

From Inspiration to Implementation: Can Obama govern as he campaigned?

**By Maria L. Fornella*

Epic, historic, momentous, transformational. In a word- saturated environment, it is hard to find a term powerful enough to describe the significance of this election for the American psyche. A few vignettes from history may help us grasp this idea better than any hyperbolic epithets.

When Frederick Douglass came to the White House, which had been opened to the public to celebrate President Abraham Lincoln's second inauguration in 1865, he was not allowed in. The freed slave, by then a well-known author, abolitionist, activist and orator, sent his card in to the President, who immediately ordered him admitted. In 1901 President Theodore Roosevelt was severely criticized for inviting writer Booker T. Washington to a private dinner at the White House. Thirty years later, his niece, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt received the same vociferous criticism for hosting several African Americans as guests in the White House, including soprano Marion Anderson in 1939.

Of course, the practice of receiving black guests in the presidential residence became much more accepted as African Americans were elected to high office in the sixties and seventies. But the journey for the inclusion of the black race has been a long and arduous one for this country, and it will culminate in poetic symbolism this coming January, as Barack and Michelle Obama and their two daughters make the White House their residence. This is a remarkable achievement that all Americans are proud of, and a powerful unifying force for the nation, as mentioned by John McCain in his gracious concession speech on Tuesday night.

Barack Obama ran a brilliant, disciplined campaign which will be analyzed for years to come for its innovative use of technology, its break with traditional funding methods and the pervasive influence of the leader 's personality which set a positive tone, an optimistic aura that trickled down to millions of volunteers and contributors. Obama captured the spirit of the times, anticipated the extent to which the country was ready for a change before anyone else did, and proposed a vision that mobilized millions behind him. He was the only one able to take the pulse of the nation and grasp its mood.

Eight years of unresponsive and irresponsible leadership, of a lingering war that could not be won, of unimaginable depredation of their cherished values and foundational ideals, had brought Americans to the verge of a nihilistic self-hate. If Obama's intelligence enabled him to perceive this mood, his audacity propelled him forward to seek the higher office in order to change it. Because he believes in the resilience of the country himself, he was able to spark the last bit of fire and illusion left at

the bottom of the American heart. He spoke of unity and human dignity; of changing the distorted image the rest of the world has of America, of using diplomacy rather than force, of consulting with allies and talking to enemies. Leaving ideologies aside, he focused on what we all have in common and not on what divides us. And America heard him.

His campaign was mainly geared toward the digital generation, and that is where he found his base. Building on Howard Dean's use of the Internet for financing and organizing his own grassroots campaign during the 2003 Democratic primary election, he perfected a technological platform from which he reached millions of citizens. His email list for daily announcements had eight million addresses, eight hundred thousand people registered in mybarackobama.com to get direct information from the campaign and the candidate himself into their mobile phone text messaging systems, and thirteen million people contributed money through the internet. He had one million and a half cyber volunteers who got special training and connected with affinity groups already in existence, such as Democracy for America and the more radical Moveon.org. His field volunteers could choose between training at local headquarters and attending "night school" on the web.

By September 1st, the date of the official start of the presidential campaign once both conventions were over, he had amassed four times more money than his opponent. That led him to opt out of public financing, being the first candidate to take this decision since federal funding was established in the 1970s. He took a gamble and won: in September alone, he was able to raise 153 million from small donors on the internet, while McCain, who stopped accepting donations in order to be eligible for public funds, had to content himself with the \$84 million received under that program.

The contagious optimism and low-key approach that characterize the candidate was also found in every field office, every phone bank volunteer, and every neighborhood canvassing team. The lack of internal disputes and the positive atmosphere earned his campaign the nickname of "No Drama Obama" and the candidates as well as his close team of advisers deserve full credit for it. He started with a small circle of inner political advisors who had worked with him during his Senate run. Talent and serenity, no prima donnas and no big egos, were the main qualifications. In a new version of J.F. Kennedy's *The Best and the Brightest*, he drew on his friends from Harvard and Columbia, and his colleagues and students from the University of Chicago as the next circle of supporters and advisors. They helped him recruit five hundred paid political operatives among the best in the business, and an army of volunteers. They mounted a huge voter registration operation and a get-out-the-vote campaign that would pay off immensely on Election Day.

