

The Potential of a Transformative Presidency: The Birth of a Liberal America

by: Andrew E. Martins (Late 2008/ Early 2009)

The election is over and our President-Elect is Barack Obama. Not only was he swept into office with an expanded Democratic majority in both houses but also a burden unlike any president since FDR. America has chosen a man gifted with incredible leadership, intelligence, charisma and oratorical skills. But it has also chosen a junior senator, a man who has not completed one full term in the U.S. Senate and a man who was rated as the most liberal senator in the 110th United States Congress. America now sits idle between two paths, Ruin or Redemption. Obama's presidency can either solidify him as one of our greatest leaders or could make Bush look like a warm-up act. On the other hand Obama seems uniquely fitted for the job, with his oratory he can rally America and its people and with his Democratic majority he can pass a flurry of legislation reminiscent of FDR's first 100 days. His presidency is one of vast potential and immense expectations. Obama's gauntlet of presidential challenges demands a great, even excellent presidency. If his first term is a success not only will he be easily reelected he will also have successfully changed America's political landscape, possibly ushering in a new "Age of Liberalism." If the politics of America continues on the course that I will outline in further detail in this paper, the presidency of Barack Obama will mark the beginning of a golden age of the Democratic Party and liberal politics.

There are many indications of the political shift that America is undergoing. The clearest example would be the resounding defeat of the Republican Party in both the presidential and congressional elections. Furthermore America has elected a very liberal individual as the 44th President of the United States, which may not seem very indicative of a political re-centering on the surface but his intentions are very far left. "History suggests that it is possible both to govern as a radical reformer and to be a unifier, and thereby move the political center to the left." Many people suggest that the fact that he has appointed many centrists as proof positive that he is going to govern from the center. This is an incredible blunder on their part, although in today's presidencies the cabinet has exerted overdue influence on the commander-in-chief. This does not necessarily mean that this will be the case with Obama. Another way of looking at this is that he has appointed people who are on the right of him to serve as a counterweight to his leftist leanings. Thus keeping the centrist/blue-dog democrats in his political coalition while also satiating the appetites of the progressives who put him in office. Some may say that the counterweight measure is a more intricate way of governing from the center but yet again I have to point out the flaw in that logic. Simply put the buck always stops with the President, his cabinet can suggest but they do not have the power of the president and only congress can override him with a veto. "But he [Abraham Lincoln] wanted them [the cabinet] to know that he had resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice." As demonstrated by the quote the function of the cabinet is for advice not answers. Obama's governing from the left will play a large role in America's political re-centering as will his rhetorical abilities.

The role of rhetoric in a successful presidency is one that cannot be overstated. It is through rhetoric that only does the president keep in contact with the people but also influence them. "He [Lincoln] set out to educate public opinion, to prepare the ground for its acceptance. Lincoln had long believed, as we have seen, that with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed." Obama and the Democrats will have to rally public opinion into their

corner for every issue to not only realize their agenda but to also shift the balance of power and the general American political leaning solidly towards the left. As of late the American public has been out of touch with its president, whether this is because of his extreme unpopularity or the lack of direct interaction the president has had with the public. Whatever the cause maybe it leads or rather represents another opportunity that the Democrats could and should take advantage of. By involving the public in the affairs of the country that they too are a part of would be a huge step in swaying public opinion and re-arranging the political stalemate. Also President Obama would need to uphold the grassroots movement he has made and actively seek to recruit others by making himself at least appear accessible to the public and he must also appear responsive to the zeitgeist of the nation and world. It is obvious that he president will be a very busy man and therefore cannot spend his time constantly in front of teleprompters and cameras but he will need to be an accessible president. Lastly he will have to uphold his pledge to governmental transparency and while all of this seems to be a bit cumbersome such has always been the life of the president; politics has always been a highly evolved balancing act. To effectively reshape the political landscape Obama will have to defy certain notions that are widely held by the public such as the reasonable distrust of government and politicians.

It is obvious to anyone that there will be some sort of increased government intervention in both the economy and the general day to day lives of the American people. America as it is right now will either sow the seeds of dissent or react violently to this, due to the overabundance of Republican ideology on the role and size of government. In short the American public tends to have a slightly pessimistic view of government, its effectiveness, size and role. "...[A]ll the great presidents used their leadership first to transform the public understanding of national challenges." The solution to this obstacle in Obama's path would be for him to attach the need for bigger government to the challenges that we face both economically, globally and socially. By making government inextricably attached to solutions to the problems that we face Obama should easily get over that hurdle. This is important to the rise of the Democratic Party and the political re-centering in America. Obama would need to be the anti-Reagan in the sense of according to Robert Kuttner, "Reagan succeeded in transforming public assumptions from the general premise that government should help to the idea that government was likely to make matters worse." Also he needs to sustain the wave of hopefulness and general good will that he receives from the electorate, one that comes from the entire political spectrum. By sustaining it he will renew the confidence in both government and politicians that is sorely lacking in today's society and he will also ensure public support for his policies and actions. Thus tying the knot or rather unifying the three guiding principles for a political re-centering and rebirth of Democratic politics.

By transforming our politics, challenging conventional wisdom and embracing American in a way rarely seen Barack Obama can reshape the liberal/progressive brand into something the people will have more than a presidential fling with. He can, due to the unique circumstances and advantages he brings with him to office bring drastic change in America but the journey will not be easy. The party as a whole will have to be behind him and his administration and will also have to rise above the partisan bickering that both sides are only too willing to indulge in as of late. Already we see a foreboding sense of party resilience, the Democrats have been voicing many concerns about Obama's stimulus package. Whether this is the start of a trend or pessimism that will be gone after Obama's successes waits to be seen. All that can be said is that the Democratic party and liberal policies as a whole have a golden opportunity to usher in an era of their politics but only the future can prove if they will seize it.

Quoted Books:

1. Obama's Challenge: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency by Robert Kuttner
2. Team of Rivals by Doris Kearns Goodwin