

Chicago Tribune

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2008



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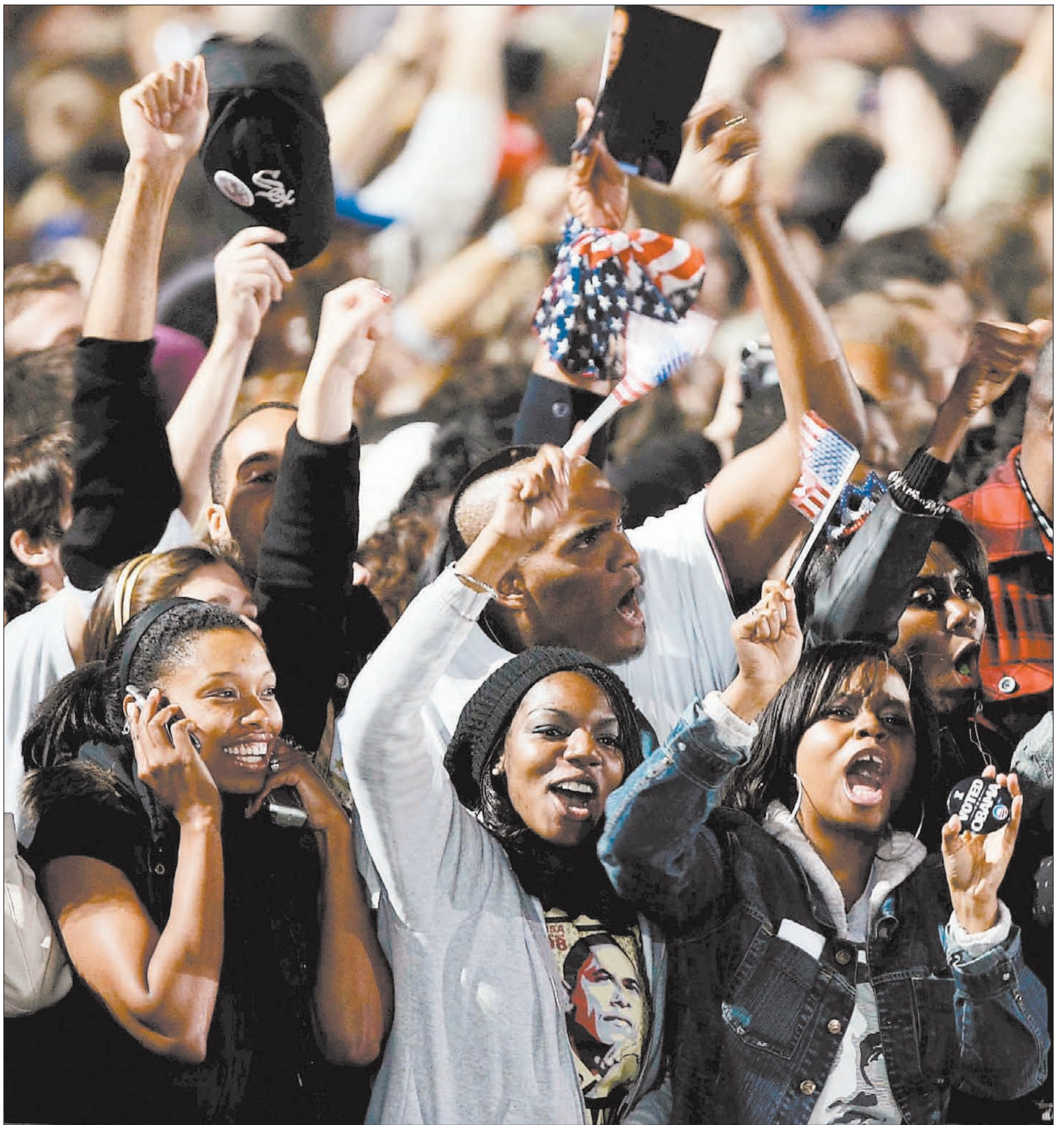
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Enormous turnout propels Illinois senator to victory as the first African-American elected president

ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE

It's Obama



Supporters at the rally in Grant Park on Tuesday night react upon hearing that Barack Obama had won Pennsylvania. PHIL VELASQUEZ/TRIBUNE

Barack Obama, son of an African man and a white woman from Kansas, a figure virtually unknown outside his home state of Illinois just five years ago, emphatically captured the presidency Tuesday night, as crowds massed in Grant Park to cheer his victory.

His implausible journey to become the nation's first black president began on a cold February day almost two years ago, as he offered himself as a candidate. Obama had spent little time on the national stage and was the furthest thing from a traditional candidate. Among other things, he was an African-American in a country still grappling with the question of race.

With his victory, America's tortured relationship with race has entered a new phase. The Obama presidency may be a sign that a country that all too recently tolerated segregation has moved irrevocably forward, or it may mean only that the nation is so hungry for change that it set aside racial struggles.

Obama is a man of extraordinary political gifts. The challenges facing him are many, including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a struggling economy. He will confront them soon enough.

But Tuesday night, at least, was a time to marvel at a once-inconceivable moment in American history.

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