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BARACK OBAMA, LIBERALISM, AND THE PRESIDENCY

The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States has dramatically focused international attention upon major changes underway in American culture, politics, and society. In the election of 2008, a decisive majority of the American electorate chose to repudiate the record of governance established by George W. Bush and the Republican party, and to launch the nation's politics down a decidedly different path, led by a decidedly different kind of political leader. While it was remarkable that for the second election in a row, the Democratic party expanded its majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate, reaching numbers last seen in the early 1990s, most attention has been drawn to the stunning outcome in the presidential race, in which Barack Obama obtained the largest percentage of the popular vote by a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964. And, of course, the United States did something that few, or perhaps no, other democracies have ever done, in selecting as its head of state a member of a racial minority that only constitutes 13 percent of the population at large.

The excitement generated by this election, and its potentially profound significance for America's national identity and international profile, was greatly facilitated by distinctive features of the American political system. Most notably, the surprising success of Barack Obama points

to the disruptive and potentially radical nature of the office of the presidency itself.[1] The election of a new liberal president, brought to power on a wave of deep national discontent, suggests that the capacity of the office of the presidency to serve as a *democratizing* force, galvanizing a national majority behind a program of change, has not been lost. In recent years, many Americans have been critical of the growth of presidential power, penning long tomes on "the new imperial presidency," the "cult of the presidency," and the rise of "unbalanced and unchecked" presidential power.[2] This election in no way vitiates the wisdom of their critiques. Yet, it also points to the progressive and democratic features of the office, and its unique capacity to serve as an agent of innovation in a political system that was, among other things, intentionally designed to slow down and even block rapid change. The outcome of the 2008 election thus reminds American liberals of what they have long liked about the office of the presidency, and it can be anticipated that their historic affinity, even love, for the office will soon be returning. In a different kind of political system, the kind of cultural and symbolic change sure to be brought about by an Obama presidency would be less likely to occur, and would certainly be more subdued in style and intensity.

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[1]On the "disruptive" nature of the presidency, see Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1997).

[2]See Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), Gene Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency* (Washington, D.C.: The Cato Institute, 2008), Frederic A.O. Schwarz Jr., and Aziz Z. Huq, *Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror* (New York: The New Press, 2007), and Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg, *Presidential Power: Unchecked and Unbalanced* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

The Presidency in Comparative Perspective

The concept of a "presidential system" naturally implies a contrast with an alternative form of democratic governance, namely the parliamentary systems that prevail among the nations of Europe, in Japan, and in many other democratic countries. At the core of a parliamentary system is found a fusion of the executive and legislative functions within an elected assembly that is empowered to select from among its own members a committee ("the cabinet") to manage the affairs of government. The leader of that committee ("the prime minister") is charged with overseeing the government's program, but may be removed from office if he or she has lost the support (or "confidence") of a majority of the assembly's members. Especially in the Westminster model of parliamentary government as practiced in the United Kingdom, vast power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and his cabinet, as the parliament itself is often reduced to the status of a confirming body with little active legislative role. Yet, since the prime minister can be removed at any time, it is necessary to maintain a different office to fulfill the need for an ongoing and stable head of state. Thus, the head of state function, the ceremonial symbol of the nation as a whole, is embodied in a different individual, either a constitutional monarch, as in the United Kingdom or Japan, or an appointed or elected figurehead who typically has little political power.

The distinctive feature of a presidential system, in contrast, is the doctrine of the separation of powers. The legislative and executive are both elected separately, sometimes at different times, and there is a prohibition on any overlap in personnel between the two branches.

This has two consequences: First, it is entirely possible that the political agenda of the president will not necessarily be shared by a majority of the legislative branch. The possibility of major conflict between the legislative and executive was not only anticipated by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, it was actually welcomed as a means for maintaining a proper separation of the two institutions. While such a system was intended to protect individual liberty from the predations of a tyrannical majority, the possibility of an undesirable stalemate and even paralysis of public policy was an unavoidable consequence. Second, the head of state function, instead of being embodied in a neutral ceremonial figure (such as the Emperor in the Japanese political system, or the British monarch), is placed in the office of the president, who also simultaneously serves as head of government, responsible for the administration of public policy. Inevitably, this arrangement means that the office of the presidency takes on a cultural and symbolic significance that is far greater than that which any prime minister is able to achieve. The phenomenon of "Obama-mania" in the United States in 2008 and 2008, complete with a vast profusion of Obama-themed music, videos, clothing, coins, plates, lamps, coffee mugs, statues, bumper stickers, action figures, and just about anything else that American entrepreneurs could dream up, is altogether characteristic of this unique status of the presidency. Such expressions are much less likely to be found in countries where the top political leader is a mere "prime minister," often designated as only a "first among equals" sharing power with other cabinet ministers, and always symbolically inferior to the formal head of state.

