

A tale of two Obamas

Let me be up front. I am a pessimistic Optimist by nature about social and political change. A pessimistic optimist believes that successful social transformation is preceded by disruption, hopelessness, and even outright failure. If Barack Obama is going to fulfill the promise he held out to so many people in politically progressive and meaningful change-hungry circles, then I anticipate the only way to get there is through a painful two-step of failure and success. There will, by necessity, be two Obamas.

OBAMA AND THE POWER ESTABLISHMENT

The first Obama is the one we are watching as we begin 2009 and who is so disappointing to progressives. This Obama is turning to the Democratic Party power structure—refashioned during Bill Clinton’s term—and some Bush team members to guide his transition, populate his Cabinet, and propose ideas for the profound economic, social, and political problems that face the new president. We may not know for a while whether this recourse to the (mostly Democratic Party’s) usual suspects reflects payback for favours owed to the power elite, political instinct that the middle ground of American politics must be seized, or recognition that help from those with previous presidential-level experience is necessary and that the most palatable place to get it is the Clinton and Bush worlds—or, likely, a combination of all three.

Rather than guess at insider politics or bemoan the lack of genuinely progressive team members, I want to make plain what I think this recourse to the power establishment will mean for Obama’s administration in a very fundamental way. In a word, it means failure. These administrators and advisers will offer plans and policies that will likely fail in the face of the pressures that are at play on a global scale.

Why believe this? For the same reason that if your doctor prescribed a

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medication that ended up harming you, you would not go back to the same doctor for more treatment. Even if that doctor stopped the harmful medication and came up with a new treatment—for both the original malady and the new medically induced one—you would be a fool to trust that she or he would not try to cover her or his tracks and would be able to get beyond the treatment framework that not only did not help you but harmed you.

THE POWER DILEMMA

We can see the first obvious weakness of the treatment framework that Obama is inheriting from his Clintonistas in his claim that he will focus on (especially economic) domestic issues—echoing Clinton’s mantra, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Any headway in the domestic realm is wholly dependent on developments in the global realm (as it was during Clinton’s time). No US economic recovery is possible without a coordinated global economic approach. An infrastructure spending program depends on countries such as China continuing to provide

credit to the United States; creating markets for US products depends on the existence of global demand for them; the profit and thereby the staffing needs of US transnational corporations depend not only on access to national economies worldwide but also economic activity within them; and any hope of reforming the very damaged international financial system depends on agreement among the major economic forces around the world.

All this we and they know. This is part of globalization. What is often taken for granted in a too economically focused approach to globalization is the importance of international politics. Karl Polanyi in his wonderful book, *The Great Transformation*, long ago in the 1940s made clear that developments in international politics and international economics shape one another: developments and conflict within international political structures can undermine unity within international economic structures and vice versa.

ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

The long 19th century of relatively peaceful cooperation among the European powers so important to international capitalism at the time came to a crashing halt, ending in the First World War. The fundamental conflict in the international system tied to imperialism was never overcome—that might have also allowed for meaningful responses to economic crises—until fundamental change was put in place after the Second World War. The implication is that jobs in Ohio depend on the Obama foreign policy team of Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates, and Susan Rice. But just as policy-makers from the late 19th century through the Second World War kept working with the same fundamental framework for organizing world order, this team has made clear that its job is to continue to work with the same US-centric framework for world order fashioned in the post-Second World War period: the same one

every president from FDR to Bush has worked with. Sometimes the modality shifts within it—more or less multilateral, more or less militaristic—but the framework remains the same.

MULTILATERALISM ISN'T ENOUGH

This framework is getting very long in the tooth: with the increasing influence of China, Russia, India, and Brazil; with developments in the European Union; with populations and some leaders in developing countries seeking a non-neoliberal US path toward change. The United States and Obama have every reason to avoid a serious commitment to order transformation and seek continuity, leaning of course toward a more multilateral and less militaristic approach.

Continuity means treating the Middle East as a problem of Israeli security; Central Asia as a matter of competition with Russia and China; the Asian subcontinent as a matter of treating both India and Pakistan as allies and as problems (potential competition from India, failing state in Pakistan); Latin America as a matter of consolidating markets and containing the Red Tide (Chavez et al.); Asia as a matter of facilitating Asian—especially Chinese—capitalist development and hindering its security ambitions, while protecting Japan; and Africa as a new security zone in competition with China. Throughout these regions the pursuit and securing of access to oil and resources more generally is a given.

BRINKMANSHIP AND CRISIS

Without a very significant global financial or political crisis—or even world war—fundamental transformation will not occur. But I think such a crisis is in formation. This is where the economic team comes in to play: Larry Summers, Timothy Geithner, Christina Romer, and Paul Volcker. Their job is to restore on reformed terms US global financial centrality: with the US dollar as a reserve currency; with Wall Street firms and US banks as key global players; with credit flowing freely to the United States; and

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with ancillary institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank fully operative. However, I expect their efforts to fail as the global economy drifts into deeper crisis because the neo-liberal-oriented US centrality they will try to save is a key factor that is producing the crisis in the first place—for which only a completely realigned and distributed credit and reserve system is the answer. And that failure will likely be accompanied by international political pressures just as Polanyi noted the crisis of the long 19th century was.

But at some point—even long before a second Obama term perhaps—the power elite surrounding Obama today will itself fall into crisis as it loses hope that it has the answers to mounting global pressures. This is when, history suggests, moments of openness appear: when the elite becomes divided and fragmented, and itself looks around

widely for answers. It is then that it—and we—will turn to Obama for an opportunity to explore new approaches to social organization and more broadly world order.

TAKING OUR CHANCES

What we may see is not a heroic FDR political figure relying on a new best and brightest team to rescue the world but rather a leader willing to open the structures of power to many voices, contentions, and frameworks from across the world. This Obama would contribute to the altering, recasting, or even replacement of those structures. These new structures would open space for broad-based and diverse dialogues regarding the social purposes of international economic and political institutions. They would establish a genuine commitment to aiding innovations in organizing local, national and global societies for the benefit of the billions whose lives are made profoundly insecure by the current structures of power.

That sort of turn would by its very nature be a success about which any progressive should feel optimistic. But western progressives will have to do their part: they will need to resist their own tendencies to offer solutions and ways forward long before the second Obama gets a chance to help open up the spaces of power and usher in not just new policies but systemic change—otherwise, we will end up with only one Obama. 🍁

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