

What Obama's victory means

President Barack Obama ... how sweet it is.

As I sat transfixed on my television watching Obama make history by becoming the first African-American president of the United States, I felt like I was witnessing the dawn of a new era. I felt REALLY proud of my country.

Lest I be accused of being unpatriotic like the vicious attacks against Michelle Obama after she expressed similar sentiments during the campaign — let me state unequivocally that I have the same unwavering love for my motherland that a daughter has for her mother even though they may disagree at times. America is a great country, but it has a tainted history that has not always measured up to its high ideals or instilled a sense of pride.

Like so many Americans, I was clinging to Obama's every word, as he made his victory speech. Obama ended his journey, much like he began it about 22 months ago, with a message of unity, bipartisanship and hope, and the grace that we have come to expect from him.

Amidst the euphoria of the moment, I could not help but reflect on all those who have suffered and died for the right of African-Americans to vote, ride public transportation and attend school, things that we take for granted today.

One such great American is U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, a national hero who marched alongside the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement.

Lewis, who was overcome with emotion as he witnessed the fruition of Dr. King's dream — Obama's victory — after years of discrimination, violence and bloodshed, knows first-hand the great sacrifices



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that have been made to arrive at this moment.

In 1961 in Alabama, Lewis and 12 other black and white civil rights activists took part in the "Freedom Rides," in which they rode buses across the South to test a U.S. Supreme Court ruling to desegregate public transportation. The Freedom Rides was the brainchild of the Congress of Racial Equality, led by James Farmer, and the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, headed by Lewis.

Even though the law was on their side, the Freedom Riders were beaten and arrested by an angry mob after attempting to sit in the front seats of buses and enter "whites-only" waiting rooms.

Lewis also was brutally beaten in 1965 when he led 600 nonviolent protesters in a march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., in support of voting rights for blacks. The march was cut short by state troopers who attacked the protesters with night sticks, bull whips and tear gas, trampling many with horses. Lewis suffered a fractured skull in the attack known as "Bloody Sunday."

The vicious beatings, which were televised, outraged the nation and prompted President Lyndon Johnson to lobby the support of Congress and sign into law the National Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Although we have come a long way since the days of Jim Crow laws, an Obama presidency cannot

heal all the wounds of decades of discrimination and disenfranchisement in America. However, Obama's remarkable victory, and the coalition that made it possible, signifies that America is capable of looking beyond its racial, ethnic and cultural differences, and rising above its tainted past.

Obama's victory also gives us hope for the future at a time when the nation desperately needs something and someone to believe in.

Some tried to squash Obama's dream — many saw it as an impossible dream — and mocked him for spreading "false hope" and called him naive. But he remained steadfast in his belief that he could help change the status quo, and that love and faith could conquer hate and fear. He never wavered in his faith in the good nature of most Americans, and he persevered with a simple mantra:

"Yes we can."

While his opponents engaged in ruthless, name-calling tactics in an attempt to discredit him, he stayed on the high road, making them look small-minded and petty.

In the end, Obama raised the bar of American politics by proving to the world that it is possible to maintain your integrity and dignity in an election and still prevail.

Unfortunately, Obama's beloved grandmother did not live to see his glorious victory; she died Sunday night in her sleep. This undoubtedly cast a dark cloud on an otherwise joyous night for Obama — as more than 200,000 well-wishers packed Chicago's Grant Park. I can't help thinking that his grandmother along with his mother, who died 13 years ago, and his forefathers, whose shoulders he stands on, are looking down on him with a huge smile.

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