

ZETA ARCHON JEH CHARLES JOHNSON ADDRESSES MU BOULÉ



President-Elect Barack Obama announced on January 8 that he intended to nominate Archon Jeh Charles Johnson, of Zeta Boulé, New York, for the key post of general counsel for the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). The following is an address given by Archon Johnson to the members of Mu Boulé, Northern New Jersey, on November 8, just after the election.

Fellow Archons, Sire Archon, thank you for inviting me. When Archon Williams asked me to do this a few weeks ago, I hesitated only because I knew, no matter the outcome, I would be very emotional so soon after the election. I solved that by putting my remarks to paper, so my only task here is to read what I wrote several hours ago, and I hope I won't crumble in front of you.

We stand tonight at a great moment, at a remarkable new chapter in this nation's history. The events of November 4, 2008, will be a reference point in every book in American history printed from this day forward.

For me this has been an extraordinary week, and I hope you don't mind that in these remarks I dwell on my own experience and what this campaign and this election have meant to me personally. I know that others here, such as Archon Williams, have their own remarkable stories to tell about their participation in this campaign.

One week ago today Archon Williams and I canvassed door-to-door in West Philadelphia. Then on Monday night I handed out campaign literature at the Walnut Street station in my hometown of Montclair. On Tuesday my family and I were in Grant Park in Chicago to witness Barack – I have to



Archon Jeh Charles Johnson



learn to start calling him Mr. President-Elect – accept the presidency. And two days from now, as part of his transition team, I go to Washington to help our new President form his new government.

It is both fitting and emotional for me that as part of this extraordinary week, one of the greatest of my life, I have the opportunity to share these thoughts with you, my brothers, in this great Fraternity.

Sigma Pi Phi is family for me. It is in my blood. I am a third-generation member of the Boulé. In addition to me, the Boulé includes, living or deceased, eight members of my family, including my first cousin, Charles S. Johnson III of Kappa, the Fraternity's current general counsel. I was inducted in 1996, but I was introduced to the Boulé in 1972 as a 14-year-old participant in the youth programs at the Grand Boulé in San Francisco that summer. There I first met some of the great men of this Fraternity: Archons Butler Henderson, Harvey Russell and John W. Davis.

My father was inducted in 1972 but was witness to the founding of Chi Boulé in Nashville in 1939. As an 8-year-old boy, he was required by his father, Archon Charles S. Johnson, to serve dinner at the first boulé meetings in their house. This was because my grandmother and the household staff at the president's home at Fisk University were not allowed, by the vow of secrecy we took, to hear

the discussions, and my dad (they thought) was too young to understand anything they were talking about. But my father, a trivia buff with an uncanny memory and, like me, a student of history, still remembers clearing the plates for the great men of black society in Nashville in that day -- Archons Aaron Douglass, John Wesley Work, Horace Mann Bond, George W. Redd and Z. Alexander Looby.

So I speak to you tonight *not* as a representative of Barack Obama or his campaign – after two years, it's hard to accept that there is no "campaign" anymore. Nor do I speak for his transition or the government that is in formation. I speak to you tonight on my own behalf, as a private American citizen who loves his country and as a student of history. Invariably, I also speak to you tonight out of pride, as a black man, a Morehouse man and a member of this great Fraternity.

As a graduate of Morehouse College, I am a disciple of Dr. King. Morehouse has as much to do with who I am as just about anything else. When I arrived on the campus in August 1975, Dr. King – and with him, the great Civil Rights Movement he led – had been gone for only seven years, but you could still feel his presence on campus. Things that had touched him touched us. His mentor, Dr. Mays, was still a regular and inspirational speaker at freshman assembly. Daddy King came by once in a while to preach an inspirational sermon, in which he reminded



us that through it all, he didn't hate anybody. The owner of the Dairy Queen up the street was a Freedom Rider in 1961. Dr. King's eldest son, Martin, was in the same class, in the same major with me. Marty and I studied together, ate dinner served by his mother at their house on Sunset Avenue, and remain friends to this day. For the freshman in the Morehouse class of 1979, the reminders of the recent struggle for civil rights were all around us.

But by virtue of the year of our birth, we were too young to have participated in that great movement. Many of us felt then and still feel a sense of having missed a great battle. We were rebels without a cause. Crusaders for something, anything. The most frequent object of our crusades was food. The food at Morehouse College in the 1970's was terrible. One day we staged a demonstration in the cafeteria by dumping our trays in unison on the center of the floor – only to learn that the poor cafeteria staff had to work overtime to clean up after us. Other days we tried sit-ins at the president's office or demonstrations at trustee meetings – all for larger portions of macaroni and cheese. My senior year we actually commandeered the cafeteria on a Sunday, declared a holiday from single-serving palm-size portions, and cooked everything in sight. Several brothers went to the hospital that day, stampeded at the dining-room door. The class

of '79 went on to successful careers in law, medicine, business, government, or in the case of one skinny kid from Brooklyn named Sheldon Lee, filmmaking, but we never lost our activist spirit, or the dream.

