

## **The Night Chicago Revived**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

At Grant Park, before an ecstatic crowd and protected by two giant bullet proof glass walls, Barack Obama declared victory shortly after midnight, Eastern Time, last night, and delivered his first presidential speech emphasizing unity and sacrifice.

Last night's election victory for the Democratic candidate Barack Obama was a breakthrough in American History, marking the end of an era of discontent and the rebirth of the American dream. With three states still too close to call, Obama has so far won 349 electoral votes (he needed 270 to win). Americans turned out to vote in unprecedented numbers (about 65%) and Obama won in Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio and Virginia, all of which had voted for Bush in the previous presidential election. He is only the third Democratic candidate since Franklin D. Roosevelt to win the White House with more than 50% of the popular vote. It represents a national political realignment and a shift in the electoral map, with Republicans seeing their base reduced to the Deep South, the rural Mid-west and the sparsely populated Rocky Mountains.

What this victory tells us about America is that the majority of voters are ready to embark in a new era of hope without looking back, exhausted by years of war, division and despair that have hurt US leadership abroad and bankrupted its economy. It represents an America that is ready to reap its promises of democracy and liberty by recognizing the fact that those ideals can only crystallize when there is also equality and yes, redistribution. After all, Barack and Michelle Obama are the embodiment of what happens when all citizens, regardless of race, gender or class, are given the opportunity to succeed. As Ariana Huffington puts it on her Post: "Obama's victory holds up a mirror, reflecting the country we are...a young... optimistic... forward-looking country, a country not afraid to take risks or to dream big."

Last night at Grant Park, where he addressed 200,000 Americans that had gathered to celebrate his victory, Obama gave his first presidential speech. Without losing his optimism, he adopted a more sober tone and addressed all Americans, even those who did not vote for him. He will govern for all, bridge the divides and become the post-ideological, pragmatic president the country and the world need. His debt to Independent and even Republican voters was apparent in Ohio, where he won a crucial victory with the white blue-collar workers (men and women) that McCain had so intensely sought out during his campaign. According to the New York Times, eight out of ten voters who voted for Bush in 2004 voted for Obama in this election, as well as two-thirds of those who didn't vote that year and 70% of those who had backed other (independent) candidates.

Now comes the transition period which will be crucial for Obama to consolidate the movement behind him, and reach across the aisle to Republicans. The challenges ahead are of gargantuan proportions, from prosecuting two wars to putting the economy back together and defending the nation from terrorist threats. He has enough political capital to take bold stands and move ahead with confidence, so he will most likely be able to make decisions that involve sacrifice and pain right away. He also has a larger majority of his own party in Congress, which is a great advantage for a president seeking urgent reforms, but could also result in his yielding to demands by his own party to advance its ideological platform. Such overreach could quickly undermine his arduously earned political capital.

Last night's victory gathering in Chicago's Grant Park was imbued of poetic symbolism: this is where the 1968 violent riots during the Democratic National Convention took place, and where Illinois police and National Guard confronted the anti-Vietnam war protesters with clubs and rubber bullets. In contrast, this time it was filled with a rapturous crowd of Americans of all races and ages, some crying, most smiling broadly, all conscious of the historical moment, celebrating with glee the triumph of the first African American President in the history of the United States, who won the election by defeating a Vietnam War hero. For many, this may very well signal the end of the culture wars that for 40 years dominated American politics. Time will only tell if this exuberant optimism is justified.

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