

Barack Obama's magnificent speech on race

It is too early to know if America will rise above the racial divide and truly unify as one nation, as Barack Obama beckons them to do, and whether they will open up an honest dialogue on race and listen to each other's point of view. Barack Obama has raised the racial discourse to a higher plane. The question is: will America follow his lead?

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

FLANKED by eight American flags, with Philadelphia's Independence Hall, where America declared its independence, as the backdrop, on Tuesday, March 18, Senator Barack Obama delivered by far the most comprehensive speech on race relations in America in living memory.

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address during the civil war in 1865 ("Four score and seven years ago..."), John F. Kennedy's new frontier inaugural speech in 1961 ("Ask not what your country can do for you...") and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Washington, DC speech on civil rights in 1963 ("I have a dream...") are part of America's school and college curricula.

It is a good bet that excerpts from Obama's speech on race, "A More Perfect Union," will make it into America's history, civics, and English textbooks for many years to come.

With a racial history of slavery, discrimination and oppression, race is a taboo subject in America; it is a hot button issue, a hot potato no one wants to handle. Americans talk about race only among their own kind; there is no cross-race discussion on a subject that is on everyone's mind. Obama forced America to examine their racial attitudes by shining light on this dark subject.

Obama did not patronise his audience; he treated Americans as adults. There is no one else of comparable stature more uniquely qualified to talk about race. With a black father and a white mother, Obama straddles both the races; he embodies both the genes. Obama appealed to America's better angels.

Senator Obama did not step into this maelstrom voluntarily. He had to address the controversial remarks of his spiritual mentor and former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., who has denounced the United States as endemically racist, blood-thirsty and rotten to the core, or risk the unraveling of his quest for the presidency.

Mr. Obama acknowledged his strong ties to Rev. Wright "who helped introduce me to my Christian faith," and said that "as imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. Mr. Obama said Mr. Wright's comments were not just potentially offensive, but 'rightly offend white and black alike' and are wrong in their analysis of America. But, he said, many Americans 'have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree.'"

Obama put Rev. Wright, his experience, and his demagoguery into the larger context of race relations with honesty unprecedented in American history.

Obama recounted the nation's ugly racial history of slavery and Jim Crow, which masquerade today in

the form of racial segregation, unequal schools, economic inequality and disproportionate incarceration of blacks that shaped people like Rev. Wright.

"For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and fear have not gone away, nor the anger and the bitterness of those years. And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races."

For the first time a black politician addressed legitimate white grievances. Many white Americans do not see that their race as an advantage. Obama acknowledged that while these feelings are not always voiced publicly, they find

expression in the voting booth.

For those of my readers who have not had the chance to listen to or read Obama's speech, please read the following excerpt, and ask yourself: when was the last time someone running for US president, or any elective office anywhere, spoke so eloquently, so honestly, and so courageously on such a delicate subject as race?

"In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience -- as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labour. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighbourhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time."

