

Barack Obama & the Enlightenment of Popular Discourse

Andrew Brenner, 2009 MPA Candidate

A former President once told the nation: “We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history. Never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis and so few external threats.” I am sure many people would like to know at what point in this nation’s history the country enjoyed the fortune of being so safe and secure and which fabled President of yore uttered these words. It was eight years ago, President Bill Clinton’s final State of the Union address.

Indeed, from where we stand today the world has become a much bleaker place than when President Clinton addressed the nation in his last State of the Union just eight short years ago. Our foreign policy is in crisis. Our domestic policy is in crisis. Our nation is in crisis. Our world is in crisis.

We all know the names – Cheney, Rumsfeld, Bush. We all know the places – Iraq, Ground Zero, Afghanistan. And now, we all know the stakes.

With these problems in mind, it is easy to slip into the “anyone but Bush” mentality, thinking that the bar has been set so low that there is no way for this country to turn but up. While the statement may be factually correct, its implication is not. It has duped many into thinking that *any* of the candidates for the Democratic Party nomination would have an equal aptitude for national transformation, rebuilding, and recovery.

Despite the allure of reverting to the 1990s, a period in time that many look back on positively, this election cannot simply be about reversing the past eight years and turning back the clock. The heart of this election needs to be about who can put this country on the road to recovery and begin the long-term transformation we so desperately need. Make no mistake, this election may very well be the most important election for generations to come.

This transformation, however, will not be accomplished through the same approaches of the past. The politics of triangulation championed by the Clinton administration will not fix the problem of 47 million people without healthcare or reclaim the 4,000 American lives lost fighting a war in Iraq that should never have been waged or authorized. Nor will a continuation of the bitter and divisive partisanship of the Bush administration fix our nation’s broken economy or salvage America’s status in the international community. Our country needs a President with the ability to inspire the nation again after seven long years of darkness and despair. America needs a President who is more concerned with helping people lead better lives than helping CEOs afford their next leer jet. Operating under the impression that any solution is a good solution will only result in more of the same, and frankly, this nation may not have the strength to endure much more.

From the beginning of the race for the Democratic nomination there has been one word uttered over and over again that best describes the needs of the nation – change. Obama said it first, and many have said it since, but despite its repetition the significance of “change” has not only endured but has become especially salient. Obama has pithily been able to sum up the hopes and dreams of an entire nation in one word, and the response has been unequivocally resounding.

Critics have dismissed Obama and his supporters as full of hope and not much else – all style and no substance with a base of support a mile wide and an inch deep. The rebuttal to that is clear – with victories in states as diverse as Washington and South Carolina, Maine and Idaho, and Iowa and Alaska, America has seen an unrivaled unifying political force. Riding on the back of those who have historically been shut out of the political process – minorities, youth, and even independent thinking Republicans – he has amassed what one could deem a true *coalition of the willing*. Obama has raised more money than anyone thought possible, \$55 million in the month of February alone, and unlike other candidates, he has done it the ethical way by refusing to accept donations from special interest groups or federally registered lobbyists.

At the heart of the race for the Democratic nomination is an intense desire for dependability – a sense of security that the nominee will be someone Democrats can depend on to win come November. For this to happen, however, this election needs to be more than just a referendum on George Bush, it needs to be a referendum on the way public policy in this country has been approached over the past few decades. For too long America has endured a political system defined by bitter partisanship and elections that have given way to Willie Horton, swiftboating, and now Jeremiah Wright. The ramifications of this negativity are real and have robbed the American public of what they deserve – real political discourse, a true debate over ideas, and a battle over whose solutions will offer the most relief and promise.

There are too few moments in history where the choices have been as clear as they are today. The choice between continuing Bush-Cheney diplomacy or creating foreign policy that supports dialoguing with nations that we disagree with and acts justly when international crises arise. It is the choice between continuing a health care system in crisis that leaves tens of millions of people uninsured and is the leading cause of bankruptcy in America today, or a common sense approach that brings people together to solve problems, yet does not criminalize an inability to pay for health insurance. It is the choice between staying in Iraq for 100 years or the promise to get our young men and women out of Iraq in the quickest and safest way possible. It is the choice between digging our country into a deeper hole or beginning our ascension upwards.

This process will not be easy and it will not be overtly swift. It will be hard and it will not be without struggle. The damage that the Bush administration has caused in the past seven years unfortunately cannot simply be wiped away. The stakes are too high to trust this next era in American politics with people more concerned with personal gain than public benefit, more concerned with helping Wall Street than Main Street, and more concerned with themselves than with the nation. The stakes are too high to trust the reins of this nation to anyone other than Barack Obama.

Suggested Reading:

“The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream” by Barack Obama

“Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance” by Barack Obama

“A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide” by Samantha Power

“Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq” by Thomas E. Ricks

“The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic” by Chalmers Johnson

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