That is why when, at 2:30 in the afternoon on November 22, 2006, Barack Obama called me at home to ask me to help him become President, I answered that call. I knew then I was going to support him and told him, "Barack, I'm with you." I could not sleep at all that night, because I knew then that it was our turn to make history. And the next two years were an incredible journey to a victory that I know many people in this room, including me, would have said a short while ago was inconceivable in our lifetime.

I drank the Kool-Aid and jumped into this campaign with all fours. I was one of the first, if not the first, former Clinton administration official to be publicly identified as a Barack Obama supporter, outed by my friend and neighbor in Montclair, Jonathan Alter, in his now famous Periscope piece in *Newsweek* in December 2006, "Don't Tell Mama I'm for Obama." I joined Barack's national finance committee and his foreign-policy advisory team, was the lawyer for the campaign in New York State, made numerous surrogate TV appearances on NBC, WCBS, MSNBC and Fox, and, with Archon Williams, was a delegate to the convention and canvassed door-to-door.

Out of that experience, I want to share with you some of my favorite stories, and highs and lows.

There were many highs: Grant Park, seeing the words “Barack Obama elected President” flash on CNN, and hearing the simultaneous eruption of several hundred thousand people at once. But Iowa – the victory in the Iowa caucus on January 3 – will always hold a special place in my heart and in my memory. It seems so long ago now, but we were one of nine Democratic contenders then. Our ground game in Iowa was remarkable. More than thirty offices and 240 paid staff. Volunteers in from every part of the country. I was assigned a specific precinct in northwest Des Moines. I was given canvass sheets with lists of people to contact, which was updated nightly based on my own notes of voter contacts and preferences. For eight days my two kids and I canvassed that precinct in subzero temperatures. The Obama headquarters in Des Moines was itself remarkable. In a warehouse on the outskirts of town. About 200 kids, average age of 23. Garbage cans overflowing. Empty pizza boxes everywhere. Kids on the floor working on laptops. A mess. My 14-year-old loved it. But beneath the mess was a well-organized ground game like no one had ever seen before.

I knew we were onto something in Iowa when I visited the home of a white couple in their thirties. Pickup truck parked out front with a hard hat in the front seat. The husband and wife were both in the Army Reserve. They had both voted for George Bush in 2004, but the husband told me he was sick of the Republicans, they had had their chance, and he was going to vote for Obama. The reception was the same from many others. By my tally, in this white blue-collar precinct in Des Moines, Obama was far outpacing Clinton or Edwards. Then, a *Des Moines Register* poll released on New Year’s Eve confirmed what many of us had felt – that Obama was in the lead.

The night of the caucus I gave an older black woman a ride to the caucus site. On the way there she told us, “God woke me up this morning and told me to vote for Barack Obama. It’s a great day.” Once there, I was anxious to get inside to set up for the caucus. The lady said, “Wait, we have to pray,” so the four of us – this lady, her daughter, my daughter and I – formed a circle and held hands in the parking lot of Hoover High School to say one more prayer before this lady went in and cast what she said was the most important vote of her life.

Then there was the victory. That night, after Barack was declared the winner, the scene downtown was simply remarkable. Thousands of Iowans cheering a black man quoting MLK and talking about Selma. I was witnessing something then that I thought I would never see in my lifetime. Immediately we were vaulted into front-runner status.

I love canvassing. I had several highs and lows canvassing.

There was the terrific experience in Des Moines. Then there was Philadelphia. I have a special canvassing connection to Philadelphia. In April, just before the Pennsylvania primary, my son and I canvassed a white blue-collar neighborhood in northeast Philadelphia where Frank Rizzo got

his political start. It was right around the time the Jeremiah Wright controversy had reached its peak. The hostility in that neighborhood was palpable. My first encounter with voters that day was a group of four men sitting on lawn chairs in the front yard of a row house, sucking back beers and cigarettes at about 10:30 in the morning. None of them had sleeves, and at least one of them had tattoos the full length of his arm. Do you have the picture yet? I hesitated to approach these guys, but thought to myself that we had

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traveled all the way down here to canvass for Obama and that was what we were going to do, so I walked up to the four of them and asked, “So, anyone here planning to vote on Tuesday? Can I talk to you about Barack Obama?” The response from one of them was, “The blacks in this city have all the good city jobs. What’s he going to do about that?” The rest of the day went downhill from there. People saw the Obama button and slammed their doors in our faces. The day was discouraging, but I wanted my son to see that we were persevering, so we pressed on.