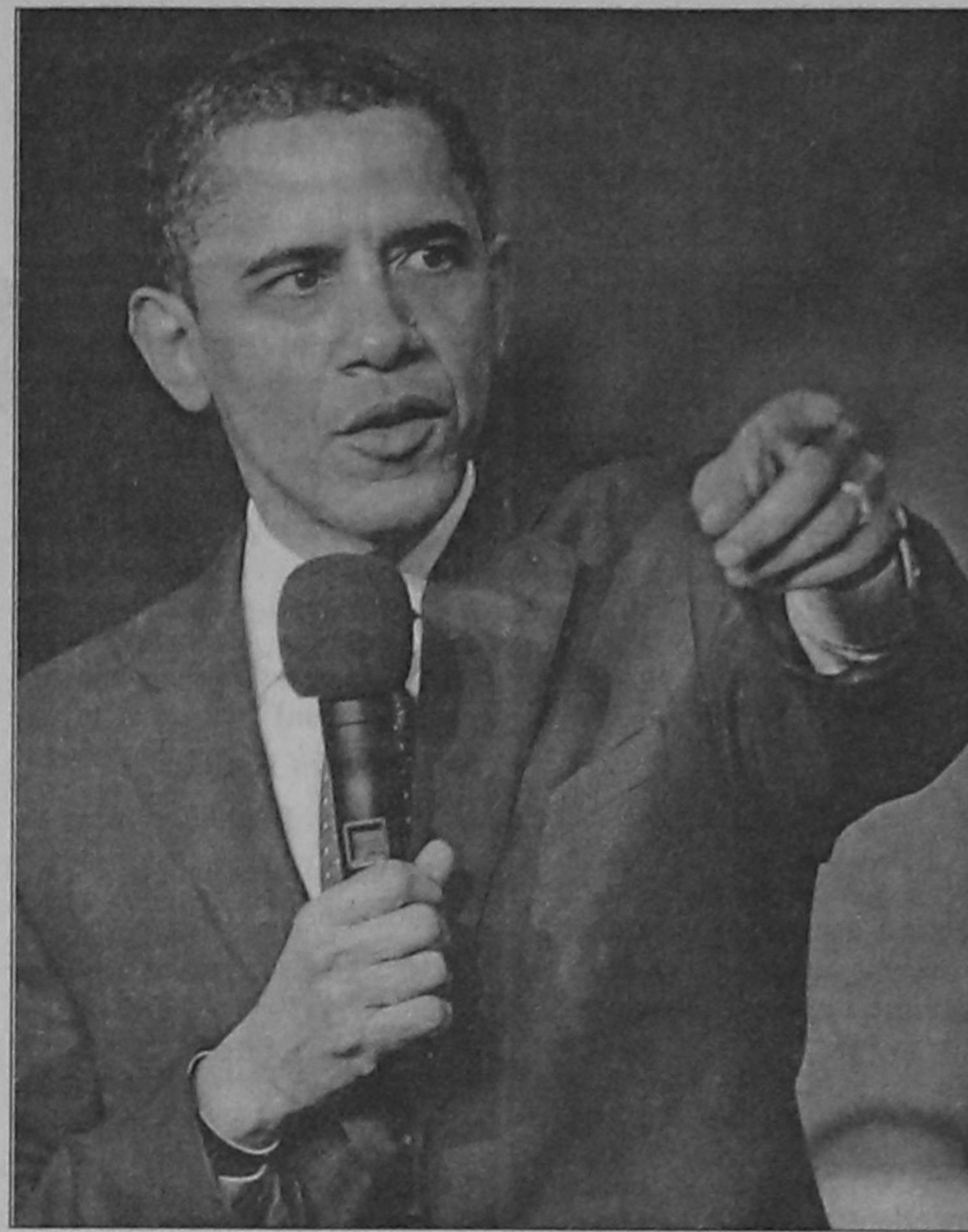
"Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped

shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism."

"Just as black anger often proved counter-productive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle-class squeeze -- a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favour the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognising they are grounded in legitimate concerns -- this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding."

"This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy -- particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own."

"But I have asserted a firm conviction -- a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people -- that working together we can move beyond



some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union."

"For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances -- for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs

-- to the larger aspirations of all Americans -- the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives -- by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism;

they must always believe that they can write their own destiny."

"The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is 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 -- a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old -- is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know -- what we have seen -- is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope -- the audacity to hope -- for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."

Refusing to repudiate his pastor Obama said: "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother." That woman whom he loves deeply, he said, "once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street" and more than once "uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe."

It is too early to know if America will rise above the racial divide and truly unify as one nation, as Barack Obama beckons them to do, and whether they will open up an honest dialogue on race and listen to each other's point of view. Barack Obama has raised the racial discourse to a higher plane. The question is: will America follow his lead?

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The five dangers of a National Security Council

Bangladesh does not have an external security crisis to require the setup of an NSC. We have a political crisis that requires a political solution based on strengthening democracy, not one that creates a set of non-democratic institutions. So we need to recognise the proposal for an NSC for what it mainly is: it's an exit and entry strategy.

SIKDER HASEEB KHAN

WITHOUT oversight by elected representatives, the caretaker government is considering some permanent institutional changes in Bangladesh. Among these, the most prominent proposal now is to form a National Security Council (NSC), which would become the top authority to deal with security issues.

The proposal was floated two months into emergency rule, in March 2007. By December, the Law Ministry had reportedly prepared a draft on a potential 24-member structure of the NSC. The army chief reasoned recently: "It's [the NSC] there in India and Pakistan -- so why not in Bangladesh?"

However attractive it may be made to look on paper, the creation of a non-democratic authority on security would be disastrous for Bangladesh. In countries where democracy is already weak, NSCs have been a guise to establish the policy supremacy of the military over elected authorities. So the five dangers outlined below are neither hypothetical nor far-fetched; they are real.

Danger 1: NSC will control internal law and order. In countries like Pakistan or Turkey, a possible rationale exists about having an NSC, since these countries face complex and compelling threats from their external environments. Bangladesh has no external enemies threatening its survival. The reality is that an NSC in Bangladesh will be used to

maintain and enforce internal security, providing cover for the many coercive agencies that already exist, such as the police, RAB, BDR, and so forth. Furthermore, as the experience of other weak democracies show, the NSC will likely operate outside judicial oversight. To strengthen our democracy, we need greater accountability for law enforcement -- and creation of an NSC will be a big step away from that direction.

