

"Change does not happen from the top down. It happens from the bottom up... [People] arguing, agitating, mobilizing, and ultimately forcing elected officials to be accountable....That's how we're going to bring about change."  
—BARACK OBAMA, January 21, 2008

Next come the battles for the changes we voted for

## The many REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL after Election Day 2008

**AFTER CASTING HER BALLOT FOR BARACK OBAMA**, Amanda Jones said simply, "I feel good about voting for him."

Ms. Jones, of Cedar Creek, Texas (a town just south of Austin), is African-American, and what gives her vote some historic punch is that she's 109 years old. Her father was a slave. Her mother was born right after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. She's been through it all—Jim Crow segregation, women's suffrage, the Great Depression, the poll tax, FDR, the civil-rights movement, desegregation, 13 years of George W (five as gov, eight as prez), and now: Barack Obama. This last change fills her with joy, she says.

**M**e, too. As you *Lowdowners* know, I'm wary about how progressive (much less how populist) Obama's presidency will be, but—come on, let's wallow in the moment, let's greet the historic symbolism of his election with all the glee that it deserves, and let's take energy from the hope that he presents to us.

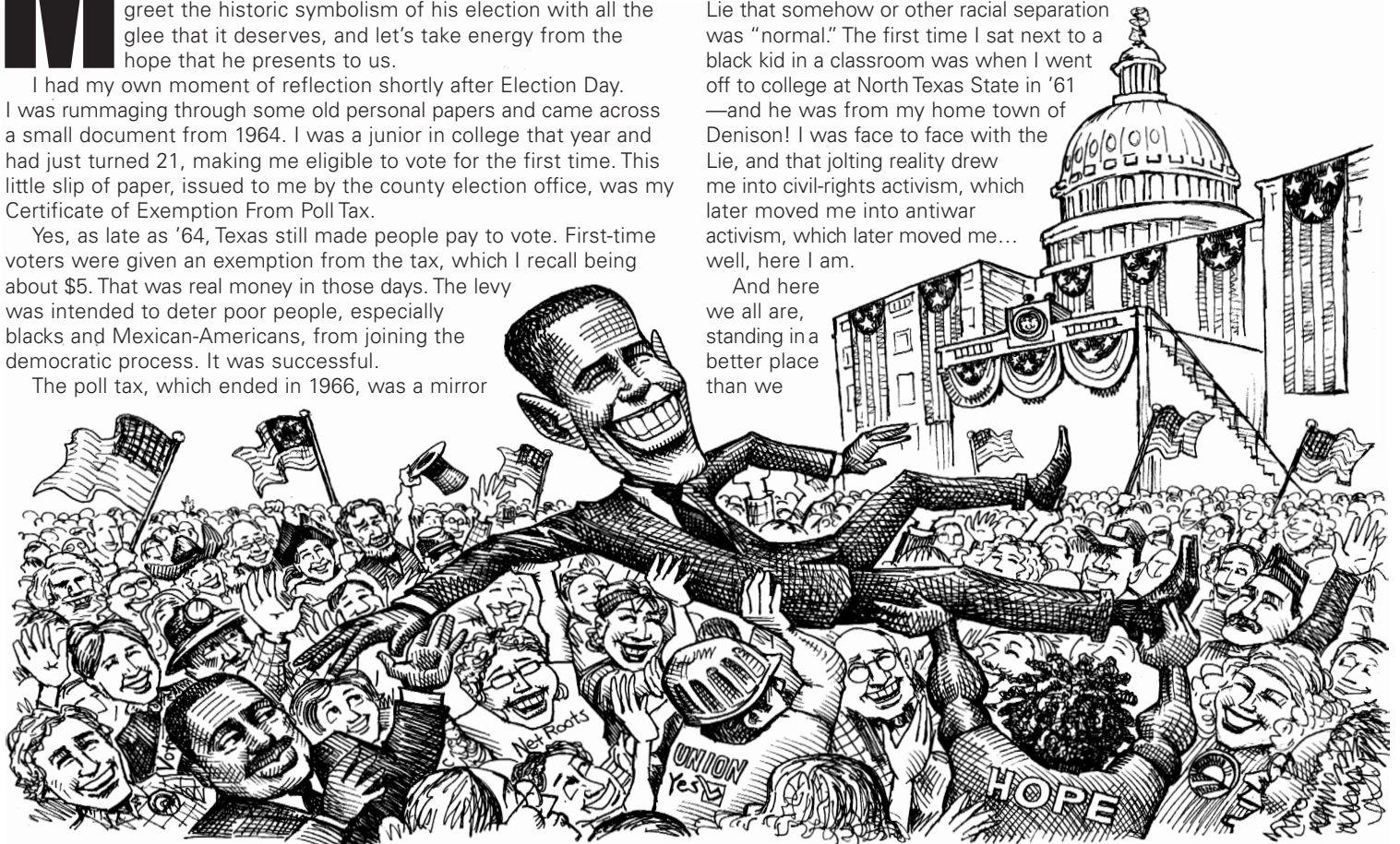
I had my own moment of reflection shortly after Election Day. I was rummaging through some old personal papers and came across a small document from 1964. I was a junior in college that year and had just turned 21, making me eligible to vote for the first time. This little slip of paper, issued to me by the county election office, was my Certificate of Exemption From Poll Tax.

