

Obama And The Openess of History Norman Birnbaum

When the Obama family takes up residence in The White House. it will live in a building constructed by slaves. The joy experienced by citizens of every color after his election is well founded. Our history remains open, its crimes, cruelties and errors sometimes can be overcome. The President-elect made achieving the unity of the nation one of his major campaign themes. Along with his insistence on the economic responsibilities of government, on the necessity of a more measured foreign policy, his self-depiction as a post-racial candidate (along with his calm and intelligence) convinced a majority of the electorate (fifty three percent) that it could risk voting for him.

Still, a majority of whites (especially in the midwest and south, and amongst older persons) voted against him. A majority of women, the university educated, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, trade unionists, and the young voted for him. The electorate increased slightly over the last Presidential contest in 2004., by somewhat more than one percent. The Afro-American vote increased by just two percent. His meticulously organized campaign and its success in mobilising his potential electorate accounted for victory. .

McCain struggled vainly with the legacy of a failed Presidency, and his Vice-Presidential candidate alienated many. His own age and erraticism, his failure to define a convincing program., cost this American hero dearly. Democratic gains in the House and Senate suggest that any other Republican would have had equal or greater difficulties. Still, he did win forty-six percent of the vote. The Republicans are demoralized, and some Democrats are proclaiming the beginning of a new cycle of dominance---like the one between 1932 and 1968. It is decidedly premature to write the history of the next decades in such definite terms. The very openness which enabled Obama to win can close again..

The rhetoric of the campaign anticipated public debates and legislative battles yet to come. The absurd denunciation of Obama as “socialistic” for advocating fiscal policies and government expenditure which no civilised industrial nation is without expressed a market fundamentalism as primitive as the Biblical literalism of the religious traditionalists. Totally cynical, America’s bankers and industrialists resort to it when they seek to fend off regulation and taxes. Now, the collapsing auto industry following the banks, they demand billions from government. The new President and his legislative majority will have to decide what new laws will govern changed relations between state and market. They will also have to decide whether to conceive of these steps as temporary or a permanent alteration of the balance of economic power. When Obama in the campaign spoke of “spreading the wealth around” he restarted an old debate on the nature of American society. It is entirely unclear how far he intends to take it, and whether the incoherent public demand for economic assistance in the crisis can be channeled into support for a new New Deal, the outlines of which he has not even sketched.

Meanwhile, the new international context negates comparisons with Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. The US is far less sovereign, economically. Joining the stimulation of the American economy to an international program for a reconstruction of the broken control mechanisms of the global economy is a gigantic challenge---the more so as the American public is systematically under educated about the problem.

It is even less educated about the geopolitical setting. Obama has called for an end to the Iraq war and a renewed and enlarged intervention in Afghanistan---as if he were unable to terminate Bush's limitless war on terror.. The Pentagon budget, nearly a trillion a year, is unaffordable, Keynesianism gone blind if not mad. Worse, the ideology of empire makes a sober examination of the limits of national power nearly impossible. Obama and his foreign policy advisors know this: dare they say so? Unless they do, Obama may end like Johnson, Carter and the outgoing President, defeated by the impossibility of combining empire and welfare, national pride and military and political realism.

The contradictions and depths of the situation he inherits will demand much of Obama . Projects for large reforms can come only from political and social movements presently fragmented or unformed.

Our citizens have been shocked by rising unemployment-and by large losses in their savings, but have no idea of an alternative to American capitalism. . They view the Iraq war as a mistake---but do not imagine a different American world role. The very enumeration of these difficulties evokes both the openness of our history and the obstacles to mastering it. Great American Presidents have been, above all, convincing teachers. It remains to be seen what instruction the former law professor will provide for the nation. One hopes he will resemble not the rhetorically gifted technocrat, Blair, but the creative leader, Willy Brandt.