

SPORT OPINION

You can tell they love Che. He has the gentlest nature with them. He doesn't tell them. He is just with them.

JOHN HARMS SPORT 6

COMMENT & DEBATE

Competing dreams of liberation do battle against tradition

JAMES RESTON JNR

This election could realise a vision of a different America.

WHEN I came of age in North Carolina in the early 1960s, my university town of Chapel Hill was 95% segregated by race. There were separate bathrooms and drinking fountains for "coloured"; the eateries displayed signs about "reserving the right" to serve whom they pleased — and there were three black students in the law school. In the years I spent there as a student, beginning with the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro in 1959, I was part of an extraordinary, nascent revolu-

tion. When I left the university in 1963, the public accommodations of Chapel Hill were 95% integrated. I had been a witness to and a participant in history.

With my own children now, I have always longed for them to have the same experience, and in some real sense, with the current American election, they are having that. But the 5% recalcitrants who remained were still plenty mean back then. The year after I left the university, a motel on the edge of town called the Watts Motel was still fiercely segregated. When my friends went out to protest peacefully, chanting and lying harmlessly on the motel's lawn, Mrs Watts came out, squatted over a protest leader, and urinated on him. Eliminating racism in America, I realised, is a lifelong process.

Barack Obama symbolises for me a kind of personal measure of

how far the American South and America at large has come since then. Blatant racism has for the most part been eliminated, and North Carolina has transformed itself into something of a beacon for racial harmony.

We are now into addressing circles and circles of hidden racism that lie beneath overt displays of discrimination. Those circles can seem endless in their downward spiral. Obama's election as president would be the realisation of an old dream: a colour-blind society politically and socially, without losing the rich cultural contributions of African-Americans to American culture. But his defeat could put on display again an ugly under-seam of America.

I married in 1971, and my new wife almost immediately entered Duke Law School in Durham, North Carolina. The

graduating class of 120 that year boasted only eight women. The dominant group was a buttoned-up group of white males who aspired to lucrative careers in business and Wall Street law firms.

At Duke these feisty women of the feminist avant garde fought for their space and their respect against the contempt and outright discrimination of both the male students and patronising male professors. And later, when they went out into the dusty, rural courtrooms of outback North Carolina, they found themselves patronised again with such statements as the "little lady for the defence". Pity the throwback chauvinist who would try such talk now.

Now the dream of women's liberation and the dream of black liberation are competing. In the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the

vision of a society that has finally shattered its "glass ceiling", that has as many women corporate heads and politicians as men, would seem to have its realisation. Women students are now in the majority at Duke Law School.

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The competition of these two dreams in the election of 2008 was thrilling at first. The prospect of choosing between the first black president and the first woman president, while rejecting the catastrophe of the Bush years, was delicious and heady and uplifting and oh so different. The warrior class was on the run. Change was the mantra. Obama's

slogan, "Yes we can" competed with her slogan, "Yes we will", and either was fine with me.

Since there is no real difference between them on policy, the liberal is thrown back on sentimentality. Which dream is more important, we asked ourselves. Which dream should be realised first? It was the stuff of the best drama, choosing not between good and bad, or the more usual choice, between bad and worse, but between good and good.

But then the primary season droned on and on, month after month. The candidates' messages became stale and boring. Even Obama's soaring rhetoric began to sound hollow. Clinton turned negative, tearing both at Obama personally and at the dream he represents.

Behind the scenes the old dirty tricks of innuendo and code words started once again.

Clinton's campaign began to tap the hidden racism in America. The product of Wellesley College and Yale Law School, she presented herself as the darling of the working class, whatever the working class of America is any more. Places like Ohio and Pennsylvania and Kentucky seemed to buy it, and rewarded her with victory over Obama.

The air is being sucked out of the room, and it is getting harder to believe that once the Democrats decide between the two, that intoxicating air can be pumped back in.

There they go again: liberals tearing one another down like they always do. When this has happened in the past, the conservatives stand by, eager and salivating, and wait right back into power. I need to remind myself that only 25 million people have voted in the pri-

maries; 135 million will vote in November.

Must it always be so? I have never witnessed a national election with this much excitement. New Dreams compete with Old Realities. Is the vision of Martin Luther King really about to be realised? Or are we going to find out just how deep and abiding is the country's hidden racism?

Dreams come and go while traditions are always with us.

Perhaps I shouldn't allow my hopes to get too high.

James Reston jnr is the author of *The Conviction of Richard Nixon: The Untold Story of the Frost/Nixon Interviews*. He is in Melbourne for tonight's opening of the MTC production of Peter Morgan's play based on his book.

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