Yes, as late as '64, Texas still made people pay to vote. First-time voters were given an exemption from the tax, which I recall being about \$5. That was real money in those days. The levy was intended to deter poor people, especially blacks and Mexican-Americans, from joining the democratic process. It was successful.

The poll tax, which ended in 1966, was a mirror

of the time. Growing up in Denison, Texas, my school years were totally segregated—from kindergarten through my high-school graduation in 1961. The southern youth of my day were raised on the Big Lie that somehow or other racial separation was "normal." The first time I sat next to a black kid in a classroom was when I went off to college at North Texas State in '61—and he was from my home town of Denison! I was face to face with the Lie, and that jolting reality drew me into civil-rights activism, which later moved me into antiwar activism, which later moved me... well, here I am.

And here we all are, standing in a better place than we



Most of the media and most Congress critters call the Bushites' gift to their pals on Wall Street the "\$700 billion bailout."

That's a pretty big wad, but it's only the ante. There's also a secret bailout that Bloomberg News says has now topped \$2 trillion! These are emergency rescue loans from U.S taxpayers that the Federal Reserve handed to America's biggest banks, investment firms, and insurance companies.

Which financial outfits got this money, and how much did each get? That's a secret, say the Bushites and the bankers. Well, what did the beneficiaries put up as collateral to protect taxpayers? None of your business, say the insiders. Excuse me, but that's our money.

Then there's Section 382. This is a tax-code provision passed by Congress 22 years ago banning a scam whereby big banks shunt their losing deals into dummy companies, then take over those companies and deduct the losses from their own taxable incomes. Good policy.

Now, Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson has unilaterally, autocratically, and illegally repealed Section 382. He didn't even inform Congress, much less consult with lawmakers, about his astonishing usurpation of power.

Hank wanted big banks to be able to use these tax shelters to finance their takeovers of smaller bank competitors, so he simply vetoed the congressional ban on such scams. Thus, when Wells Fargo took over Wachovia this year, it got Wachovia plus about \$25 billion from Paulson's tax dodge. Over all, the 382 giveaway is expected to cost taxpayers another \$140 billion.

This ever-more-odious  
—continued on page 3

came from. The thing we can celebrate is not solely that Obama's going into the Oval Office, but that so many people over so many years worked so hard, enduring so many ups and downs, to get to this day.

I'm not just talking about the racial breakthrough that he symbolizes, but also the long, incremental, and steady advance of progressive ideas and ideals pushed by generations of Americans. Obama is part of a continuum that flows from the revolutionary beginnings of our country right through today's young, innovative, netroots community that gave his campaign its vibrancy. We have made progress, and we will make more. That's because uncelebrated legions of good people just keep pushing.

