

//Notas de Análisis//

The post-modern candidate

**By Maria L. Fornella*

For years I have asked my Intro to Comparative Politics class: what would it take for your generation to abandon its passivity and lack of interest in politics and become mobilized as students all over the world did in the 1960s? From the événements de mai in Paris to the sit-ins against Vietnam and police brutality in American universities, to the strikes against oligarchic democracies in South America, those were the times when the terms “young” and “mobilized” were almost synonyms.

In response to this question, my students would just laugh softly, shuffle in their seats and avoid a direct answer. A couple of times someone would say: “well, if the government took away our rights, we would certainly do something about that...”

After twenty years of teaching, I think I have the answer— for the American youth to become mobilized, it takes fear and loss of national self-confidence, usually due to ineffective presidents who, through their misconceived and reckless policies, escalate the level and intensity of an earlier conflict. Lately, the manic reaction of George W. Bush to September 11, his mediocre and short-sighted populist presidency and his failure in the fake war against terrorism in Iraq, have had that effect.

Finally, after eight years of failed foreign policy that certainly has not made the country safer, indeed, many would say it has made it even more vulnerable and hated in the world, students all around the United States are mobilizing around Barack Obama, whose charisma and message have struck such a deep chord in many Americans, that he is being called a “phenomenon” against which it will be very difficult to run a successful traditional campaign.

Every twenty years or so, after a bad war and some wound-licking and soul-searching, Americans coalesce around a leader that reminds them of their national identity, proposes a new way and makes them feel better about themselves and the country’s destiny.

This happened with John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s, then with Reagan after the shameful decade of the 1970s and now it has happened again.

This American tendency of losing its self-esteem follows a clear pattern: after a big fear has engulfed the nation, the government, instead of assuaging those feelings, builds on them to justify its foreign policy adventures. During the late 1950s it was the growing concern with the Soviet threat, the arms race and the competition over the imminent conquest of Space. Kennedy appeared on the scene. Young, passionately articulate, strong and handsome, he reassured the nation about its own

strengths and powers. He embodied the hope they yearned for, the hope that could assuage their fear.

The foreign policy establishment watched him suspiciously. Wasn't he a big liberal that would be soft on Khrushchev? If elected, he would be the first Catholic President— wouldn't that mean his first allegiance would be to the Pope and not to the nation?

The younger generation was energized, as were others, by this promising young figure and they managed to put him in the White House by a narrow margin.

In the short time he was given a chance to govern, before he was abated by a lone gunman on October 16, 1962, he proved himself as a world leader, well-liked by most, yet respected by "the enemy." He restored pride and self-confidence to all Americans, even if behind the scenes he had a much darker side, including increasing the involvement of US in Vietnam and even condoning the CIA killings of certain dictators.

Then came the 1970s, the lost war, Nixon and Watergate, and American morale plummeted. This, followed by the Iranian Revolution and Jimmy Carter's failed attempt to rescue the American hostages in Teheran, made the mood even more somber. To the rescue came Reagan, in his entire Hollywood cowboy splendor, with his wonderfully reassuring smile that said: "Vote for me and I will restore your pride!" America became once more the "shining light on the hill", a beacon of freedom and prosperity. He was blessed not only with a great personality but also by destiny: his challenge to Gorbachev ("Mr. Gorbachev, bring down that Wall!") could not have been more perfectly timed. America was back on top. Again, in FDR's uplifting words, we had nothing to fear but fear itself.

The 1990s were the times of peace dividends, low mortgage prices, balanced budgets and prosperity for all Americans. The future extended before us, without a cloud in sight. It was the End of History, the end of ideological conflict, and American style democracy and capitalism reigned supreme, unchallenged.

Then came September 11, and with it, bunker mentality, the rallying around the opportunist president who could not wait too long before he used the spectacularly terrible attack to gather his posse and plan the completion of the war against Saddam. Americans were scared, and we sacrificed young people's lives and our own personal freedoms in order to be "safe again". It took a while to realize that complete security is an absurd concept, and that good police and intelligence work, together with cooperation with the rest of the world, was the only rational response.

Now, five years into an unwinnable war, after a terrible toll of young deaths and injured veterans, many with severe mental problems, the light shines again on a new leader. Out of the shadows comes Barack Obama.

He is the poster child of the post-modern candidate: dark, tall, with a winning smile, from a mixed racial and religious background, and a JD degree from Harvard, he dismisses the "silliness" of Washington-style politics and scare tactics, of building walls to keep immigrants out, of

eavesdropping on citizens to track down terrorists, of arousing the worst emotions on people for political gains. Instead, he wants to change the face of America, talk to the “enemies”, to leave ideology behind and use good ideas pragmatically, even if they happen to be “Republican” ideas. He appeals to a broad base of college educated young white men and women (under 50), African Americans, and even Hispanics.

Never mind that his middle name is Hussein, as some insist on bringing up, and that he for a while followed the Muslim faith (he professes to be a Christian now): young people are so tired of the barrage of propaganda against anything and anybody foreign, that they don't even listen. False nationalism based on violence and war does not sway them anymore.

Serenely cool, this gifted orator voices the youth's angst, promises change, a new beginning, a fresh approach, and non-partisan solutions to problems. He shares their fatigue with the lies, the corruption, and the meaningless sacrifice of the young in Iraq.

He leads, in Max Weber's terms, by a “gift of grace” (charisma), the strongest source of legitimacy at times when the other two, namely tradition and statute, are deeply discredited. His oratory hits the right tones, he inspires devotion, he embodies the confidence the country is thirsty for. Let's move on, he says, and show the world the real face of America. He is more than “a narrow and vain upstart of the moment”.

He is the post-modern candidate.

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