

The **Obama Factor**

There is good reason to think that January 20, 2009 – the day of the inauguration of the 44th President of the U.S.A. – will go down in history as the day America awoke from a long and costly nightmare. That day, after more than a century in which the nation's economic policies and practices, instead of serving the commonweal, gradually degenerated to privilege and enrich the greedy and unscrupulous few, a man stepped onto the political stage who understood that the grinding poverty millions of its citizens suffer in the richest country on earth is a disgrace, and who vowed to put an end to it. After a century in which the nation's international policies and practices degenerated into a form of imperialism which aided and abetted virtually every government on earth determined to suppress the legitimate demands of its woefully exploited and impoverished working people, a man took over the helm of the ship of state to put an end to such gross disregard for human rights and held out a hand of friendship to all nations



of good will.

The election of Barack Obama to the American presidency has ushered in a new era of politics in which the nation, if he has his way, will return to live by the just and righteous values which the Founding Fathers proclaimed and enshrined in its Constitution. It's a monumental undertaking, one that calls for steadfast determination and undaunted courage. Barack Obama has demonstrated that he is possessed of both. He is the very embodiment of the American dream. Born to a white mother and a black father, he is a true African-American, neither solely black nor solely white but both, a mixture of races and blood just

like his country and, increasingly, the whole world. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth, he said in his inaugural address, and that's why we cannot help but believe... that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve, that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself. His is the voice of the 21st century and the new humanity to which it must give birth, or we shall surely perish.

Life itself has shaped this man as though he were destined to become the nation's leader. Born in Hawaii because it was the least racist state in the nation, his skin was tanned enough for him to suffer the racist slurs

that come with being looked upon as 'black'. His father returned to his native Kenya when Barack was still an infant, and he grew up largely in the care of his 'white' grandparents. He learnt the native tongue of Hawaii before his mother remarried, this time a man from Indonesia whom she followed to his native land where Barack went for two years to a Muslim and for two years to a Catholic school. In the process he learnt another native tongue. His mother recognized his keen intelligence and remarkable powers of observation, and because she found his schooling inadequate, she roused him at 4 o'clock every morning to study English with her before going to school. He resented it, as any ten-year-old would, but he came to realize that her drill developed his mind to a level that garnered many scholarships for him as he made his way to the top of academic studies. In his moving and insightful memoir, *Dreams of My Father* (NY, 1995), he pays tribute to his mother, who had died by then. I won't try to describe, he writes, how deeply I mourn her passing still. I know she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and that what is best in me I owe to her.

It is not possible in a brief editorial to rehearse the stations of Barack Obama's life. Suffice it to acknowledge that it was a perilous road, often painful and desperate. With so many different cultural environments and racial origins, so many different languages and different places, all making their conflicting demands and urging their many

misapprehensions, so nomadic a life could have ended on skid row. But throughout his autobiographical reflections, one senses a steeliness of character and a clarity of moral purpose in the native make-up of Obama that guided him on a more constructive path. For him, the struggle to survive became a quest for his identity. On the way he acquired discipline, compassion, tolerance, understanding, forgiveness and an extraordinary perspicacity.

It is rare indeed that an individual who combines in himself all the best virtues of civilized humanity successfully launches himself on a political career that takes him to the very pinnacle of power and leadership. That this was possible testifies to the fundamental health of American democracy and gives us all grounds for hope. That this was possible

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for a so-called 'Black Man' tells us that something profound has changed in the psyche of America and thus in the psyche of the world. Race has been sidelined as a basis for the judgment of a person's worth. And so has re-

ligion. For the first time in history, an American President has specifically included "non-believers", i.e. agnostics, atheists and humanists, as equal partners in the common purpose to meet the grave challenges facing us at this historical moment. If President Obama lives up to his promises, the world will continue to leave behind the primitive prejudices of race, religion and gender that have victimized millions throughout the ages and still violate millions in different parts of the world. The Obama factor will urge all humanity forward on this road to a world in which all humans are truly equal.

Our admiration for the man and our celebration of what his election signifies must not, however, blind us to the fact that it is not men who make history but history that makes men who make history. Barack Obama could not have become president of the United States except at this specific historical moment. Without the growing threat of environmental disaster, without the bankruptcy of free market economics, without the obscene corruption of government and business becoming public knowledge, without two costly (in blood and money), immoral wars that have much in common with the Vietnam debacle, without two decades in which the Bush dynasty and its cronies turned America from the wealthiest to the most debt-ridden nation on earth, without the eight shameful years under the junior Bush whose devious, lying and corrupt governance deprived millions of Americans

of their jobs, their economic foundations, their health care, and much of their civil liberties – without all that and more in the complex web we call history, a man like Obama could never have been elected president. The people of America wanted change; he promised change; they recognized his intelligence and integrity, and trusted him to deliver change.

Once before in the history of the United States a man was elected to the presidency under similar circumstances. When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president on March 4, 1933, he took over a country in much the same desperate financial straights and in a looming global depression just like today. He took over from a man, Herbert Hoover, who had governed the country in a manner similar to that of George W. Bush (though not as blatantly dishonest and self-serving). Adam Cohen writes in his judicious study, *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America*, Penguin, 2009):

When he [FDR] took office, the national ideology was laissez-faire economics and rugged individualism, and the federal government was small in scope and ambition. "The sole function of government is to bring about a condition of Affairs favorable to the beneficial development of private enterprise," Hoover had written in 1931. Roosevelt and his advisers introduced a new philosophy, one that held that

Americans had responsibilities to one another, and that the government had a duty to intervene when capitalism failed.