Liberals and the Presidency

For American liberals, by which I refer to those who seek to actively use government to achieve greater economic equality and social justice (as they define it), the presidency has historically been an appealing institution for one simple reason: it helps to get things done. Those who seek to use the power of the state to achieve social change have often been stymied by a Congress that is most effective at delivering benefits to local constituencies (what we call "pork barrel" in the United States, and which has a Japanese equivalent in the famous Shinkansen "trains to nowhere" and other unnecessary public works). When it comes to the enactment of coherent government programs at the national level, Congress has often proven to be far from efficient. The presidency, in contrast, as the only elected institution primarily responsible to a national rather than a local constituency, has emerged as the main political force capable of pushing through legislation that serves broader interests. Thus, such presidents as Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, the prime movers behind the New Deal and Great Society programs of social and economic reform, became greatly admired figures for liberals of the twentieth century (and beyond). The president as an energetic head of government and party leader, formulating policy initiatives and actively pushing them through Congress, became crucial to the liberal strategy for achieving social change.

At the same time, the head of state function had its distinctively attractive features to American liberals. The president, as a cultural and political representative of the nation, could serve as a symbolic means for including societal groups that had previously been denigrated and excluded. Perhaps the most dramatic example can be found in the case of Andrew Jackson, who swept to power in 1828 as the voice of rough-hewn western frontiersmen, and whose inaugural

celebration was a famously raucous event in which drunken supporters invaded the White House for a night of revelry.[3] Jackson and his followers disdained the aristocratic pretensions of Washington society, and embraced Jackson's assertion of the wisdom and capacity of the common man, no matter how lacking in social graces and formal education. Jackson's success electrified his supporters, who eagerly acquired their own nineteenth-century versions of the souvenirs and tokens so popular during Barack Obama's contemporary inauguration. Evincing an altogether different style, John F. Kennedy became a darling of American liberals not only as the first Irish Catholic president, but as an urbane, witty, and sometimes intellectual model of American cultural modernity and sophistication. The informal style of Jimmy Carter, manifested in more casual dress and a willingness to literally carry his own baggage on and off of Air Force One, was likewise lauded by liberals eager to encourage a more populist and less imperial brand of presidential leadership after the semi-monarchial style manifested by President Richard Nixon.

Notwithstanding their historic affections, liberals came to be fearful of the office of the president after the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the abuses of presidential power in the Watergate scandal. While most liberals had seen little to fear in the strong presidential leadership provided by Franklin Roosevelt, by the 1980s they had grown deeply apprehensive about the propensity of the executive to use military force unencumbered by legislative approval, and the associated tendencies towards excessive secrecy, outright deception, human rights abuses, and the illegal surveillance and harassment of US citizens. Unsurprisingly, the administration of George

[3]Described well in H.W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Anchor, 2005) and Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832, Vol. 2 of 3* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

W. Bush stimulated even greater misgivings about the use of presidential power. In a remarkable speech in 2006, former Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore attacked George W. Bush for concentrating vast powers in the executive, with dire consequences for the quality of American democracy. "We have for decades been witnessing the slow and steady accumulation of presidential power," Gore said. "As a result of its unprecedented claim of new unilateral power, the Executive Branch has now put our constitutional design at grave risk. The stakes for America's representative democracy are far higher than has been generally recognized." Gore continued:

> This effort to rework America's carefully balanced constitutional design into a lopsided structure dominated by an all powerful Executive Branch with a subservient Congress and judiciary is – ironically – accompanied by an effort by the same administration to rework America's foreign policy from one that is based primarily on U.S. moral authority into one that is based on a misguided and self-defeating effort to establish dominance in the world. The common denominator seems to be based on an instinct to intimidate and control.[4]

By the second term of George W. Bush, few liberals could be found who were willing to embrace the concept of a strong presidency as desirable in its own right. The expressed concern of American liberals was actually the opposite: to achieve a rebalancing of the inter-branch

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[4]The full text of Gore's speech can be found online at: http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/01/16/gore_spying/index.html?source=opinion.rss.

relationship in favor of the legislative branch. Seemingly long forgotten was the fact that the modern presidency was itself largely a liberal invention, most clearly in the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, but also in the earlier reformist efforts of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The idea that it might be liberals, not conservatives, who would stand to benefit the most from a strong presidential office was scarcely to be found in the national media or journals of opinion.

