

What Will an Obama Presidency Bring?

by Carl Finamore & Mark T. Harris



There is growing dismay with Obama's conservative statements amongst Americans hoping for change.

After 16 years of someone named either Bush or Clinton occupying the White House, the timing was right for Barack Obama's presumptive victory as the Democratic Party presidential nominee. It was a victory the party establishment did not see coming.

A relative newcomer to national politics, Obama's campaign tapped into a reservoir of deep public discontent with the old faces and the old politics of both major United States parties. As the first African-American to win the Presidential nomination of a major party, Obama's success understandably inspires many in the black community.

Indeed, Obama's message of change is like the perfect storm to the drought of hope of the last eight years. A May CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey shows 71% of Americans now disapprove of President Bush, making him the most unpopular president in modern American history. Nearly two-thirds of Americans also oppose the Iraq War. With soaring

gas/petrol prices and millions facing home foreclosures, the Obama candidacy has become for many Americans the right candidate at the right time.

Back to the future?

But what exactly is this message of change? What can Americans and the world expect from an Obama presidency? On foreign policy, Obama promises a return to the more conventional foreign policy of earlier Clinton and Bush administrations. After eight years of a White House responsible for a genocidal occupiers' war in Iraq, a 'war on terror' that has earned the United States a global reputation as a rogue superpower that tortures its enemies, some might consider Obama's professed foreign policy stance reassuring.

But less reckless than the Bush Administration does not necessarily mean less war-like or imperial. Referring to President George H.W. Bush, father of the current president, Obama told *New York Times* columnist David Brooks (16 May 2008), 'I have enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H.W. Bush. I

don't have a lot of complaints about their handling of Desert Storm.'

What is Obama really telling us here? In 1991, Bush the elder's response to Iraq's incursion into Kuwait represented an orchestrated march to a foregone conclusion – war, before which all diplomatic solutions fell. In fact, serious Iraqi offers to negotiate withdrawal from Kuwait were repeatedly rejected by the White House in the weeks prior to the military assault.

As many as 250 000 men, women, and children would eventually die as a result of the United States military assault, according to the London-based Medical Educational Trust. But apparently all it took for Obama to judge the slaughter acceptable was the White House's concern for 'burden sharing' and support from key US allies.

For all Obama's criticism of the current Iraq war, his support for the first Gulf war should give his supporters in the peace movement pause. As for the current war, the stage is already being set for Obama to renege on his campaign

promise to pull all US combat troops out of Iraq within 16 months of taking office. According to Agence France-Presse (May 18), 'Amid warnings of the risks of leaving too early, the Illinois senator – a strong opponent of the war – said that he reserves the right to change this policy depending on the situation on the ground.'

In fact, Obama has long indicated his withdrawal plans are contingent on the Iraqi government's success in shoring up its military capabilities. An assessment of the latter will be under the expert advisement of American military generals. One of Obama's key advisors, Colin Kahl of the Center for a New American Security, envisions leaving tens of thousands of US troops in Iraq for years.

As Naomi Klein and others have noted, Obama's plan for staying in Iraq has more guarantees than his plan for leaving Iraq (ZNet, 27 March 2008). His 'war opposition', such as it is, would leave a large counterterrorism 'strike force' in the region, trainers for the Iraqi military, and thousands of armed private contractors in Iraq.

Nor does he plan to dismantle the large American Green Zone with its grotesquely imperial US embassy.

It's apparently a rule of American presidential elections that any progressive Democratic candidate can be expected to move rightward once they clinch the party nomination or the election. Bill Clinton did it in 1992 when he abandoned the progressive rhetoric of the campaign trail for a conservative pro-NAFTA, anti-welfare economic agenda. Obama is doing it now with new rhetoric about support for exclusive Israeli control of Jerusalem, right-wing speeches about upholding the economic embargo against Cuba, and reversing his opposition to congressional legislation exempting telecommunications companies from lawsuits over warrantless spying. He's even talking lately about supporting more corporate tax breaks.

This left-to-right shuffle occurs because in the early stages of campaigning liberal candidates such as Obama (or Bill Clinton) must focus on building popular grassroots support. Later, the demands they face as the party's official candidate shift more toward assuring established power and media of their reliability to serve and protect the corporate status quo.

On other issues, Obama's long-stated positions are hardly better than the Republicans. He wants to expand the US war in Afghanistan and says he is willing if necessary to launch pre-emptive military assaults on Pakistan and Iran. Domestically,

his healthcare plan represents a weak vision of reform in which private insurers will still run the show.

Will we really be closer to peace and justice under Obama?

Many left-progressives argue now that a better climate will exist for progressive social movements to flourish with a Democrat in office. Accordingly, otherwise trenchant critics of the war in Iraq, from veteran activist Tom Hayden to journalist Robert Scheer and others, have begun touting Obama's election as the path to a renewed society. But where is the evidence of this? Has there been any real progress in ending the war since the Democrats won control of Congress two years ago? Is the antiwar movement now growing commensurate with the success of Obama's campaign?

If anything, the opposite is true. The energy and hopes of many peace activists are now being channelled into electing a candidate whose 'new course' in foreign policy amounts to mostly tactical differences with the Bush Administration. But should we really expect something more from a candidate whose Senate record includes voting for every single war appropriations bill? Should we expect more from a candidate who wants more money for a defence budget that already equals half of the entire world's military expenditures?

Such liberal hopes reflect a misunderstanding of how power works and social change occurs. The core power of the 1960s civil rights movement grew from sit-ins, marches, unrelenting popular dissent, and from the movement's subsequent moral authority, not from the fact that John F. Kennedy or Lyndon B. Johnson were in office. Women's suffrage, the Vietnam peace movement, and labour's quest for the eight-hour day were also all fundamentally products of mass social protest, not whether the President was a Republican or a Democrat.

Contrary to progressive folk wisdom, a Republican President is not

intrinsically impervious to the pressures of mass dissent. If the American antiwar movement has failed over the last five years to force Bush out of Iraq, this is more a testament to the limits of the existing movement (and the demobilising effects of the Democratic Party on the movement) than the strengths of Bush.

Ironically, it was under Republican President Richard Nixon that the life-saving Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was created, the military draft ended, and abortion rights mandated. Such social change happened not because Nixon or the Supreme Court were even remotely progressive, but because of a changed political climate that was the result of years of protest and grassroots activism.

Isn't this the story generally of all movements for democracy? Apartheid collapsed under De Klerk's government in South Africa not because a more 'liberal' representative of apartheid took office, but because of the explosion of massive and prolonged popular discontent that began with the Soweto rebellion.

Unfortunately, the long-established lack of any major labour-based party in the US predisposes many liberals and left-progressives to subscribe to an outlook, however implicitly stated, that social change originates with those in power. In the end, this perspective reduces itself to the argument that, if nothing else, at least Obama will be better than McCain.

Different, yes. But for life to get better will take independent mass political action, not just illusions in Obama's good intentions. What will certainly not change with Obama's election is who holds the power. In fact, a more authoritative leadership in Washington could actually embolden new military adventures in Iran or Pakistan, for example, that would be more difficult for the now widely discredited Bush White House.

In any case, it would be naïve to expect the imperial mind-set that has led the US under the last two administrations to impose 17 years of bipartisan hardship on working-class Americans and unprovoked war on the people of Iraq to suddenly abate with a new Democrat in office. ■

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Obama has been successful in mobilising the liberal establishment behind him. Here he is with film star, Robert De Niro.