FDR believed in the noble ideals articulated in the Constitution which Hoover had betrayed. He determined to restore them to the commonwealth. In the first hundred days after taking office, FDR ushered in the New Deal by persuading Congress to pass 15 laws that,

Look at yourself before you pass judgment. Don't make someone else clean up your mess. It's not about you.

**Barack Obama,
*Dreams from My Father***

among other things, addressed minimum wages, banned child labor, created public works programs, imposed regulations on the stock market, and abandoned the gold standard for America. Thus he laid the foundations for modern America.

Barack Obama is too savvy a politician and too well informed in the history of his country not to know that he is stepping into FDR's shoes. But he is facing formidable odds because, as Russel Baker writes in "A Revolutionary President" (*The New York Review of Books*, February 12, 2009), No Republican president since Roosevelt's death has tried harder than the departing George W. Bush to undo what Roosevelt did. Obama, in turn, now has to undo the evil that

Bush inflicted on America. He knows that since Roosevelt's performance the first Hundred Days of any presidency are the touchstone by which the president is judged. He has certainly started on the right foot: closing Guantánamo Bay, that infamous prison, the closest America has come to running a Nazi concentration camp; renouncing torture, that medieval practice that tramples the very human rights countless Americans have fought and died for; indicting the gangsters on Wall Street and in corporate business whose boundless greed is paralleled only in the brutality of criminal organizations like the Mafia. These are significant and promising moves, and no doubt others are in the process

of being defined and put on the path to implementation during his Hundred Days.

The question is whether it is humanly possible for President Obama to deliver. The obstacles he faces are daunting. He has promised equitable employment, affordable health care, and decent housing for all Americans; he has promised to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and to reform the financial system to achieve this; he has promised to address the environmental crisis by reducing energy consumption and harnessing wind, water and sun. These objectives cannot be achieved in a hundred days, or a hundred weeks, or even a hundred months. Just moving the nation closer to them requires huge sums of money at a time

in which the nation's financial system has collapsed and its economy is carrying the biggest debt load in its history. It requires also what the President, in his inaugural address, called a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world.

Will that recognition be forthcoming? Today Barack Obama enjoys immense popular support, partly because of the relief the nation feels that the disastrous Bush era is at an end, partly also because of a growing anxiety about the storms approaching from all sides. A majority of Americans have pinned their hopes for the future on him. That future will demand severe belt-tightening for the whole nation. How will ordinary Americans feel a year from now when their standard of living has declined significantly? Will they still be cheering?

And what about the corrupt manipulators of industry, business and finance who have accumulated fairytale wealth at the expense of the community – will they forego gratification of their insatiable greed and allow the President to curtail their privileges? Will the arms dealers and their military-industrial base tolerate any infringement on the astronomical profits that flow from their murderous machinations? These are centres of political power which their perpetrators exercise through the media they control as well as through the politicians and their parties which they finance.

Any president, upon elec-

tion, steps into a pre-existing power structure determined to guarantee business as usual. When that president is himself the product of the entrenched power, accommodation is swift and painless. But Obama's moral principles and political objectives are almost diametrically opposed to such a self-serving perpetuation of privilege and power. Will he have the strength to face down those that oppose him? To what length will those who see him as their enemy go to stop him? Politics is the art of compromise. But when does compromise become sellout? Obama promised the nations of the world peace and determined to end the war in Iraq – but with a commitment to send twenty or thirty thousand soldiers to Afghanistan instead. Is this expansion of one war when ending another a sop to the military-industrial powers, and, if so, has compromise crossed the line?

In the area of foreign policy, the ultimate test of Obama's integrity and strength will emerge in the context of affairs in the Middle East. To the Muslim world, he has promised a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. Those words will ring hollow if he does not end America's unconditional support of Israel. A good deal of the tension and the terrorism in the world today has its roots in the perception of Arabs and Muslims that we in West are their sworn, racist enemy. This perception, in turn, has its roots in the fact that, thanks to the unqualified financial, military, economic and moral support of the United States, Israel

has been able to violate Human Rights and United Nations Resolutions for six decades with impunity in their effort to sabotage a Palestinian State. There is only one way to bring peace to the Middle East, and that is to establish a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders, so that both Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side as equal partners based on mutual interest and mutual respect, each a sovereign nation in its own right. The forces in Washington that oppose this necessary resolution of a long and bloody conflict are potent, and it will be crucial for President Obama to neutralize them if he is to keep his promise to bring change to the larger world as well as to his homeland.

President Obama has the charisma and the humility that will enable him to rally the positive and creative forces in his nation to support his vision of a better future. All men and women of good will across this planet will join him in the final challenge of his inaugural speech: With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter. Whatever the outcome, the active commitment to a world in which peace, freedom, and social justice reign – the Obama factor – will always remain an essential part of the evolution of human history.

—Henry Beissel