

"Remaking America: The Ambiguities of Obama"

Barack Obama was inaugurated president of the United States on January 20, to the cheers of a vast majority of both the American people and the people of the rest of the world. In his inaugural address, he promised to "begin again the work of remaking America."

In this short phrase, which was picked up by the world press in their headlines and analyses, Obama captured all the ambiguities of his presidential promises. The verb "remake" can mean quite different things. It can mean returning to a previous state that was better. And Obama seemed to indicate this possibility with another phrase, calling on American citizens "to choose our better history." But "remaking" can also mean more fundamental change, creating a quite different kind of America than the one the world presently knows. The ambiguity is whether Obama proposes merely to tinker with the structure and the institutions of the United States and the world-system or to transform them fundamentally.

What should be clear to everyone by now is that the United States has not elected a Che Guevara as its president, despite the hysterical fears of the unreconciled rightwing of the Republican Party. Nor, however, has it elected another Ronald Reagan, despite the hopes of some of those who voted for him and the fears of his more intransigent left critics. What then has the United States elected? The answer is not obvious yet, precisely because of Obama's style as a politician.

There are two questions to parse. One is what Obama would actually like to achieve as president. The second is what he can possibly achieve, given the realities of geopolitics plus a worldwide depression. Vice-President Biden described the latter on January 25 as "worse, quite frankly, than everyone thought it was, and it's getting worse every day."

What do we know, at this point, about Obama? He is unusually smart and well-educated for a political leader, and he is a poised, prudent, and very successful politician. But where does he really stand in the large gamut between wishing merely to tinker and fundamentally to change? Probably somewhere in the middle of this range. And probably what he will really do and achieve will be more a function of the constraints of the world-system than of his own choices, however intelligent they may be.

Up to now, we have had hints of where he is presently heading in five arenas: inclusive participation, geopolitics, the environment, internal social questions, and how to handle the depression. The initial verdict is very mixed.

Obviously, where he shines best is in inclusive participation. His own election is a measure of that. To be sure, electing an African-American president is merely the culminating act of a steady trend in the United States since 1945 - from President Truman's integration of the armed forces to the Supreme Court's decision on school desegregation, to Thurgood Marshall's appointment to the Supreme Court, to Colin Powell's appointment as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Powell's and Condoleezza Rice's successive appointments as Secretary of State. Still, it marks a breakthrough that few expected two years ago. And it matters.

Obama will continue these efforts of inclusive citizenship. He, however, faces a major political test on the question of immigration. There is no indication yet as to how forcefully he

will tackle this issue. He would have to struggle with a large part of his own political base. Given the extent of current and expected levels of unemployment in the United States, he may postpone doing anything. But the issue will not go away, and it will only get harder to resolve. Furthermore, not resolving this issue will have negative effects on the world's ability to come through the depression with less pain.

Obama's geopolitical posture is far less promising. The Israeli/Palestine conflict is probably unresolvable at the moment. The absolute minimum that needs to be done is to include Hamas in the negotiations. Quite possibly George Mitchell's appointment as U.S. special representative presages doing that. But that will scarcely be enough to obtain a viable political solution. The Israelis are entrenched in their bunkers and not ready even to think about anything that Palestinian nationalists could accept.

I have no doubt that the Iraqis will make Obama keep his promise of withdrawal in 16 months. And I do not believe that Obama will do more than jostle verbally with the Iranians. But he has started down the path to disaster in Pakistan, seriously undermining its government in his first week in office. Pakistan's government is weak and may soon fall. And, if it does, Obama will have no defensible options.

The basic problem is that Obama has not renounced the inflated language of a former hegemonic power. In his address, he said to the world: "Know that America is...ready to lead once more." The world wants the United States to participate. It precisely does not want the United States to lead. I don't think that Obama really understands that yet. Pakistan could well be his undoing.

In addition, he has started off on a bad foot in Latin America. He has played to the gallery on Chavez and, worse, he has not heard President Lula's challenge that Latin America will not believe he stands for change until he lifts unconditionally the Cuban embargo.

His first steps on the environment are positive - in his appointments, in his executive decisions, and in his indications to other states that the United States is ready to take part in the collective measures that the scientists indicate are necessary. But here, as in other domains, the question is how boldly and rapidly he is ready to act.

The policy on internal social questions is again an uncertain mix. Obama has restored the policies on abortion that were those of the Clinton administration, and this clearly distinguishes him from the Reagan/Bush policies. He has decreed the closure of Guantánamo and the secret CIA prisons, while postponing for up to a year some decisions about what to do with those who are presently imprisoned. The degree to which he will revoke the vast network of government invasion of privacy within the United States is still a very open question. Nor is it yet clear to what degree he will fulfill his promise to the unions to undo the serious constraints the previous administrations had put on their ability to organize.

Finally, we come to the arena in which he has least leeway, the world depression. He is obviously ready to increase vastly government involvement in the economy. But so is virtually every other political leader throughout the world. And he is obviously ready to augment what might be called social-democratic measures to reduce economic pain to the working strata. But so is virtually every other political leader throughout the world.

The question here too is how bold the measures. He has nominated a bunch of very cautious

Keynesians to all his key positions. He has not included any of the U.S. economists who are the left Keynesians - Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, Alan Blinder, or James Galbraith. They are all saying that cautious measures won't work, and that precious time is being lost. Maybe one year from now, Obama will reshuffle his team to include those who are calling for bolder action. But maybe too that will be a little late.

Obama is anxious to pull the Republicans in Congress along in his economic proposals. Partly this is his passion for choosing "unity of purpose over conflict and discord," in the words of his inaugural address. Partly, it is clever politics, in the sense that he doesn't want to be out on a limb as the economy further deteriorates. But the Republican leadership is shrewd enough to understand this, and will give him their votes only in return for gutting much of his program.

Obama is off to a very shaky start. The belief that he is ready to push for a fundamental remaking of America has weak evidence in its favor, despite his intelligence and his intellectual openness. The United States is getting good grammar. It needs bold remaking.

by Immanuel Wallerstein