

THE RACE CARD: A POST-ELECTION UPDATE

By Richard Thompson Ford (BA '88)

At the beginning of

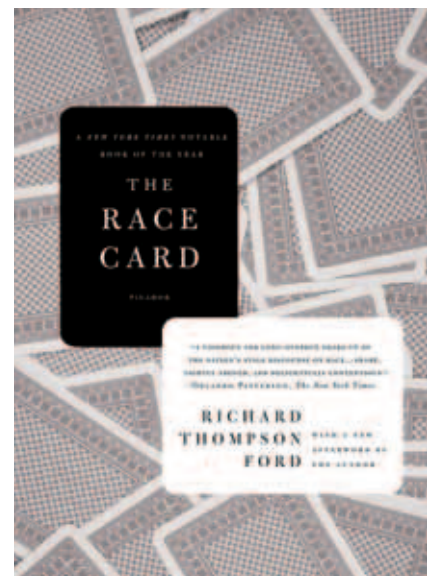
the 21st century the United States swore in its first black president. The tall, handsome, and charismatic senator had survived the smear tactics and dirty tricks of his rival for the Democratic nomination, the bad press generated by his opinionated and outspoken spouse, a bitter fight in the general election, and the threat of assassination when he took the oath of office. President David Palmer made history in the hit counterterrorism drama *24*, becoming the most popular president since Ronald Reagan, easily besting his ratings rivals Jed Bartlet of *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief*'s Mackenzie Allen—to say nothing of such prime-time mediocrities as William Jefferson Clinton and George W. Bush. The nation felt in good hands with President Palmer, secure in the knowledge that a strong, ethical, and pragmatic leader would keep the homeland secure from terrorist threats both foreign and domestic. The Nielsen ratings proved that the average American would not only accept a black president—but would embrace him.

Four years later Barack Obama announced his run for the presidency. And by early 2008, the field had narrowed to two: Obama and Hillary Clinton. Democrats were euphoric about the possibility of setting new and historic precedents. The first black! The first woman! No matter who won the nomination, the Democratic Party would emerge from the convention strong and united behind a candidate who would make history by his or her very presence on the ticket.

But as the campaign wore on and Hillary Clinton's prospects dimmed, feminists began to seethe with resentment and frustration. Pundits had focused obsessively on Clinton's hair, makeup, wardrobe, cleavage. They had berated her as a castrating dragon lady and an angry and shrill banshee. MSNBC's Tucker Carlson quipped, "When she comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs." Ken Rudin of NPR compared her to the psychotic jilted lover played by Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* and columnist Mike Barnicle said she looked "like everyone's first wife standing outside a probate court." Author Marc Rudov complained about Clinton's "nagging voice" and opined that "when Barack Obama speaks, men hear, 'Take off for the future,' and when Hillary Clinton speaks, men hear, 'Take out the garbage.'"

Their righteous indignation did not stay confined to such conspicuous examples of chauvinism; it quickly spilled over to Obama himself. *Wasn't*

Obama winning because of male chauvinism? Gloria Steinem penned an angry screed for *The New York Times* op-ed page, in which she insisted that "the sex barrier is not taken as seriously as the racial one." "I'm not advocating a competition for who has it toughest," Steinem claimed, but her op-ed declared women the presumptive winners: "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House." Walter Mondale's former running mate Geraldine Ferraro offered an even less nuanced version of the same complaint, suggesting Obama was, effectively, the



beneficiary of an electoral affirmative action: “If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman of any color, he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he his.”

Obama supporters were furious. And many blacks thought these comments trivialized racism—or worse, reflected it. *Lucky?* Had black skin—what W.E.B. Du Bois called the badge of insult—become instead a sign of privilege? Many thought the observation of comedian Chris Rock struck closer to the mark: “Not a single white person in America would trade places with me. And I’m rich!” Had Steinem and Ferraro forgotten the racist death threats that Obama

query had all of the conceptual futility of grade-school kids arguing over whether Superman could kick Spider-Man’s butt in a fight, but with none of the playful charm. The culture wars of the 1980s broke out all over again on the opinion pages and blogs of the nation. Typically, the opening salvo involved some thin and one-sided evidence that “established” that one or the other candidate had it worse because of bigotry (Clinton has to put on makeup and worry about the color of her pantsuits/Obama can’t go on the attack without sounding like a black thug) and then added a long litany of injustices that had little or nothing to do with Clinton or Obama (on the one hand: slavery, Jim Crow, job discrimi-

president. This obtuse and unresolvable moral question, shot through with anxiety, desperation, and raw self-interest, had ruined more potentially successful activist organizations, academic conferences, college seminars, and political movements than all the *agents provocateurs* J. Edgar Hoover ever deployed. Now it was poised to ruin the Democrats as well.

By early 2008 the Democrats’ presumptive cakewalk to the White House started to look like a cross between a street riot and a death march. Comedy Central’s *Colbert Report* began a nightly feature on the latest squabbling among the Democrats, called “Democracy Now,” which began with an ani-

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received on an almost daily basis? Were they so cloistered in their all-white, gated communities and tony country clubs that they didn’t notice the poverty and despair of the black community on the South Side of Chicago, where Obama worked as a community organizer and still attended church with his family? Did they really think it was tougher to be a rich white lady with a livery chauffer and a half a dozen yellow pantsuits than to be a black man who can’t hail a cab even when he’s wearing a business suit?

As the increasingly bitter struggle wore on, the question boiled down to this: *Which is worse, racism or sexism?* This

nation, racial profiling, segregation, the Tuskegee experiment, the Jena Six; on the other: rape, pornography, anti-abortionists, sexual harassment, prostitution, the glass ceiling, lazy and macho husbands, laundries that charge more to clean blouses than shirts). The sheer tedious length of this catalog of grievances was meant to overwhelm all arguments to the contrary, leaving only one conclusion: Sexism (or racism) is worse.

The narrow question of whether Hillary Clinton’s campaign had been hindered by sexism more than Barack Obama’s had been by racism was muddled together with a larger question: Was racism or sexism the more pressing social problem? The real argument wasn’t over which *candidate* had been harmed more by bigotry, but which *type of bigotry was worse*, which social justice struggle was more important, and, hence by implication, whether it would be more profound to elect the first black or the first female

mated graphic of a donkey being split in two. While re-fighting the culture wars, the Democrats were test-marketing the tactics that Republicans would later use against whichever candidate was eventually nominated.

What started as a historic opportunity for Democrats to transcend the divisive politics of race and gender turned out to be another sad demonstration of the temptations and costs of playing the race (and sex) cards. The historic campaign for the Democratic nomination had slipped first into tragedy and then, as Karl Marx would have expected, into farce. **SL**

RICHARD THOMPSON FORD (BA '88) is the author of *The Race Card: How Bluffing About Bias Makes Race Relations Worse*, recently released in paperback. This essay is an excerpt from the new paperback edition of the book.