In October I had quite a different experience, this time in West Philadelphia. I had one of my associates at Paul Weiss with me, a young 27-year-old lawyer by the name of Josh Rothstein. Josh was a big help to me on the foreign-policy team of the campaign. But I told him he needed to get out there and canvass, to earn his “street cred.” We worked a very poor African American neighborhood that day. About one in every five homes was boarded up and abandoned. But people were fired up and ready to vote. The enthusiasm was amazing. At one point Josh said to me, “Jeh, this neighborhood is really poor. Can it get worse than this?” I said, “Yes, it can.”

That afternoon, we found out what “worse” was. We were given a second canvass package with some more addresses across the train tracks, literally, in West Philly. This was a neighborhood far off any main street, where about two out of every three row houses were boarded up. No police anywhere nearby. Josh said to me, “Jeh, this looks like Bagdad, and we have left the Green Zone.” Just then a very large black man came out from a front porch encased in iron bars, walked up to us, looked at our campaign buttons and said, “You all be safe. Walk slow, look everyone in the eye and be safe.” I realized that the dealer who controlled the block had given us a pass to canvass his neighborhood. We knocked on a few doors and left the block quickly. Back at the storefront campaign headquarters, I recounted the story to a local volunteer and said, “Please be careful who you send into that neighborhood.” The volunteer smiled at



Archon Johnson and his daughter, Natalie, canvassing in Des Moines

me and told me not to worry, that the word on the street was that Obama canvassers “were not to be touched,” and there had not been a single incident.

We had great success in West Philly. Over five weekends, our busloads of volunteers from Montclair knocked on more than 30,000 doors, and turnout in the precincts in West Philly where we worked, which is traditionally 30 to 40 percent of registered voters, was, I’m told, about 80 percent.

In this campaign many people got an education on race and the history of race in this country.

In March 2007 I was interviewed on NBC about the new campaign – Barack and Hillary had just gone to Selma for the thirty-second anniversary of the march the day before. I was asked a series of questions that the reporter and I had discussed beforehand. At the end she sprang an unexpected one on me: “Jeh, I just heard that Barack Obama is the descendant of white slave owners. What do you have to say about that?” I said, “Well, that would include me too. It’s sort of the nature of things.” That exchange was edited out.

Then there was my own public foray into the Jeremiah Wright controversy. In April my friend Lanny Davis, a fervent Clinton supporter, wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* critical of Barack. One line in the op-ed jumped out at me: “Why didn’t he leave that church?” Without thinking much about it, I stopped what I was doing in the middle of

a busy workday and punched out a lengthy e-mail to Lanny to try to answer his question.

I got a prompt answer. Lanny told me he got my e-mail and had consulted his rabbi, and that my e-mail had opened his mind and his heart to the issue (at least partly). Lanny asked if he could publish my letter to him publicly on his blog. I agreed, and our exchange actually ended up published on a number of blogs, including Anderson360. Several hundred postings followed. Lanny wrote a nice public introduction to my letter and said that he had received many notes in reaction to his op-ed. He wrote:

One e-mail sent to me moved me the most, giving me a better understanding of Senator Obama’s reaction to Rev. Wright’s sermons. While not answering all my concerns, it still opened my mind and heart much more than before. It came from a highly respected attorney from New York City, Mr. Jeh Johnson, who happens to be an African American. Jeh is a strong and steadfast supporter of Senator Obama. I have known of and admired Jeh from afar for many years. He also admires Senator and President Clinton and served with me in the Clinton Administration.

And here is an excerpt from what I wrote to Lanny:



In the course of my life, I have encountered many very militant and angry elements of the black community, much of them as formative for me as the large corporate law firm in which I am now a partner, the Clinton Administration, or growing up in the largely white community of Wappingers Falls, New York. But it would be an act of sheer hypocrisy for me to try to renounce any of this.

For example, at Morehouse many educated and invited speakers blasted the white man, black men who acted like the white man, and condemned our whole society as fatally racist. . . . But I love Morehouse and would rather quit all involvement in public affairs before I had to sever my ties of support to the school. Morehouse is part of what makes me a proud African American.

A good friend from my parents' generation, a retired Ivy League professor who is like an uncle to me [a

reference, by the way, to Archon Charles V. Hamilton], was branded a dangerous radical and subversive by our government in the 1960's. J. Edgar Hoover wiretapped his conversations with Dr. King. But if someone combed his books and found something he wrote with which I disagreed, I'd rather disassociate myself from my right arm than publicly renounce this man.

