

WORD FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

“Change, We Can” – But Will He?



America is being eroded away at an alarmingly fast rate.

Barack Obama is most definitely not another Jimmy Carter, and all of those in Europe and elsewhere who are contemplating in sheer delight the expected arrival of a “gentler” and “kindler” US administration (by which

they mean a weak and largely incompetent administration, and one that will by default allow them to basically do as they please) are in for a pretty nasty surprise or two. The presence of political figures such as Madeleine Albright and Zbigniew Brzezinski amongst President Obama’s closest advisors is a very sobering pointer at the shape of things to come.

President Obama will likely pursue these overarching goals with better skill and flexibility than George W. Bush. Also, he can assuredly be counted upon to rely on diplomacy with a far greater intelligence and finer perception than his predecessor (not that this is a particularly demanding task), so as at least not leave foreign governments in the unmistakable understanding that they are regarded as either serfs or enemies. Much of this would however be purely cosmetic, and intended to project an image of “change” where in fact there is a substantial continuity.

Talking about which, there actually is a very significant move that President Obama might wish to implement, on the very day of his inauguration to demonstrate whether he really means change. As already indicated, it would be highly disingenuous to expect for him to solve exceedingly complicated issues such as the economic crisis and the two ongoing conflicts just by snapping his fingers, and even removing the moral opprobrium of Guantanamo will require time and attention. But there is something that depends solely on him and would come virtually for free: President Obama could ask Congress to repeal the “Patriot Act”.

The “Patriot Act” plays no useful purpose whatsoever in the so-called “Global War on Terrorism”. However, the extraordinary unconstitutional powers it bestows upon the President – powers of waging undeclared wars, of torture, assassinations, extraordinary rendition and domestic spying – are at the very core of the notion of an “imperial presidency”, which in turn is the pivotal element of the necons’ dangerous dreams.

If Barack Obama decides that he doesn’t need and want those powers, and rather he intends to be a constitutional president in the mould of 42 of his predecessors, the world can be satisfied that there indeed will be change where it matters. If not, well, at least we will know where we stand.

Ezio Bonsignore

Arguably never in history was the election of a new US President greeted with such an overwhelming enthusiasm, and accompanied by such great expectations both at home and all around the world as Barack Obama’s victory. Literally billions of people of all races, nationality, creed and social status are looking at him in awe as sort of a Messiah, a man who will solve the global economic crisis, quickly disentangle America from the twin mess in Iraq and Afghanistan, reverse the most despicable policies of the Bush administration, establish friendly and amicable relations with all countries in the world, rid the world of poverty and famine, and find a cure for cancer and AIDS – the whole, of course, within the first one hundred days of his administration. And therein lies the problem, because unfortunately enough at least some of these expectations are to end up in bitter disappointment.

Barack Obama’s victory, and to an even larger extent his current enormous popularity worldwide appear to be result of multiple factors, including most notably his exceptional position as the first black President, his personal charisma and undoubted intelligence, an extraordinarily efficient, richly-funded and well-organised electoral campaign, and above everything other the general rejection not to say disgust for all the Bush administration stood for and tried to achieve in eight horrible years, and the resulting perception that a fundamental process of change was indeed urgently needed. But there is very little in what is known of the President-elect’s programme that would even come close to justify the truly spectacular demands that are placed upon him. Further, even the most powerful man on Earth must on occasion walk the tight line between what he would like to do, and what he can actually manage to achieve in a given situation. Thus, there necessarily will be cases, whereby President Obama’s policies, no matter how sound and well thought-of, will end up in failure. One would certainly hope that the US and world’s public opinion would quickly come to understand and accept these limitations, and the sooner the better.

For the purposes of this magazine’s areas of interest, the most significant expectations upon President Obama’s future administration – although not necessarily the most important ones on a global scale – involve the overall foreign policy and strategic posture of the United States, beyond the relatively marginal question of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and involving most particularly the relationship with the Allies in Europe and elsewhere. I might be myopic, but I see very little potential here for the truly epochal changes quite a few European commentators, and I’m afraid some European political leaders as well are deluding themselves about.

Barack Obama has been elected by the US citizens, and them alone to be the 44th President of the United States – which has very little to do with the confused and confusing global empathy that sees him as sort of an anointed leader of the world. As such, he will apply his intelligence and character to foster and defend, to the best of his capacities the interests of the US and its citizens – which are not always and necessarily the same as the rest of the world’s.

President Obama will most certainly handle the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and Iraq differently from the Bush administration – which is only too logical, given the abysmal results so far – to try and come to sort of a final solution in both theatres, that will enable him to bring the troops home while minimising any ensuing strategic losses and indeed possibly scoring a point or two in the “Great Game”. He might even wish to take a different approach to the Iranian question, although this is questionable. But I doubt very much whether President Obama could or would progress much further on the road of change.

Some people this side of the pond appear to confidently expect for President Obama to implement a nearly complete reversal of the strategic policies, that the Bush administration has been following. This, however, implies the perception that the neocons’ visionary project that underpinned much of the actions by past administration was but a freak accident in history, a psychotic deviation from the United States’ true nature and national goals that will now be corrected. I’m afraid such a perception is grossly mistaken.

The Bush administration went through its foreign policy business with an appalling mixture of incompetence, arrogance and misguided use of military force, but many of the goals it was pursuing were pretty logical in view of the strategic and economical position of the US after the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalisation. The fact that these goals were and are highly unpalatable to the rest of the world is a completely different issue altogether.

Even President Obama would thus wish to maintain the primacy of the US in a unipolar world, if only he can. By the same token, he would also resolutely defend and further strengthen America’s positions on the “Great Chessboard”, particularly as regards control of the global energy reserves – if need be at the expenses of everybody other, even including America’s closest Allies. Financial situation permitting, he would also wish to ensure that the US maintains its current overwhelming military superiority over any conceivable opponent of combination thereof. And, I don’t see how he could sit idle, while the US’ control over its own backyard in Central and Latin