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Why Obama

In 1990, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I first saw Barack Obama. On a cold winter's night, someone pointed him out, walking in the distance: "There goes the first Black President of the Harvard Law Review."

I took notice. Even as a first-year law student, I knew that the Harvard Law Review was the most prestigious law journal in America. Getting into Harvard Law School is not easy. Making it onto the law review is incredibly difficult. Being elected President is nearly impossible. To win that position not only requires enormous intelligence but a deep political sensitivity, to get conservatives, liberals, and moderates to join together behind a common cause. This is why I'm not surprised that Obama has done so well despite his relative lack of political experience.

But Harvard pedigree is not why I'm voting for Obama.

As a Professor of Law at UCLA, I study race relations and civil rights, including issues that affect Asian Americans generally and Korean Americans specifically. It comforts me that Obama taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago. This means that he has a deep understanding of core constitutional values, such as checks-and-balances, due process, and equal protection of the laws. This first-hand understanding that comes from being a teacher, who wrestles with students to think hard and independently, will be invaluable as our nation continues its endless war on terror. Korean Americans should not forget that in the name of "military necessity," we have done awful things to immigrants and racial minorities.

But academic experience is not why I'm voting for Obama.

Indeed, my support is not even based on strict comparisons of voting records. In terms of their votes, Obama and Clinton are far more similar than different. So, why Obama?

I choose Obama because more than any political leader in recent memory, he has the potential to transform how we think and talk about race in America. His biography—a father from Kenya, a mother from Kansas, raised in Indonesia and Hawaii—means that he understands what it means to be different, to be an outsider, to be looked at skeptically by the mainstream. We as Korean Americans also understand what it means to be different, to be misunderstood. And we should welcome the possibility that the next President of the United States—the ultimate insider—might share this understanding.

In 1992, April 29, I recall watching the small television in the lounge of Gannett House, the building that houses the Harvard Law Review. I witnessed Los Angeles burn after the Rodney King verdict was announced. It was difficult to repress the tears. Where were the police? How could things have gotten this out of hand? How could there be so much bad blood between Koreans, Blacks, and Latinos? I felt deep frustration at how the

mainstream media covered the crisis. Where were the voices of Koreans and Korean Americans? Why weren't we being heard? More than 15 years later, much has changed, but much has remained the same.

There is one way we, as a community, can speak right now for change. Some skeptics assume that Koreans will not vote for a Black candidate. But that is a ridiculous generalization. For the Korean American community to vote for Obama-not simply because he is Black but because he is a remarkable candidate, in all his complexity and potential-would send a clear message rejecting any such politics of racial division. It would powerfully demonstrate that Koreans are a people not cabined by prejudice or parochialism. Our vote would be a soaring symbol for change.

And who knows, after this African American has blazed the trail, maybe someday, someone whose biography reaches to the shores of Korea or Asia will follow Obama's footsteps. I look forward to the day when that becomes possible.