The reality is this. Those of us who participate in both the white and African American experiences in this country will very likely have a Jeremiah Wright in our lives – it could be our teacher, our uncle, our brother, our father or our pastor. It is simply part of the American experience.

Then, of course, the victory last Tuesday. We in this room are happy tonight. We are proud tonight. But this is not a "black thing." It is not about black advancement. It is an American thing. It is about the promise of America.

The greatness and appeal of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement were that it was not just a black thing. It was a patriotic thing. Martin summoned white America to own up to this nation's unfulfilled promise to all its citizens. To remind America, as he put it, of the great nation it was supposed to be. To make America a better country, in our eyes and in the eyes of the rest of the world.

In one election, in one day, that is what happened on Tuesday.

In the course of the seventy-two hours that followed our victory Tuesday night I received about 1,600 e-mails of congratulations. I tried to answer them all. I was moved by several of them that I received from some of my white law partners:

"God bless America."

"I am in tears. Thank you for leading me to this man."

"Thank you, Jeh. I am now ready to become an American citizen."

So on this day, this week, the future for our country and our world is bright again. We leave a great gift for youth. And on this day, this week, I cannot help but think about our ancestors, the Archons who have gone before us, who did not live to see this extraordinary day.

Archon Charles Johnson, my grandfather, was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, in July 1893. He was a sociologist who rose to prominence when he studied the Chicago race riots in 1919, founded the Urban League's magazine *Opportunity* in the 1920's, and became president of Fisk University in 1947. He was to many the intellectual firepower of a Civil Rights Movement that was about to take off.

In September 1956 Archon Johnson wrote an article on race relations in the South that was published in the magazine section of *The New York Times*. My grandfather received many congratulatory letters for his work, which my father recently found in a box in his basement.

Here is one from his buddy Langston Hughes:

That was certainly a fine piece you had in the Sunday *Times* on a Southern Negro's view of the South. I've been thinking it's about time the Negro viewpoint be expressed therein, since about every white man who can write a line has had his say in the national media – but little is heard from us. You have made some very telling points, and written very well!

You're mentioned and pictured in my forthcoming *Pictorial History of the Negro in America* due out in November. I've put you on the list to receive an advance copy for comment, so I trust the publishers to see that you get it, probably along toward the end of October, since it's just about gone to press this week.

Don't take time out from your busy schedule to answer this letter. None's needed. It's just a fan letter, that's all!

Best regards to Marie [my grandmother],

Langston

Archon Johnson received another letter about his article, this one dated October 11, 1956, from a young preacher in

Montgomery, Alabama, and future member of this Fraternity, on the letterhead of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church:

Dear Dr. Johnson:

This is just a note to say that I have just read your article which recently appeared in *The New York Times*. It is the best statement that I have read in this whole area. You evince a profound grasp of the whole subject. I am sure that the more this article is read [the more] it will bring about a greater understanding of the Negro's point of view as he struggles for first class citizenship. You combine in this article the fact finding mind of the social scientist with the moral insights of a religious prophet.

Sincerely yours,
M.L. King, Jr.
Minister

My grandfather died on October 26, 1956. He never saw his picture in *Langston's Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, he never saw the great social revolution that the young preacher from Montgomery was about to lead, and given the mails at that time, it's possible he never even saw his letter. And he never saw the extraordinary moment this week when a black man with the African name Barack was elected President of the United States, and his own grandson, with the African name he gave me, Jeh, helped him get there. Despite his intellectual power, a Ph.D. and honorary degrees from Harvard and Columbia, Archon Johnson died a second-class citizen in this country, of a massive heart attack in the segregated section of a railroad station in Louisville, Kentucky, on his way to a board of trustees meeting in New York City. But he died knowing that brighter days lay ahead for his grandchildren and his country. He died with a belief in the words his friend Langston had written:

"O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me. And yet I swear this oath – America will be!"

Thank you all.

Archon Jeh Charles Johnson, general counsel for the Department of Defense, was a partner in the law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, LLP. His career has been twofold: He has had a successful private law practice as an experienced trial lawyer, and done distinguished public service as a federal prosecutor and presidential appointee. At age 47 he was elected a fellow in the prestigious American College of Trial Lawyers. His career as a trial lawyer began in 1989 when he became an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York, where he prosecuted public corruption cases. He served three years as a federal prosecutor. In 1998 he left Paul, Weiss for twenty-seven months when President Clinton appointed him general counsel of the Department of the Air Force, following nomination and confirmation by the U.S. Senate. While in that position, Archon Johnson was awarded the Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service. In 2007–08 he was a foreign-policy adviser for President-elect Obama's campaign. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a graduate of Morehouse College and Columbia Law School.

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