### Return Day

After a long, long, long political season of attack ads, lies, and slime-ball nastiness, a glow of political serenity and sanity (sweetness, even) emerged on November 6 from the small, often-ignored state of Delaware.

Maybe I'm the last to learn about Return Day, but I think it's the best political innovation in years. Actually, it's hardly new, dating back to around 1792. It's a grand post-election celebration in which the candidates for various state and local offices join with the public in front of the Sussex County Courthouse to hear the town crier announce the official returns from the courthouse balcony.

The former opponents—victors and vanquished—ride to the courthouse together in horse-drawn carriages and antique cars. For example, Joe Biden, who also ran for re-election to his Senate seat this year, rode in an elegant white carriage with Christine O'Donnell, the Republican he defeated.

After the parade and reading of returns, the Sussex County Republican and Democratic chairs jointly put their hands on a ceremonial hatchet, lowering it into an ornate cabinet. This symbolic Burial of the Tomahawk officially ends the political season.

Surrounding all of this is a big festival, with music, food, and libations for all. How civilized!

Check it out: [www.returnday.org](http://www.returnday.org)

### Turnout

Boom time! About 131 million ballots were cast, the most ever in a presidential run. That's up from 122 million in 2004, the second-highest number in our history.

The percentage of participation by eligible voters was also impressive,

though not a record. About 61.4% of eligibles went to the polls, slightly under the 62.8% of the Johnson-Goldwater contest in 1964 and the 63.8% record set in Kennedy's squeaker over Nixon in 1960.

■ **YOUTH.** A generation awoke and asserted itself powerfully this year. Though final tabulations have not been completed, it looks like 24 million 18-to-29-year-olds voted—54.5% of those eligible. Only in 1972, when 18-year-olds were first able to vote, was the percentage higher, with a 55.4% turnout.

Sixty-six percent of young voters went for Obama—the largest percentage ever to support one candidate over the others.

Despite various Republican efforts to suppress turnout by college students, campus voting blossomed. For example, compared to 2004 (itself a good turnout year for campuses), voting increased 45% at the University of Colorado, 66% at the University of South Florida, 92% at Ohio State, 122% at the University of Maryland, and 287% at Indiana University.

■ **LATINO.** A few short months ago, the conventional wisdom among political pundits was that Latinos would not vote for an African-American. But—hello—66% did cast their ballots for Obama, and a whopping 76% of young Latinos voted for him. Turnout in these communities was about 10 million voters—a 30% increase over 2004. This made a big difference for Obama in Colorado, Florida, and New Mexico, as well as in such surprising places as North Carolina and Virginia.

■ **EVANGELICALS.** In September, I knew something different was going on when I went to Colorado Springs, home to dozens of conservative Evangelical groups. Considered the capital of Evangelical America, this city has mostly been written off by Democratic presidential campaigns, but Obama had storefront offices there, 10 paid staffers, and hundreds of volunteers. He was not giving up on these people, refusing to surrender them to a destiny of right-wing Republicanism.

He knew he couldn't win the overall Evangelical vote, but he could reach out and make gains, particularly among younger Evangelicals, appealing to their broader, Biblically grounded concerns about such issues as

poverty, environmental degradation, and human rights. As a result, Obama more than doubled the support that John Kerry received from young, white Evangelicals (18 to 44 years old), especially in the battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. McCain still won 74% of national Evangelical voters, but that is 10 points less than Bush got four years ago.

### Just go away, Joe

Joe the Plumber became a widely ballyhooed and ubiquitous stage prop for McCain in the final weeks of the race. The GOP candidate even did a weeklong Joe the Plumber Tour, claiming that Obama's "share the wealth" tax plan would snuff out the dreams of aspiring small business people like Joe.

But Joe was phony baloney. He was not a licensed plumber, he actually would benefit from Obama's tax proposal, and—get this—his name was not Joe!