Danger 2: NSC will see politics as a threat. Let me put it simply: "Give a man a hammer, and everything will start to look like a nail." Once it is focused internally, the NSC will be able to interpret anything that it does not like as a threat. There may be legitimate security issues from time to time, but what will happen

most often is that political opposition to policies favored by the NSC will be seen as a security threat. In all weak democracies, the NSC has weakened democracy further by blurring the line between the freedom and threats, eventually resulting in situations where the state begins to view parts of its own citizens as enemy number one. This becomes a downward spiral: the more that threats are constructed and sold to the public, the more entrenched the NSC becomes. So, a security council may even increase conflict in society.

Danger 3: NSC will protect human rights abusers. We already have enough human rights abuses resulting from the government's heavy hand. Getting justice is extremely difficult; those trying to secure accountability for extra-judicial murders know this. The formation of an NSC will provide a shelter at the highest level for rights abusers. This has happened in Pakistan. The NSC will also protect those groups that it sees as allies.

Danger 4: NSC will not be accountable to elected authority. The NSC's formation is being accelerated to take advantage of the absence of elected authority. No announcement so far places the NSC directly under political authority. It will become at least a parallel authority to elected politicians, or worse, as a superior authority constituted by the president. There will be some political representation on the council, but that representation will probably be used to convey the NSC's wishes, rather than the other way around. There will be no popular oversight on the NSC. Once created in this way, the NSC cannot be undone easily.

Danger 5: NSC will politicise the military. The most influential members in the NSC will be from the armed forces: the three service chiefs, the paramilitary chiefs, the intelligence agencies, and their associates. This institutional role of the military in policymaking, combined with a focus on internal security, will quickly involve mili-

tary decision-makers in political controversies. This will compromise the professionalism of the military, and militarize professional policymaking. Do we really want a Pakistanisation of Bangladesh's civil institutions?

Bangladesh does not have an external security crisis to require the setup of an NSC. We have a political crisis that requires a political solution based on strengthening democracy, not one that creates a set of non-democratic institutions. So we need to recognise the proposal for an NSC for what it mainly is: it's an exit and entry strategy.

It's being done to assure a protected exit for the current military government, but more importantly, to ensure the military's permanent entry into the nation's political decisions. Those decisions must remain the domain of people's elected representatives, as stipulated by our constitution.

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Playing a straight bat

The opening session of Pakistan's newly elected National Assembly has raised hopes and revived fears about the country's return to democracy. The hopes are the result of unprecedented cooperation between the leaders of major political forces. The fears stem from Pakistan's chequered history of political manipulation by an over-arching establishment.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THE opening session of Pakistan's newly elected National Assembly has raised hopes and revived fears about the country's return to democracy. The hopes are the result of unprecedented cooperation between the leaders of major political forces. The fears stem from Pakistan's chequered history of political manipulation by an over-arching establishment.

A weakened General (retired) Pervez Musharraf is already warning against "confrontation" between the presidency and the newly elected parliament. The politicians, notably PPP co-chairman Asif Zardari, have made it clear that they want a return to constitutional rule without conflict.

Pakistan has one of its best chances of finding political stability if Musharraf can resist the temptation to follow the pattern of vice-regal rulers dating back to governors general, Ghulam Muhammad and Iskander Mirza during the 1950s.

There will be no confrontation if parliament is allowed to exercise its sovereignty. Musharraf may not want the elected parliament to vote on the Provisional Constitution Order (PCO), the decree that he used to amend the country's constitution once again in November 2007. The majority parties in parliament argue that it is parliament's privilege to examine the arbitrary amendments to Pakistan's basic law.

When the country's previous military rulers, from Ayub Khan to Ziaul Haq, allowed a phased return to democracy after several years of direct military rule, they allowed the new parliament to vote on constitutional amendments proposed by them.

By claiming that the PCO should not be debated, Musharraf is failing to adhere even to that precedent set by his military predecessors.

Over the years, Pakistan has become a state that stands only on one pillar -- that of the executive branch of government represented by the security and intelligence services. The judiciary lost its standing by repeatedly endorsing

extra-constitutional interventions, and only regained its stature last year when the judges stood up to Musharraf's arbitrariness.

Even now, Musharraf claims that his authority to amend the constitution derives from a Supreme Court ruling, confirming his desire to keep the judiciary subservient to the executive.

There is no recognition of the basic logic that the judiciary, which has the right to interpret but not to amend the constitution, simply cannot confer a right it does not have itself on someone else.

In the past, the military or civilian executives had constantly circumscribed the legislature in its functions, if and when the legislature was allowed to exist at all. Political parties operated in the shadow of larger than life figures, slandered, jailed or exiled with alarming frequency.

