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Book Review: Seeking for a City

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Seeking for a City


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Gwen Ifill’s The Breakthrough sparked controversy even before its publication when, last fall, some suggested that because Ifill was writing a book about Barack Obama, she could not moderate impartially the vice-presidential debate between Sarah Palin and Joseph Biden. (This canard proved unfounded as Ifill presided over a spirited and evenhanded debate.) More relevant, perhaps, to the issues Ifill broaches in The Breakthrough was her interview in October 2007 with eight of the nine African-American students who 50 years before had integrated Little Rock’s Central High School. Ifill let these now middle-aged adults recall their experience, what they had learned about themselves, what the ordeal had brought home to them about race relations in the United States, but ultimately what their education had allowed them to achieve. As they spoke, one could see in Ifill’s demeanor—always professional—her awareness that she in no small measure owed her position to the courage and fortitude of the Little Rock nine. Their breakthrough opened the passageway for much that followed.

Ifill begins her account of the new generation of African-American politicians by noting that in her thirty years as a journalist, beginning with reporting on the attempts to integrate South Boston High School, nothing had “prepared [her] for 2008 and the astonishing rise of Barack Obama.” She uses as her theme the tensions, sometimes conflicts, between the older generation of African American politicians, tested in the protests and marches of the Civil Rights movement, and the younger generation, the beneficiaries of the advances made by those who preceded. The contretemps between Reverend Jesse Jackson whose off-the-cuff disparaging remark about Barack Obama earned him a sharp rebuke from his son representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. neatly symbolizes the generational difference. Ifill views politics as a sandpapering process where groups with opposing interests rub against one another and create friction. For the earlier generation of African-American politicians and activists the friction resulted from racial conflict as black Americans asserted themselves against entrenched and entitled white political power. While many of these conflicts are by no means resolved, the younger generation with no direct experience of Selma and Birmingham has moved away from an emphasis on racial issues to focus on issues that will garner widespread—i.e. white—support. “The rift,” Ifill points out, “between African-American politicians born in the 1980s and 40s and those born in the 1960s and 70s is a deep one that is often papered over. The worldview of the older politicians…was defined by limitation…. They could not attend the schools they preferred or aspire to the jobs they believed they were qualified to hold…. Their children, who walked freely down the streets where their parents marched, were raised to believe they could do anything.”

Candidate Obama addressed this issue in his 18 March 2008 speech on race delivered at Constitution Hall in Philadelphia. He said of his pastor Reverend Eugene Wright that his mistake was “not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country…is still irrevocably bound to its tragic past.” Reviewing Mr. Obama’s speech in the 1 May 2008 New York Review of Books, Garry Wills paralleled Obama’s problem with Reverend Wright to Lincoln’s attempt to dissociate himself from abolitionist John Brown. Wills observes that “neither [Lincoln or Obama] denied the darker aspects of our history, yet they held out hope for what Lincoln called here the better ‘lights of current experience’ what he would later call the ‘better angels of our nature.’ Each looked for larger patterns under the surface bitterness of their day. Each forged a moral position that rose above the occasions for their speaking.”

Reading the text of candidate Obama’s speech, one encounters not only his deep thoughtfulness and understanding of the role race has played in America’s history but also his political awareness that Reverend Wright’s inflammatory remarks had to be placed within a dynamic context that moved the discussion forward. In an interview with Ifill in the midst of the Wright controversy Mr. Obama said “we’ve got to remind ourselves that what we have in common is far more important than what’s different.” Throughout his campaign he stayed focused on this simple, reassuring, and clearly successful message.

Ifill chronicles the journeys to power of several young African-American politicians: Representative Artur Davis of Alabama, Mayor Cory Booker of Newark, and
(not surprisingly) Governor Deval Patrick. Each received his education from America’s élite universities and law schools; each embraced politics and sought elected office often in the face of daunting obstacles. Davis, who hopes to run for Alabama’s governorship in 2010, had to take on the entrenched African-American politicians in order to win election to the U.S. House over 15 years ago. His early support for Barack Obama antagonized the state’s democratic establishment, most of whom supported Hillary Clinton. Of Booker, Ifill writes “he’s a walking, talking, philosophy-spouting generational conflict. In his attempt to woo those who would spurn a city such as Newark and mollify those who are defensive about its past, success for Booker lies in forging a way forward. The trouble is, the path forward is littered with the debris brought on by the act of breaking through.” Deval Patrick’s candidacy for the Massachusetts’ governorship perhaps faced the most intractable obstacles: he was virtually unknown; he would campaign in a state of predominantly white voters; he would have to grapple with a powerful, chauvinistic, and set in its ways Democratic organization. (Still, I remember seeing Emily Rooney’s Greater Boston October 2005 interview with Patrick and thinking he might just pull the election off.) His opponent in the election, Kerry Healey said afterward that “Deval was able to build a successful grassroots candidacy and overcome all of those structural disadvantages in ways that were quite extraordinary for the Democratic Party.” Patrick’s performance as governor, as we all know, has not been trouble free. His inexperience has led him into blunders that a more seasoned politician might have known to avoid. The current recession has forced difficult and mostly unpleasant choices on state government. (Though, again, I note that the Commonwealth appears to have learned from past fiscal crises and taken precautions to moderate the effects of economic downturns.) Now, in April 2009, Patrick confronts having to raise revenues (i.e. taxes) to ease the fiscal pressure on state government. Ifill offers a prescient paragraph when she writes “it remains an open question whether Patrick will be strong enough to seek a second term without drawing a significant challenge. ‘People are making a mistake if they are presuming there is a trajectory here that is clear and defined,’ Charlie Baker told me. ‘I think it could go in either direction.’” This morning’s Boston Globe (April 16th) reports that Baker, CEO of Harvard-Pilgrim Medical, may become the “significant challenge” in 2010. As Ifill asks early in Breakthrough, “can insiders
effect real change, or do they become change’s worst enemy once they’re inside. This is when the friction kicks in, that sandpaper place where change happens and the nerve endings of ambition become exposed and frayed.” Challenge notwithstanding, Deval Patrick’s efforts to change Massachusetts’ political culture, should he succeed, will be a breakthrough.

Ifill also notes early in *Breakthrough* that she does not believe Barack Obama’s election victory represents a “‘postracial’ moment.” Admitting her uncertainty over what the phrase means, Ifill suspects that the phrase is “code language that conveniently means different things to different people. For those interested in resisting any discussion of racial difference, it is an easy way to embrace the mythic notion of color blindness. For civil rights veterans, it is a term that sparks outrage” in its suggestion that “getting past” race is a good thing while just below the surface lurks the implication that race itself is a “bad thing.”

Near the end of the book, Ifill writes that “perhaps a wholesale shift in racial understanding was too much to hope for in a single electoral cycle. But then again, what did happen was no small thing. Americans were willing to place a widespread acceptance to African American culture, previously limited to arts, letters, sports, and entertainment, into a broad political context.” As President Obama has inhabited his office and shown the same disciplined, unflappable temperament he displayed as a candidate, I think citizens have grown increasingly comfortable with him and his message that much more unites than divides us. He may never find his face engraved on a treasury note or his image sculpted on Mt. Rushmore. I have no doubt that the story of his presidency will figure prominently in the history of America’s third century. We may not as yet have overcome, but we have broken through.

—Charles Angell is Professor of English and Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.