling, until we actually open up the doors to the White House to someone other than a white male.

That's what I am looking forward to. That's what I believe will happen. And I hope the media finally gets the story right. I hope we don't have to talk about Obama's blackness. I hope we don't have to talk about a woman's dress or hair or hemline or husband as much as we talk about her values, character, strengths and viability as a candidate. I hope we get to the day when we don't have to stereotype all black people so I don't have to answer for black people in Colorado. How do they make their gumbo? I don't know. We all don't use seafood. Some of us use bison; some of us use chicken. It depends on what's available and what's okay. It is all about whether or not you like onions and if you make a roux. When people see us as individuals with our own personal strengths and weaknesses, our own character and personalities, we will all do better. The country will be better off and Dr. King's dream will finally be realized. So thank you, and I'm looking forward to your questions and comments and any recipes you might have.