

The end of the culture wars and the Obama presidency

FAIRWEATHER AMERICAN VOTERS

In a recent interview, one of America's most provocative public intellectuals, Cornel West, was wisely cautious about the long-term impact of Barack Obama's electoral victory: as an outsider to the establishment, Obama will be reluctant to "step out too far." Although inevitably caught up in the excitement of the moment and the groundbreaking election of a young African-American—a feat that could only be imagined one generation ago—West qualified that the hope embodied by Obama is "hope on a tightrope." It is hope that can be easily betrayed by a naive belief in the possibility of creating a genuinely democratic polity without the "messy" struggle and conflict that must, inevitably, take place to achieve it.

We cannot predict what will happen, but it is possible to diagnose the malaise in the United States, which Obama successfully tapped in to with the slogan, "Yes, we can." The enthusiasm of US voters was undoubtedly activated by the harsh realities of a recession, the prospect of diminishing expectations, rapidly dwindling resources, and fear in the face of the unpredictable—the inadequacy of health-care provision, inequality of income, and social and racial discrimination. What remains to be seen is whether the many people who were directly involved in the campaign or felt empowered by their vote will now retreat into the privacy of their homes. Or will their brush with politics lead to a much needed revitalization of the public sphere? Can Obama capitalize on the support of these diverse and divergent constituencies, which have not worked together previously? Will he be able to create a climate of creative debate that will overcome the unproductive deadlock resulting from rigid party ideologies and the entrenched practice of bargaining with powerful, self-serving interest groups?

BY NATTIE GOLUBOV

Nattie Golubov is a researcher at the Center for North American Studies at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

[T]he hope embodied by Obama is "hope on a tightrope." It is hope that can be easily betrayed.

TWO NARRATIVES

The belief in possibility is an important factor in the constitution and political mobilization of collective identities. It is, after all, one of the fundamental ideas of what is identified as the American Dream. However, the sense that citizens can remake themselves also works more locally, where it serves as the inspiration for individuals who seek self-realization and, more often than not, upward mobility and economic independence.

Obama's journey to the White House is in many ways a new version of the stereotypical rags to riches story that fires the imagination of most American citizens and immigrants. But it can also be read as the culmination of another, related story—that of African-Americans and their extremely long struggle for equal treatment. Throughout his campaign, Obama drew upon both narratives and skillfully wove them together, and steeped them in history. Not only is he the son of a mixed marriage *and* a patriotic American, despite the years he spent abroad, he is an African-American who, despite many odds, successfully took advantage of the opportunities available to him in the United States. His personal story is one of moral and political progress. As a result, an extremely diverse audience could identify with the collec-

tive "we" that he invoked in his speeches, an admirable rhetorical strategy.

Obama comes across as a thoughtful, intellectual man who does not talk down to his audiences. He is young and he proved that he is in touch with cultural trends when he used new communication technologies and pop culture to reach a generation that acquires most of its information either through a mobile phone or the Internet. He belongs to the professional middle classes and is a liberal from the north; he is a religious man and a family man. Given his background, he is culturally bilingual and so can inhabit two cultures. He is well-travelled and so is not parochial. Even his lack of executive experience is an asset given the public's widespread distrust of institutions and politicians. It is therefore no surprise that he garnered the support of blacks, Hispanics and other racial and ethnic minorities, new voters of all kinds including young first-timers, churchgoers, white and black upper-middle-class professionals, and educated whites who are not threatened by the country's increasingly diverse racial and ethnic mix, among many others. Is it any wonder that Henry Louis Gates named him "our very first postmodern Race Man—a man who embraces his African cultural and genetic heritage so securely that he can transcend it, becoming the candidate of choice to tens of millions of Americans who do not look like him."

AN INEVITABLE BACKLASH?

But, hope is one thing and reality is another. Obama, currently a figure of inspiration and promise, is intent on tackling several generation-spanning causes: the economic crisis and a new energy economy, health care, climate change, civil liberties, and diplomacy. Indeed, polls that measure emotional reactions to the presidential election and the confidence inspired by the outcome demonstrate the extent to which voters


are emotionally invested in the idea of him. Unfortunately, there are issues here that may not be resolved because they have greater staying power.