And then there were the ubiquitous intelligence agencies, hidden from public view but frequently seen pulling the strings in Pakistan's complex political drama.

If the new parliament is to rep-



resent a new beginning for the country then political parties must be given an opportunity to operate without the constraints of the past. The legislature and political parties are important institutions and, along with the judiciary and media, they are essential for Pakistan's evolution into a normal, functioning democracy.

Given the result of the February 18 election, and the army's critical decision to disassociate itself from politics, Musharraf simply cannot expect to rule Pakistan with a veneer of elected, albeit powerless, institutions.

Pakistan has aspired for democratic rule since its inception. Power has alternated between civilian-democratic dispensations and military rulers claiming to control institutional decline, politi-

cal chaos, and economic disarray. When Musharraf took power he promised to restore democracy within three years, after creating institutional checks and balances and introducing reforms that would forever end the alteration of power between authoritarian military rulers and ineffective elected civilians.

Even before he achieved the status of a US ally, Musharraf had started espousing political ideas that rested on his continuation in office rather than on the effectiveness of institutions such as an independent judiciary or a government truly accountable to parliament.

It should by now have become obvious to all that various plans for controlled democracy have compounded Pakistan's problems.

Pakistan needs democracy not controlled democracy, the notion of which was formally introduced by Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan who ruled for a decade from 1958-1969. General Ziaul Haq presided over the country from 1979 till his death in 1988, benefiting from Pakistan's role as the frontline state in the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan.

Ayub wrote his own constitution while Zia revised the existing constitution to suit him. Like Musharraf, they established a one-legged system revolving around them, instead of allowing other institutions of state to participate as equals in running the country. All this led to social unrest, corruption and eventual economic stagnation.

True democracy facilitates peaceful removal from power as well as the prospect of returning to it. Losing office while respecting dissent and accepting the role of national institutions is not as bad as risking everything.

Instead of trying to impose or manipulate the fulfillment of his will by creating new polarisation, Musharraf should work with parliament and let the constitutional democratic process take its course.

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Vittachi

ONLY IN ASIA

by Nury Vittachi

For ex-pats, the smart move is to play dumb

AN inability to speak Asian languages can be helpful, reader Mick Wilkinson discovered.

Mick, who lives in Australia, has an unpleasant memory of one night in Hong Kong when he had to rush his baby son to hospital and spend the night propped up in a chair.

As dawn broke, he went to get his car -- only to find that a yellow metal wheel clamp had been padlocked to its wheel. He'd parked next to a no-parking sign which was written in Chinese only.

Stung by the unfairness of the situation, he bought a pair of metal cutters from a nearby hardware store and snipped the padlock off.

Then he spent a long minute thinking about whether to race off in his car and take the wheel clamp with him, and thus never have to worry about parking problems again. But in the end, he did the honourable thing, and purchased a shiny new padlock, leaving it on top of the yellow clamp.

A few months later, he received an envelope from the hospital's parking service. It contained a photograph of his clamped car and a hefty bill for the equivalent of US\$200 to cover a US\$50 fine plus "administrative expenses."

"Fair enough, staples don't come cheap," he joked to his wife.

Then he had an idea. He sat down and wrote a letter explaining that he was a Westerner and thus suffered from profound stupidity at not being able to master Chinese characters.

"To my surprise, a week later I received a personal letter from the manager, cancelling my well-deserved debt in full," he said.

From Dan Kubijske, a foreign correspondent: "You pose the

question, why do Asian men collect Hello Kitty items? To be honest, I don't know. But maybe it is because they can actually get lucky in a Japanese bar with: 'Would you like to come up and see my Hello Kitty collection?'

So let's pass the question over to young female readers. Why do today's Asian women prefer wimpy, metro-sexual guys to the macho members of the previous generation?

Joe Rocas, a Filipino reader living in the United States, was dismayed to hear about the rise of metro-sexual Asians. He wrote: "Here in the States, Asian-American males are embroiled in a bitter battle to fight the public perception that Asian men are effeminate, nerdy, or just plain losers. Looks like we won't be getting help from our cousins out east." Joe admitted that he did wear hair gel to shape his locks (he favours the porcupine look). "But it only takes me about five minutes average, ten max. And yes, you can touch it if you want."

US congressman Phil Gingrey recently said he was unhappy that people "with Asian and Indian names" dominated the list of top scorers in tests in his district. He asked Bill Gates, who has been lobbying for more work visas to be given to skilled Asians, whether "youngsters who look like me" would find the influx of foreign workers a deterrent to choosing technology careers.

Phil, baby, this is the year 2008 and you are on a globalised planet. There are many smart people on this planet who have Asian names and don't look like you, and some are even American citizens. Whoa, he is in for a shock.

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