He's Samuel J. Wurzelbacher, and you'd think he might be embarrassed enough by his deceit (and defeat) to step away from the publicity machine. But, no—he's starting his own blog, putting out a book, and launching a conservative website to make Obama "accountable." Accountable? Samuel might start by making himself accountable.

### Change in the Senate

Sometimes change comes slowly, as if on the back of an old turtle. Take Robert Byrd, the 91-year-old senator from West Virginia. Enthused by the vim and vigor that Obama is bringing to the nation's capital, Byrd has announced that he will step aside next January as chairman of the powerful Appropriations Committee. It's time for "a new day," he said, opening up the slot for a younger generation. Well...sort of. Next in line is Sen. Dan Inouye of Hawaii. He's 84.

### Victories

Progressives won hundreds of important contests that the national media ignored. For example, in the October *Lowdown*, we mentioned some worthy contenders for a few of these unheralded offices, and we're happy to report some satisfying results. *Kevin Killer*, the 28-year-old Oglala Lakota tribal member, is now a South Dakota legislator; *Monisha Merchant* and *Joe Neguse* took two of the three seats up for election on the Colorado Board of Regents; and

Peter Goldmark weathered the big-money opposition of such timber giants as Weyerhaeuser to become Washington State's next commissioner of public lands.

Our friends at Wellstone Action also had a good outing. This grassroots group, which trains candidates, campaign managers, and organizers, had 247 of its graduates across the country running for all sorts of offices, from school boards to Congress—and 97 of them won election in 24 states. One of them, for example, is Denise Juneau, who'll be Montana's new superintendent of schools, the first Native American elected statewide.

Equally important are a plethora of initiative victories, including health-care reform and a clean-energy proposal in Missouri, a major extension of children's health care in Montana, long-term health care and a death-with-dignity provision in Washington State, medical marijuana in Michigan and Massachusetts, and a paid sick-leave initiative in Milwaukee.

**Poetic justice**

McCain and Palin kept trying to convince voters that they were a couple of honest-to-god mavericks. Apparently, the claim didn't wash with folks in Maverick County, Texas—a place named for Sam Maverick, the early Texas rancher whose unorthodox ranching practices gave us the term "maverick." Obama beat McCain in Maverick County, 78% to 21%.

**Dobson's delirium**

"Be aware," warned an apocalyptic document issued by right-wing Christian political operative James Dobson. Just before Election Day, his Focus on the Family organization put out a 16-page, detailed account of "changes that are likely" if, god forbid, Obama won. Written as an

imagined report from a pained Christian who has endured Obama's horrifying first term, the "Letter from 2012 in Obama's America" was intended to spook Evangelicals and goose up their support for McCain. This Karl Rovian-style missive is almost Halloweenish in tone, presenting a litany of 34 imaginary Obama-induced policy changes that would turn the devil loose on America, including these gems:

*Obama gets several appointments to the Supreme Court, and his new 6-3 liberal majority mandates that the Boy Scouts must "hire homosexual scoutmasters and allow them to sleep in tents with young boys."*

*He ends illegal wiretapping of Americans' phone calls and emails, resulting in four terrorist bomb attacks, including two on small towns (Wasilla?), with the result that "no place seems safe."*

*He nationalizes health care, requiring that all doctors and other providers work for the federal government, that care be rationed, and that hospital access be denied to anyone older than 80.*

*He declassifies Bush's secret White House papers, leading to ACLU lawsuits, with the result that (O, the horror!) "dozens of Bush officials from cabinet level on down, are in jail."*

*That diabolical Supreme Court strikes again, requiring schools to teach first graders about "the goodness of homosexuality" and allowing TV networks to broadcast programs at all hours of the day containing "explicit portrayals of sexual acts."*

**Worst ad**

The "winner" in this sorry category is not one of John McCain's awful "Obama is a terrorist"

itches. Nor is it the despicable ad that Sen. Elizabeth Dole ran in North Carolina against her Democratic challenger, Kay Hagan, using an actress to make it seem as though Hagan was saying "There is no God." Hagan (a state senator and a Christian who even teaches a Sunday school class) responded angrily—and defeated Dole.

