

Barack Obama's victory: Great expectations

The weight of the past, present and future will add drag to Obama's ascent to the White House

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Barack Obama's victory marks a decisive generational and sociological shift in American politics. Its impact is difficult to predict at this stage, but the expectations of the majority of young people who propelled Obama to victory remain high. It may not have been a landslide, but the vote was large enough with the Democrats winning over 50% of the electorate (62.4 million voters) and planting a black family firmly in the White House.

The historic significance of this fact should not be underestimated.

It has happened in a country where the Ku Klux Klan once had millions of members who waged a campaign of deadly terror against black citizens with the support of a prejudiced legal system. How can one forget the photographs of African-Americans during the first three decades of the last century being lynched under the approving gaze of white families enjoying their picnics as they watched – in Billie Holliday's memorable voice – “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze/Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”?

It was the mass struggles for civil rights in the 1960s that forced desegregation and the black voter registration campaigns, but also led to the assassination of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (just as he was beginning to insist on the unity of blacks and whites against a system that oppressed both). It would be trite to remark that Obama is not one of their number. He is seen as such by the 96 per cent of Afro-Americans who spilled out of their homes to vote for him. They may yet be disappointed but for the moment they are rejoicing, and who can blame them.

It was barely two decades ago that Bill Clinton was warning his Democrat rival, the liberal governor of New York State, Mario Cuomo, that America was not yet ready to elect a president whose name ended with 'o' or 'i'. It was only a few months ago that the Clintons were openly pandering to racism by repeatedly stressing that white working-class voters would decisively reject Obama and reminding Democrats that Jesse Jackson, too, had done well in past primaries. The new generation of voters proved them wrong: 66% of those between the ages of 18 and 29, comprising 18% of the electorate, voted for Obama; 52% of the 30-44 age group (37% of the electorate) did likewise.

The crisis of deregulated, free-market capitalism led to a surge of support for Obama in states hitherto regarded as Republican or white Democrat territory, accelerating the process that defeated Bush/Cheney and the neo-con gang. However the fact that McCain/Palin still obtained 55 million votes is a reminder of how strong the American right remains. The Clintons, Jo Biden, Nancy Pelosi and numerous other Democrat heavyweights will use this to pressure Obama to remain loyal to the script he used to win the election. But bland, feel-good slogans will not be enough to secure a second term. The crisis is far too advanced and the questions agitating most American citizens (as I discovered when I was there a few weeks ago) concern jobs, health (40 million citizens have no health insurance) and homes.

Rhetoric alone is insufficient to deal with the slump in the real economy: there is a trillion-dollar credit-card debt that could bring down other banking giants; the decline of the car industry will lead

to large-scale unemployment. And there is the bail-out that has mortgaged future generations of Americans to Wall Street. The panic measures of the Bush administration designed and orchestrated by the banker's friend and treasury secretary Paulson have privileged a few big banks that are being subsidised by public money.

The Democrats and Obama agreed to the deals and will find it difficult to draw back so that they can move forward on another front. The expanding crisis, however, might compel them to move in a different direction. Austerity measures always hurt the less privileged and how the new president and his team deals with this will determine their future.

It is an awful time to be elected president, but it is also a challenge, and Franklin Roosevelt accepted such a challenge in the 1930s by imposing a social-democratic regime of regulation, public works and an imaginative approach to popular culture. He was helped by the existence of a strong labour movement and the American left: the Reagan-Clinton-Bush years helped to destroy the legacy of the New Deal. It is a new economy, heavily dependent on global finance and a deindustrialised America.

Does Obama have the vision or the strength to turn this clock back and forward at the same time? In the realm of foreign policy, the Obama/Biden approach has not been too different from that of Bush or McCain. A New Deal for the rest of the world would require a rapid exit from Iraq and Afghanistan and no further adventures in these regions or elsewhere. Biden has virtually committed himself to a Balkanisation of Iraq, which now appears less likely since the rest of the country as well as Iran and Turkey are opposed, for different reasons, to the creation of an Israeli-American protectorate in Northern Iraq with permanent US bases. Obama would be best advised to announce a rapid and complete withdrawal. Apart from all else, the costs are now prohibitive.

And sending troops based in Iraq to Afghanistan would only recreate the mess elsewhere. As numerous British diplomatic, military and intelligence experts have warned, the war in South Asia is lost. Washington is certainly aware of this fact. Hence the panic-induced negotiations with the neo-Taliban. One can only hope that Obama's foreign policy advisers will force a retreat on this front as well.

What of South America? Surely Obama should mimic Nixon's trip to Beijing and fly to Havana, ending the economic and diplomatic embargo of Cuba. Even Colin Powell acknowledged that the regime had done a great deal for its people. It will be difficult for Obama to preach the virtues of the free-market, but the Cubans could certainly help him in establishing a proper healthcare system in the United States. This would be change that most Americans would be happy to believe in. Other lessons are also on offer from other South American countries that foresaw the crisis of neoliberal capitalism and began to restructure their economies over a decade ago.

If change means that nothing changes then those who have put Obama in the White House might decide after a few years have passed that a progressive party in the United States has become a necessity.

P.S.

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