

In the middle of a bitterly fought US Presidential election, Barack Obama, the incumbent Democrat, has chosen to make a high profile speech about the disturbing plight of modern-day slaves. The campaign to tackle the international trade in human beings, known as human trafficking, is an echo of the long battle to ban the international trade in black African slaves. Even today there are those willing to transport vulnerable people from the developing world, often as children or teenagers, and sell them into a life of captivity in richer countries. For those who share the President's revulsion, his decision to raise the issue was laudable, and the comparison with abolition a powerful way to give energy to the campaign. But for Obama, the first American of African descent to occupy the White House, it was an unusual step. Keen to be seen as a unifying figure, governing for all of America's people rather than just ethnic minorities, this grandson of a Kenyan farmer shies away from talking about the interests of his own social group for fear of alienating the rest. He uses what one commentator calls 'a rhetoric of common purpose' to try and unite Democrat and Republican, white and black. For some, this is a constant source of discontent. One veteran campaigner for black equality in the US, fellow Democrat Jesse Jackson, caused a scandal when he was overheard criticising Barack Obama for not being 'black enough' during his first presidential campaign. This accusation continues to surface. Before he ran for the Presidency, Obama wrote a book about growing up with a Kenyan father and white American mother, and his teenage struggles over racial identity. He has been open, for example, about his decision not to marry a white girlfriend because her world was not his. Now he answers questions about his race carefully and courteously, but chooses not to dwell on the issue – again, equality campaigners would like to see him be more explicit in his commitment to tackle issues such as the over-representation of black men in the prison population and on death row. Lamenting the poor record of recent American governments in tackling the racial aspect of social inequalities, Obama said in 2008 when he was running for election that 'not enough has been done' to right the wrongs of America's racially segregated past. Should the most powerful black man in the world make sure that he is the person to address the historical injustices that afflict his own ethnic group? Or has his impressive rise through Harvard Law School to the Presidency done enough to change the minds of both white and black Americans – indeed the whole world – about how far someone from his family background can rise?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write a list of the top priorities of black voters, and a list of the priorities of Americans as a whole. Are your lists any different?
2. Do some research on modern-day slavery, using the links below as a starting point. Is it easier or harder to tackle than abolition of the slave trade in the 1800s?

WORD WATCH

Incumbent

An 'incumbent' (from the Latin 'to lay on') is the person who currently holds a political office, such as the Presidency. Obama has already been President for one term, and is seeking a second – the maximum allowed by the US constitution. He is therefore the incumbent.

African slaves

Between the 16th and the 19th Centuries, it is estimated that around ten million slaves were taken from their homes in Africa and transported by colonial powers like Britain to the Americas, where they became the possessions of rich white farmers. They had no rights or freedoms and were forced to labour hard in the fields under terrible conditions, living an average of just thirty years.

Life of captivity

Many of the people captured and traded as slaves are young women, whose bodies are then sold for sex. This is a major problem all over the world.

Abolition

In 1960, America was split between 'Slave States' in the South and 'Free States' in the North. When anti-slavery President Abraham Lincoln was elected, the Southern states attempted to leave the union. A bloody civil war was the result, in the middle of which Lincoln signed the 'Emancipation Proclamation', declaring all slaves forever free.

Prison population

Forty percent of the American prison population is African American, and one in every eleven prisoners is a black male.