Worse even than these was a truly bizarre and repugnant ad televised here in Austin by the Republican running against the incumbent county tax assessor. It depicted a man lying in a bathtub filled with ice and trickles of blood. He had just cut out one of his own kidneys, a narrator explained, because high property taxes left him no choice but to sell his organs. "It's time to stop the bleeding," the narrator said.

Aside from the yuck factor of the ad, it totally misrepresented the job—the assessor neither sets tax rates nor determines property value. The kidney man lost. Badly.

**Staying connected**

Thomas Jefferson had a network of pamphleteers and a group of wildly democratic newspapers as his medium. The Populist Movement of the 1880s and 90s had a speakers' bureau with 35,000 "lecturers" linked to movement chapters all across the country. FDR understood the power of radio to communicate directly with voters, and JFK grasped the potency of the cool medium, television, to connect his administration to the public.

Obama, however, will have the most direct, most democratic, and most intriguing tie with his core constituency: the two-way electronic pipeline of the Web.

Building on the pioneering efforts of Howard Dean's campaign in 2004, Obama turned this into a

bailout is the biggest bank robbery ever.

**MONSANTO'S LATEST BIOTECH MIRACLE**

Once again, here comes the Monsanto Medicine Show! This corporate flim-flammer is hawking yet another brand of pricey biotech snake oil, guaranteed to work miracles. Monsanto promises that its latest high-tech hocus-pocus will allow farmers to grow crops without water. Amazing! Well, at least not much water. "More crop per drop" is the PR slogan, exploiting public fears about global warming and food shortages to sell corn it has genetically altered to survive in a drought.

It's a miracle plant, they say—a drought-tolerant crop that even Momma Nature hasn't been able to produce in millions of years of evolution! But—shazaam—we made it in our handy gene-splicing machine in no time at all! It's just what those poor people of Africa need, say the hucksters, so step right up and buy a ton of our magic corn seed!

Not so fast. What are these mystery genes? Monsanto won't say. From what species of plants or animals did you take the genes? Trade secret, says Monsanto. What happens when the pollen of this frankencorn gets loose in nature, and what are you doing to prevent that?

Trust us, says Monsanto. Why not just push for better water management, which is easier, more effective, less costly, and won't endanger our health? We can't profit from that, says Monsanto. Well what about labeling this corn? No way, says Monsanto, because then consumers wouldn't buy it.

Like other biotech "miracles," this one amounts to a kernel of corporate greed suspended in unex-

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*The Hightower Lowdown* (ISSN 1524-4881) is published monthly by Public Intelligence Inc., 375 South End Ave #14P New York NY 10280. ©2008 in the United States. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: 1 year, \$15; 2 years, \$27. Add \$8/year for Mexico or Canada; add \$12/year for overseas airmail. Back issues \$2 postpaid. Allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: *The Hightower Lowdown*, P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011.

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**DONT BE GLUM—GO SHOPPING!**

Yes, these are tough economic times, but when the going gets tough, the tough get going...to Neiman Marcus, hot on the high heels of Sarah Palin.

Hoping to cut through all of the doom and gloom in today's economy, the luxury retailer has issued its annual Christmas Book. "I think we all need a break," says a perky Neiman executive, and what better break can you get than to buy something shiny and playful for someone on your gift list?

You might choose the ultra-shiny limited-edition 2009 BMW, for example. It's listed in Neiman's catalogue at \$160,000. Or you could turn someone from gloomy to giddy with Neiman's delightful stack of hit records! You get the top 100 records from each of the past 35 years—that's 3,500 records for only \$275,000.

Now here's a novel Christmas surprise: a dozen thoroughbred racehorses! They'll be stabled and trained by a top Kentucky horse farm, and you get it all for \$10 million. That might seem a little pricey, what with Wall Street wobbling, but, as the head of the stable put it, "What better time to have a little levity and fantasy?"

