

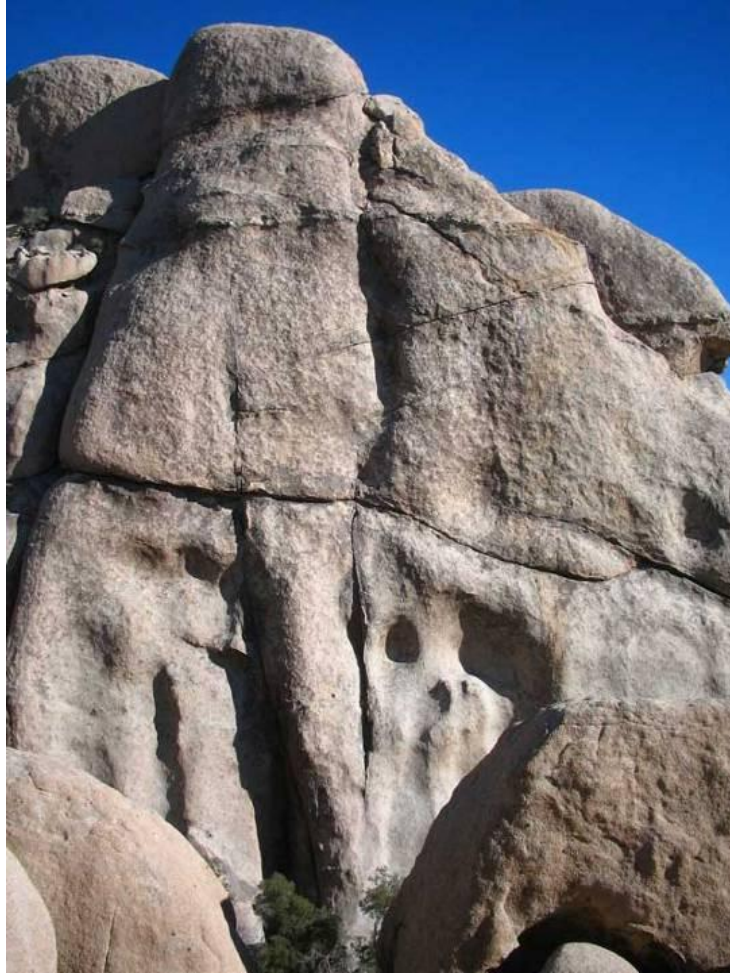
Black President
Joshua Tree National Park, California
5.11a

Kristian Solem

The morning of December 13th 2008 broke crisp, clear and windy. A winter storm was moving through Southern California, but the skies over Joshua Tree National Park remained clear while the surrounding mountains and deserts got snow and rain. Barbara Taylor, Randy Wenzel and I were each in our own private world as we hiked out past the old ruins known to climbers as Uncle Willie's Health Food Store. From here our path would take us deep into the "Wonderland of Rocks," a crazy maze of crags, boulders and canyons where climbers often spend as much time getting lost as they do actually climbing. Our mission was to find, climb and photograph the classic route called "Black President," a plan we had cooked up when talking politics around the campfire a few weeks earlier. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but this morning as I took measure of the cold gusting winds I simply hoped this route would be within my pay grade today.

Black President was first climbed in December of 1984 by Craig Fry, Dave Evans and Dave Bruckman. The year 1984 had special significance thanks to George Orwell's writing, but it was also the year that Afro Beat music, pioneered by the amazing Nigerian musician Fela Kuti really hit in America. His album was called Black President, and it inspired the naming of this climb.

Fry, Evans, and Bruckman did many fine new routes in Josh, and this one is a classic in every regard. At 120 feet it is a long pitch for the area (it is sometimes done as two.) It features two very different cruxes: First one must climb a delicate thin slab. Then comes a system of steep arching cracks with a wild finish. Black President is on a unique formation which features beautiful natural arches, and it has a remarkable approach making it difficult to find.



Black President climbs the line in the center. The crux face moves are just above the horizontal crack

Randy sized things up and decided the best location to shoot from would be from the top of the climb, looking down. The easiest way up there is some very exposed 5.6 slab climbing, right up the crest of the arches. A particularly strong gust of wind made me thankful it would be him out there with a huge pack full of camera and rigging equipment, while I could focus on leading the Black President with the relative safety of the rope. Ultimately Randy decided against the exposed slab solo in the wind, choosing instead the relative security of a heinous chimney, hauling his pack up with a rope. He took a while getting up, but about the time I was thinking I should go looking for his body he stuck his head over the top and began setting up his anchor and rigging.

The climb begins above a sea of cactus. The opening moves are easy but the prickly landing zone is disconcerting. Above, a thin move protected by a bolt leads to a nice steep easy crack which ends below the first crux at a horizontal feature about half way up the pitch. Looking up from here I watched as Randy was blown off his feet and left dangling in his rigging. I realized I needed a miracle. The wind would have to stop for about one minute to let me do the first crux: delicate face moves leading boldly above a bolt to the cracks above. I figured I could deal with the wind in the crack section, where I

would have good protection, but if a gust like the one which just knocked Randy over came through while I was up on the steep slab I would be airborne in a big way for sure.

Standing above the horizontal I clipped the bolt and got my miracle. The wind stopped. I set off climbing the slab without hesitation. The first bit of gear comes with the bolt a good body length below the feet and I prayed for another moment of still air while I patiently placed a thin stopper from a dicey stance, and moved up. Right on cue as I got into the cracks above with good protection the gusts resumed. I stemmed wide with my feet, locked off the fingers and finished the pitch while Randy struggled to stay on his feet, hanging over the edge taking pictures.



Stemming in a near split, placing protection. Randy Wenzel Photo

As I stood on the top with Randy in the blasting wind, I resisted the temptation to say "Mission Accomplished..."

The wind had increased by now and the sun was getting low. Barbara and Randy were both too smart to have anything to do with more human kite experiments, so we rappelled down and hiked out. But this time I will not let ten years go by before I am out there again. I'll bring Barbara and Randy on a nice user friendly day and we'll spread the wealth around...