Cornel West is confident that there will be a white backlash and, I would add, there could be a conservative one as well, especially around cultural and social problems that are invariably contentious in the United States—Xenophobia comes in many shapes and forms, such as abortion, gay rights, women's rights, and the contents of school curricula, perhaps even immigration laws, civil liberties, and environmental issues. All of these invariably give rise to emotionally charged disagreements that seem to be interminable because the moral beliefs and world views from which they are understood and justified are incommensurable. For example, despite optimistic claims that the United States is now "post-racial," one man's

appointment will not end racial tension, resentment, or discrimination, and the recent referendum banning gay marriage in California—where Obama won with an overwhelming majority—provides another example. These cleavages will continue to divide the nation. These kinds of local conflicts will not go away despite Obama's intention of creating a flexible, bipartisan coalition in Washington. The values and beliefs with which people conduct their lives do not necessarily correspond to either party politics or institutional agendas.

THE ROUT OF NEO-CONSERVATIVE PUBLIC CULTURE

The looming question is whether the new president will be capable of narrowing "the gap between the promise and the reality," to use his own words. Perhaps for the present what matters is what

he represents. Given the widespread skepticism concerning politicians, lobbyists, and corporate America, the figure of the president has a moral authority that is baffling in other countries. If we read the election results as a referendum on the exhaustion of conservative ideas, Obama to a large extent won on the strength of his ideas. Let us hope that his arrival in Washington will usher in an era of careful reflection, auto-critique, and innovation both within the White House and elsewhere to fulfill the social and economic expectations of an increasingly complex and changing society. 

For more information on
Canada Watch and the Robarts
Centre for Canadian Studies, visit
www.yorku.ca/robarts

Lincoln's reincarnation continued from page 19

graphical bestsellers, sat through a thousand interviews, and placed rationales for his policies on a sprawling website. What part of him was missing?

It was, I would suggest, the Tom Beck part—that is, the familiar, comforting, liberal Democrat leader of the free world who happens to be black. Where was the centrist, accommodating black president from central casting that had been previously imagined when Hollywood or anyone else wished to fantasize a black president? Certainly, it wasn't the kid with an Islamic name from a broken, interracial marriage who was also president of the *Harvard Law Review* and, after 2004, an unstoppable force. What we kept looking for and couldn't find in Obama was that comfortable, dull Hollywood cliché.

THE AFRO-AMERICAN SUPERHERO

This brings us to our third film, the one in which Obama truly stars. The movie he is in, I would suggest, is Peter Berg's 2008 release, *Hancock*. In that story, Will

Smith plays not a president but rather a down and out African-American superhero of the faster-than-a-speeding-bullet variety. He drinks too much, eats with his hands, and passes out on park benches. When he does do his superhero thing, he causes as much mayhem as he prevents. The good citizens of Los Angeles, while naturally enough expecting the services of a superhero, are getting fed up with him.

Hancock (a name that seems to have been chosen for an American political year) is redeemed when a down-on-his-luck public relations agent takes on the task of resuscitating his image. As in most American films of this ilk, broad comedy ensues, and everyone learns a little lesson about what is really important.

Why is this the Obama story? It is because today, American film has finally engaged the extreme clichés about African-American males: their physical prowess working unpredictably for good and evil (think Mike Tyson); their image problems, often self-induced by the fear of their own achievements; the white

community's need for them to be adequate by becoming exemplary.

BEYOND THE CLICHÉS

And just as American film has confronted these clichés, so has Obama. When the *New Yorker* published its infamous satirical cover in the middle of the campaign, it was depicting the image that Obama, thanks to the right-wing propagandists, might have had but didn't. He didn't because it was cancelled out by the other satirical image—that of the perfect if ethereal Obama that one saw, for instance, in the widely distributed JibJab cartoon (http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time_for_some_campaignin).

All that remained for a president who thinks he is Lincoln—and may well be right—was to look out over his inaugural crowd and pick out his own Frederick Douglass. That wasn't protective glass around him; it was a mirror. For with the demands Obama is making and with his assertion of his right to judge others, this Lincoln's Frederick Douglass is the rest of us. 