Now, I'm sure there are spoilsports who'll complain that flaunting luxury in hard times is smug and insensitive. But hold your thoroughbreds right there. In recognition of financial realities, Neiman is sending out a special catalogue featuring gifts under \$300 for "aspirational shoppers"—those looking for just a touch of luxury.

It's such thoughtfulness that makes Neiman's what it is.

prodigious political force. His *my.barackobama.com* website allowed him and his massive base of internet activists to raise a record-breaking sum of money, to organize locally in every state, to counter the McCainites' many smear attacks instantly, to bypass the conventional media and control the campaign's message, and to coordinate and monitor the best-ever get-out-the-vote effort by a Democrat.

This remarkable tool is not going away. Obama wants to bring this growing interactive community directly inside the government, and—most significantly—the community itself fully expects to collaborate and wield power with the new administration. For the transition period, the digital link-up is *change.gov*. Last month one of Obama's chief internet staffers posted a message on *my.barackobama.com*—which was visited by over 10 million people during the campaign—that "the community we've built together is just the beginning."

**Change from within**

If last month's sweeping vote for change is to come to fruition, We the People must be the ones who nurture it. We can't just crank back in our La-Z-Boys and say, "We did our job—now Barack can do the heavy lifting for us." We tried this laid-back approach after Clinton won in 1992—with unpleasant and unprogressive results.

If you think your job is done, look at who's waiting for Obama in Washington: a swarm of Wall Street bankers, the war machine, 13,000 corporate lobbyists, naysaying Republican Congress critters, right-wing yackety-yackers, weak-kneed Democrats, the conformist media, and other powerful forces of busi-



**Lowdown's 10th Anniversary**

WITH THE FEBRUARY 2009 ISSUE, *The Hightower Lowdown* will complete its **first 10 years of publication!** The March issue will start the second decade. Our feisty little newsletter **leapt out of the blocks in 1999** and rose rapidly to become one of the most widely read political publications in the country. **Watch your mail** for a 10th anniversary message coming soon from our fearless leader, **Jim Hightower!**

ness-as-usual politics. These insiders intend to shape his presidency in their image.

We have to be the counterforce, pushing insistently, vociferously, and persistently from the outside. Who's "we"? You and me—determined citizens, working through our personal networks, public-interest organizations, progressive media, the netroots nation, unions, community groups, and other connections to grassroots activism.

Obama was the candidate of change, but he'll be the president of change *only* if we buck him up and back him up. We must stand up and speak out on every move the insiders make; we must propose and push progressive ideas and ideals; and we must certainly expose and vigorously oppose any capitulations he will be pressured to make to the corporate powers.

If his presidency is to be worthy of the enormous effort that so many put into it, worthy of the deep potential of this political moment in American history, you and I have to be on the alert and in the face of power. *The Lowdown* will be front and center for this ongoing ObamaWatch.

From the start, I've felt that the most significant thing about the

Obama phenomenon was not Obama, but the phenomenon—the fact that millions of ordinary Americans (especially young people) were not merely enthusiastic but were engaged, organizing and mobilizing, taking possession of their democracy, and doing the grunt work that is the essence of self-government.

People really do want change—not as a political buzzword, but as a fundamental matter of national direction and policy. In fact, for some time, folks have been shouting: CHANGE! Get our troops and America's reputation out of Iraq. Provide good health care for all. Reign in greedheaded CEOs and corporate lobbyists. End "tinkle down" economics. Re-invest in America's infrastructure. Rebuild middle-class opportunities. Deal with global climate change. End the use of torture. Get serious about green energy. Restore our stolen liberties. Stop polluters. And, generally, reinstate the Common Good as America's governing ethic.

As Obama himself often said on the campaign trail, he is not the change. We are. By electing him, we opened the White House door to the possibility of change. Now we must see it through.

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10:12 December 2008

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