Liberals and Barack Obama as Head of Government

Given the intensity of liberal dislike of George W. Bush and his assertions of presidential prerogative, it is ironic that, in all likelihood, a strong and forceful presidency by President Barack Obama will result in liberals embracing the office in much the same fashion as have their recent conservative predecessors. While perhaps surprising, this embrace will reflect the continuing functional need for presidential leadership. A weak president does not result in a Congress that passes its own version of national legislation as much as a Congress that passes no significant legislation at all (instead devoting its efforts to local spending projects and other activities that help ensure reelection). If liberal policy measures are to be passed, they will require a strong and popular executive, capable of effectively reaching out to the general public for support. In Barack Obama, liberals feel they have found such a leader, and there is good reason to believe that he will in fact be successful in serving as a focal point for collective action in the national policymaking process. Democrats have secured at least 257 seats (out of 435) in the House, and 69 seats (out of 100) in the Senate (counting independents Joe Lieberman and Bernie Sanders as members of the Democratic caucus) – solid majorities in both bodies. However, given the continued

opportunities for delay and obstruction, especially via use of the filibuster rule in the Senate (which requires a 60 vote majority to bring bills to the floor for a vote), major policy change is very unlikely to occur unless President Obama plays an active role in orchestrating public support and pressuring individual members of Congress. As Obama proceeds with his agenda, it will be the administration, not Congress, that will initially write much legislation, and formulate the strategies for guiding bills through the legislative labyrinth. And, as Obama succeeds legislatively, so too will his popularity grow with the very same liberals who were complaining just yesterday about the dangers of Republican on Capitol Hill who slavishly followed presidential initiatives to the detriment of Congress's intended deliberative role.

While there shall no doubt be some hypocrisy involved in the alacrity with which liberal Democrats will soon embrace presidential leadership, this fact should not blind us to the reality that the American presidency is likely to serve once again as a means for breaking up existing power relationships, much as it did under the leadership of such reformers as Jackson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. Perhaps, then, there is a certain genius in the American political system that it is still able to call up new charismatic leaders, virtually unknown on the national scene a few short years ago, who are able, within the confines of legally-bound institutions, to initiate policy innovation and societal revitalization. This potentiality of the office to bring about progressive change must surely be counted on the balance sheet as we evaluate the presidency, just as much as the Bush-era abuses in foreign policy, civil liberties, and human rights that we in the United States (and so many around the world) have come to know all too well. (It is worth noting that this potential of the presidency may also suggest some avenues of reform for Japan,

which has shared with the United States a legislative assembly with strong tendencies towards excessive localism and particularism.)

The capacity of the presidency to act as an agent of change has also been facilitated by the democratization of various aspects of the system of presidential selection. In recent decades, each political party has embraced a system of popular participation for nominating its presidential candidate, one which allows new leaders to emerge quickly and without excessive encumbrance by established political interests. The complex system of caucuses and primaries, which captivated the nation in the winter and spring of 2008, has been criticized for its length and high cost, and the power accorded to small and arbitrarily selected states, such as Iowa and New Hampshire. Yet, at least one distinctive virtue of the system is the opportunity it allows for the emergence of charismatic leaders capable of overcoming congealed power relationships in the nation's capital. Just six years prior to his election, Barack Obama spent his Christmas vacation on a beach in Hawaii, contemplating his recent humiliating defeat in a bid for the US House of Representatives, his dissatisfaction with life as a junior legislature in the Illinois state assembly, his persistently large student loan debts, and the attractions of possibly leaving politics altogether for a lucrative career in law or administration.[5] Yet, only a year later, Obama was running for the office of United States Senator, and four years later had ascended to the office of President of the United States. This quick ascent to national power is almost unknown in parliamentary systems that typically require a long journey through various cabinet positions before attaining the status

[5]See David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 133-162.

of prime minister. In the rise of Barack Obama from almost complete obscurity to the nation's highest elected office in the space of five years, we witness the distinctive capacity of a presidential system to facilitate unexpected and perhaps transformative change.