In difficult times during the campaign, David Axelrod, his chief strategist says, Obama and his team would regain their motivation focusing on what he would be able to achieve once in the White House.. During the lowest point of his campaign, the Reverend Jeremy White controversy,

after brainstorming for a while, Obama decided to make a speech on race as he saw it, based on his own experience and perspective. If he could not persuade Americans of his good faith, he would lose and go back to the Senate, he told his closer advisors with his usual cool detachment that belies a disciplined tenacity and a passion for his call of service to the country. That speech was hailed as exceptional, and was well-received by all races and creeds; it generated a consensus seldom forthcoming on such a divisive topic.

The result of these efforts, from the vision that inspired it all to the organizational strengths, was reaped on election night, when he won over 61% of the youth vote, 98% of the African American vote, 67% of the Hispanic vote, 56% of the women's vote, 47% of white men. He also won the Independents vote, as well as the Catholic and even some of the Evangelical vote. This broad based coalition is also reflected in a geographical shift, with the inroads he made into Republican territory by winning Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Ohio, Nevada and Colorado as well as Florida. There is no denying that this represents a major political realignment, even if it is too early to evaluate whether these demographic and geographical changes are permanent. But they do reflect changes in the economy, with economic power flowing away from major urban centers and into new states such as Virginia and Colorado. This transfer of economic power brings about demographic change and, ultimately, a shift in political power. Obama put it with subtlety when he said: "There are no red states and blue states; there is the United States of America."

Now the major question being posed these days is whether President Obama will be able to govern as flawlessly as he campaigned and whether he will make good on his promise of bipartisanship. He has quite a few good options to do this when choosing his cabinet: moderate Republican Robert Gates could, for example, be asked to stay on as Secretary of Defense, or Chuck Hagel, a Republican Senator that was outspoken on his opposition to the Iraq war could replace him. Colin Powell's name has been suggested for Secretary of Education. Obama has already announced that his first measures will be on the economy, namely, a stimulus package to spur employment, extension on unemployment benefits and more attention to the implementation of legislation already passed on mortgage foreclosures. Given the economic crisis and the huge bailout package that will have to be administered by the incoming administration, the Treasury Secretary will be the most important cabinet member. Here Obama will probably choose a Democrat such as former Clinton Secretary Treasurers Larry Summers or Bob Rubin, or perhaps younger Timothy Geithner, President of the New York Federal Reserve Bank.

A larger question is whether Obama will be bold or cautious in his first decisions. President Reagan was of the idea that what a president does not get done during the first year of his tenure, goes into oblivion and does not get done at all. Since the center of the political spectrum decided the election and gave him a strong mandate, he will need to address their concerns first. For example, by giving the middle class the promised tax

cuts, and financing those by letting Bush's tax cuts on the wealthy elapse. Health care reform is also a possibility, to demonstrate his commitment to voters, but one that would cost a lot and take time to implement. The main difficulty he faces lies in the conundrum of how to do something bold without enlarging the trillion dollar budget deficit he is inheriting, and all without raising taxes.

A neo-Keynesian approach is likely, with, for example, the government ignoring the deficit for a while, and investing in a huge renewable energy program, thereby creating thousands of green jobs and meeting two campaign promises with one bold stroke. He could also opt for highly symbolic actions, such as closing Guantánamo and delivering the prisoners to the US regular court system. Politically, he has a mandate for this, but there may be some legal sticking points that might protract the process and thus not render it so symbolically effective. Whatever he decides to do, the transition period will set the tone for the rest of his administration. He thus needs to do it right, lay out his vision of a national purpose and work towards it in a bipartisan and transparent way, avoiding the temptation of governing with the Democratic legislature only, to the exclusion of the Republican minority. The same mobilized digital-age generation that gave him this victory will be monitoring his every move, assessing the results and sharing their opinions on blogs and chat rooms. Since Obama has his sights set on the long-term, he will try his best not to disappoint.

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Geography
Director, ODU Model United Nations Program Old Dominion
University, Norfolk, Virginia*