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Now Comes The Test

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When I was growing up, there were families in our town who had lawn jockeys at the end of their driveways. These, you might recall, were little cement statues of men in bright racing colors, holding a metal ring at the end of an outstretched arm. Their faces were black.

As enlightened times came to suburban Philadelphia, I remember the owners of those lawn jockeys painting the faces white. And I remember how over the winter, the white paint started to peel off.

I think about that when I look at this amazing event - phenomenon, really - that is the Obama campaign. In the coming months, it is going to administer a mandatory national self-assessment in ways that are just starting to play out.

Are we a nation about to take a transforming step beyond color in the most important of ways on the most visible of stages? Or will a patina of correctness peel away in the quiet of the voting booth?

We can hope that race has, indeed, taken a back seat to capable leadership - especially after eight years of fear, failure and lethal buffoonery. We must also embrace the possibility that it hasn't.

Every minute of this campaign is unique in history.

The primaries are an indication that change trumps prejudice. But in a way, they were the preliminaries, where voters could try on the idea of an African American president - like practicing for a driver's test. The general election is like driving with the big DMV guy and his clipboard in the front seat. This is the real deal.

I love the idea that somewhere in a madrassa in Pakistan, a mullah swaddled in Western loathing is trying to come to terms with the fact that the Great Satan is thinking about electing a brown skinned man with the name Barack Obama.

There are elements of this country - some more quietly than others - who are also going to have to make a different, but also similar, recalibration. They must come to grips with a leap that some thought, if it happened at all, was decades away. And yet out of nowhere, here we are at the front door of history.

This is an immensely encouraging point in time. But there are other points.

Race in American is not the sucking chest wound it was in the sixties. But the scars are visible - and tender.

We are fresh off nooses hung in a high-school courtyard tree because African American kids sat under it.

Cameras are still catching white cops - as recently as May in Philadelphia- clubbing African American suspects senseless as they writhe on the ground.

Jesse Jackson, Exacto Knife in hand, is having trouble adjusting to the idea that a fellow African American might have different ideas on responsibility - and, quite possibly, the shadow across his already dimming national spotlight.

In 1961, the same year Obama was born, Bobby Kennedy said in a speech that "in the next 40 years, a Negro can achieve the same position that my brother has."

We're at 47 years and counting - through times of incredible progress and horrific events; times of energizing hope and bitter disappointment. And we have come to the first (apologies to the Reverends Jackson and Sharpton) legitimate national realization of that prediction.

Maybe we'll hit our stride, but we've stumbled badly out of the gate. Portending poorly for hopes that this election will rise above race, it has so far wallowed in it.

Early on came Senator Joe Biden's praise of Obama as "clean." There were the inexplicable and incendiary rantings of Jeremiah Wright. We endured the whiney race-baiting of Bill Clinton in South Carolina. There was Hillary Clinton assuring 60 Minutes that Obama was not a Muslim - "as far as I know." Finally came her desperate late-hour positioning as the shot-drinking, gun loving candidate of "hard working white people."

We've also watched the Obamas trot out their luminous little girls in US Weekly and for a group interview with Access Hollywood's political heavy-weight, Maria Menounos (fresh from her reality hosting gig on Clash of the Choirs) - all to say to white America: "See - we're a family just like yours."

Many will vote for Obama because he is African American. Many will vote for John McCain because he is not. But across the spectrum of perception and motivation, in the silence of the voting booth, will the content of character supersede the color of skin?

We can hope that America has become a place where that is an irrelevant question. But like I said, we're new at this.