It is also an inescapable feature of the office of the presidency that its very democratic nature, responsive to the changing tides of public opinion, means that American foreign policy can experience sudden shifts – shifts that are less likely to occur in most other political systems. Such changes have often been seen as negative, introducing an element of instability into policy formation and implementation that prevents the kind of skill, secrecy, and dispatch necessary for effective diplomacy. One of the earliest observers of the American experiment, Alexis de Tocqueville reached the conclusion that democracy and skillful foreign policy simply did not mix: "For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that in the control of society's foreign affairs democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others."[6] Yet, there are also those who see presidentially-driven oscillations in foreign policy as a source of strength, not weakness. Some students of the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, for instance, have concluded that it was exactly the *alternation* of different emphases in foreign policy – shifting from confrontation to detente, from an emphasis on economic and security interests to a concern with human rights – that gave US foreign policy a surprising effectiveness in the long-term confrontation with communism.[7] Perhaps, then, the alternation from George W. Bush's

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[6]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Anchor, 1959), p. 226.

[7]See Stephen Sestanovich, "Did the West undo the East?" *The National Interest* (Spring, 1993) and the essays compiled in Nikolas Gvosdev, *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism: A Postcript* (Edison, NJ: Transaction, 2008).

style of militaristic confrontation to Barack Obama's more diplomatic and humanitarian approach will prove advantageous for the achievement of US foreign policy goals. This kind of inconsistency, whether advantageous or not, is less likely to occur in parliamentary systems in which foreign policy is largely controlled by professional civil servants and established politicians who have risen over decades into positions of responsibility.

Liberals and Barack Obama as Head of State

It is already apparent that liberals have been delighted with the symbolism of Barack Obama as head of state, and this aspect of the American presidency – with its capacity to symbolize the social and cultural inclusion of previously excluded groups – has already exercised a galvanizing effect on the image of the United States both internally and around the world. Obama is, of course, the first African-American president, but he is also the son of an immigrant, and as such also suggests the capacity of the United States to include new immigrants into the political system. The earlier rise to power of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who still speaks American English with an Austrian accent that extends to the pronunciation of his own state of California, is likewise a symbol of the adaptiveness and flexibility of American national identity in an increasingly globalized world. As many European countries struggle with the incorporation of growing communities of Islamic immigrants, the United States has gone so far as to elect a man named Barack Hussein Obama not just as a head of a political party or a mere prime minister, but as the occupant of an office that inevitably helps constitute the country's very sense of national

identity. Eight years of Barack Obama as the American head of state may change American identity in ways that cannot be foreseen today.

The twist in this development is that Obama's background is quite different from that of other African-Americans, and by some definitions he might not be considered African-American at all.[8] Unlike the vast majority of people of African descent in the U.S., he is descended from an African immigrant, not a slave brought forcibly to the United States. His mother, of course, was a white woman originally from Kansas, and it is on that side of the family that he finds his roots in the American experience. Indeed, he counts among his American ancestors not slaves, but rather slave owners, and according to his autobiography he is descended via his mother's side from relatives of Jefferson Davis, the zealously pro-slavery president of the southern Confederacy during the American Civil War.[9] Moreover, Obama grew up in Indonesia and in the state of Hawaii – the latter usually not thought of as a traditional center of the African-American community. However, in choosing to marry into a middle-class Black family in the city of Chicago, and to work and live for many years within the African American community of that city, Obama gained the respect necessary to be accepted by this historic American community as one of its own.

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[8]See the discussion in Debra J. Dickerson, "Colorblind: Barack Obama would be the Great Black Hope in the Next Presidential Race – If He Were Actually Black," *Salon*, Jan. 22, 2007, online at: http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2007/01/22/obama (accessed Nov. 16, 2008).

[9]See David Nitkin and Harry Merritt, "A New Twist to an Intriguing Family History," *The Baltimore Sun*, March 2, 2007, online at http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nationworld/politics/bal-te.obama02mar02,0,3453027.story (accessed Nov. 19, 2008), and Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), p. 13.

The fact remains, however, that Obama's identity is in many respects that of a hybrid – he is Black, but he is also White; he is a Chicagoan, but also a Hawaiian (and those are two very different things); he has Christians in the family, but also Muslims; he has a grandfather who fought with Patton's army in World War II, but another one who worked as a cook for British colonialists in Kenya; he grew up in the United States, but also in Indonesia, including during some very formative years of a child's life. In short, Obama's election as head of state can also be seen as the symbolic inclusion of not only the historically oppressed African-American community, but also of all those whose own identities cross traditional lines of demarcation based on skin color, religion, culture, nationality, and geography – the very people who 2008 Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin sometimes suggested were not quite "real Americans." But it is they, those whom Obama would later suggest were the "mutts" of America (the American colloquialism for a mongrel dog), who won, and the proponents of a more rural, traditional identity who found themselves in this election, at least, in a political minority. Obama thus emerged as more than a Black president, but also as America's most *multicultural* president – a development altogether appropriate for an era of increased globalization and the ensuing cross-fertilization of new identities.

As head of state, the president can provide not only for the legitimation of subordinate social groups, but also of political and cultural forces that, while not historically oppressed, have nonetheless found themselves ill-represented in the White House. It is noteworthy in this respect that Obama is the first Northern, urban liberal Democrat elected to the presidency since John F. Kennedy. He is an urbanite with no ranch in Texas or vast suburban compound to abscond to

when the rigors of Washington become too much to bear. He is also an academic, having taught constitutional law for twelve years at the University of Chicago, and an accomplished author, having penned two books without the help of the ghost writer upon which most American politicians depend. For the academics and intellectuals of America, there is no doubt a good deal of jubilation in seeing one of their own elected to the nation's highest office for the time in a generation. But Obama also brings into the White House a set of political ties that have been far more controversial. While he was careful to emphasize his moderation during the campaign, Obama's congressional voting record suggests that he is perhaps the most liberal president that the United States has ever elected.[10] He spent a considerable portion of his youth as a left-wing community organizer, and while the point was frequently sensationalized by his opponents, he does come from a social milieu in which radical activism was accepted as fully legitimate. In the 1990s, for example, Obama was closely tied to the New Party, a small political grouping based in Minnesota and Illinois, that embraced a social democratic political orientation that, in the American context, is considered rather radical.[11] While several European countries have seen the inclusion of radical activists from the 1960s in their political system as cabinet ministers (one thinks, for example, of the former street fighter Joschka Fischer serving as German foreign minister), none have selected a former community activist to serve as either head of government or head of state. Obama is not a socialist, nor even much of a social democrat, and his

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[10]"ADA's 2007 Congressional Voting Record," Americans for Democratic Action. Accessed on Nov. 18, 2008.

[11]P.J. Gladnik, "Will MSM Report on Obama Membership in Socialist New Party?" *NewsBusters* web site: http://newsbusters.org/blogs/p-j-gladnick/2008/10/08/will-msm-report-obama-membership-socialist-new-party (accessed Nov. 18, 2008).

administration is unlikely to be more radical than that of Franklin Roosevelt when it comes to economic issues. Nonetheless, there are reasons to think that his election will eventually serve to legitimate a more liberal, even left-wing, style of politics in a nation that has long been adverse to even a hint of social democracy or socialism.

Conclusion

The initial response to the election of Barack Obama suggests that the office of the presidency, despite the protestations of many liberal critics in recent years, retains its allure as a powerful agent of change, including progressive change in a leftward direction. American liberalism, and American society, is posed once again to fall in love with the presidency, not only as a culture symbol, but as a practical means of bringing energy to a set of nineteenth-century political arrangements that are otherwise prone to stalemate and paralysis. The rise of unified party government, in which Democrats simultaneously control the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Presidency, may allow for markedly liberal policy change. It is likely, therefore, that we will soon be hearing fewer criticisms of presidential prerogative from American liberals, and instead witness once again the potency of the siren call of executive power. In his 2006 speech attacking the Bush Administration for an executive power grab, Al Gore concluded by saying, "As I stand here today, I am filled with optimism that America is on the eve of a golden age in which the vitality of our democracy will be re-established and will flourish more vibrantly

than ever."[12] Little could he know that such a revitalization of democracy would, it now appears, come from the very institution that he was in the process of warning Americans against. But as liberals come to embrace the presidency once more, they would do well to recall Gore's admonition: that with the great potential for good of the office of the presidency, so also comes the dangers of concentrated power.

[12]The full text of Gore's speech can be found online at: http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2006/01/16/gore_spying/index.html?source=opinion.rss.