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**SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE 2008 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION**

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## VOTING FOR OBAMA: THE SYMBOLS OF HOPE AND CHANGE IN THE 2008 AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Marius Jucan\*

### Abstract

*The present article intends to deal with some cultural aspects of Barack Obama's election as the first African-American president. The cultural dimension of the 2008 electoral campaign in the United States was framed by a set of different factors ranging from the economic crisis to the spreading distrust of the American symbols and the new expectations regarding the global role of the United States. A non-white American intellectual, lacking in political patronage and current managerial experience, senator Barack Obama profiled his sense of anticipation, iconic strategy and ability to redraw the future dimension of American politics as the main cultural assets in his electoral campaigning for the president's office. His constant appeal to hope and change provided not only a basis to re-imagine America's future beyond the confusions of an ailing administration, but yielded quite surprisingly in prompting the readiness of the American people to eventually follow another type of leader. His advocating for the moral integrity of democracy, public wellbeing and virtuous future for the new generations sounded as a restoring, necessary start to reshape America on the threshold of a new century.*

**Key words:** Barack Obama, symbols, culture, presidential campaign.

Barack Obama's election as the first Afro-American president has occasioned a deluge of comments, opinions, controversies, and some ideas about the necessity of political transition. In the following, I intend to focus on the relationship between political transition and the symbols of hope and change in the American present-day society.

The symbols of hope and change have an obvious religious grounding in American culture. They link the idea of modernity with the

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representations of good, transcendence human genius, and political possibility. Hope describes the horizon of future seen through the capacity of the exertion of public will. It is rather common to think about hope in terms of attempting to appropriate the possible as the implementation of good for a community as well as for the individual. Hope always addressed a certain moral and political capacity to implement a faithful commitment to a professed ideal. In the same generic view, change is connected to an ascending sense of civilization, to the idea of transcending the past and the rewriting of its canon.

Political change has become since the Enlightenment a natural “right” of the autonomous individual as well as of modern nations. The alacrity and efficiency of change occurred in different cultural and political conditions lending themselves to various interpretations amounting to what may be called the versions of the “morality” of progress. In America, the symbols of hope and change have grown embedded in the liberal and the conservative components of the political discourse since the publication of *The Federalist*. In the case of the Barack Obama’s electoral campaign, re-symbolizing of hope and change constituted the novelty of a bold political program, embracing both critical and augural aspects of America’s possible renewal in the aggravating circumstances of the late neoconservative administration.

It is relevant to mark that besides Barack Obama’s natural gift for political rhetoric, one could witness the relevance of his cultural insight to assess adequately the symbols of hope and change as the core line of his political message. Traditional forms of political change or reform were constantly referred to by former senator Obama, whether when speaking about Thomas Jefferson’s championing for the “rights” of the individual, in Abraham Lincoln’s debating the racial issues of America, in reminding the religious-reformist Afro-American tradition, in dr. Martin Luther King’s struggle to assert the emancipation of the black community, or in the expression of American 20-th century pluralism. Each of these intellectual routes expresses the transformation of the American cultural canon which culminated with the transformations of 1960s, which were echoed in the 2008 presidential campaigning. Barack Obama is not only a natural, but also a “spiritual” offspring of the above mentioned period. He repeatedly eulogized the chance of benefiting from a democratized education which

actually allowed him to build his present-day civic and political legitimacy due a new vision of culture.

The self-made-man pattern, reminding the towering silhouette of Abraham Lincoln, upheld in the case Obama's political message, the tenets of a liberal culture. It provided a clear instance of the individual's freedom to rebuild society and to revive the foundational myth of consensus in times when citizens grew aware of the delusions by consumerism. The necessity of change harvested an unbridled enthusiasm on the part of Obama's voters. It succeeded in realigning America's present with liberal democratic tradition, in the sense of rekindling the interest of the all voters for the dignity of politics and the seriousness of its goals. The backdrop of the American economic crisis, its global repercussions, against which the need for proper measures suddenly intensified, called for a window of opportunity after the last Republican mandate failed to cope with a staggeringly vulnerable situation. America's future was at risk. Actually, Barack Obama's ascendancy to America's highest magistrateship was not only an answer to this complex challenge, but also a plan to seize power by convincing voters to sustain a blueprint of change.

In the course of the presidential campaigning, it soon came evident that the Gordian knot of crisis (or rather of the *crises* of the American system) was to be unraveled by the youngest runner, in spite of his much rumored inexperience. Before long, when the first important speeches delivered by Obama captured the audience's interest, it was clear that a set of priorities for the implementation of change proper was already at hand. Due to the almost generally spread discontentment with Bush government's policies, Barack Obama's popularity took on a steady ascending slope, until it became similar to an effigy of popular culture. The unprecedented wave of sympathy helped senator Obama to unearth the anarchic state of local economic conditions, the neglecting of the civil servants' duties, the indifference and incompetence in the management of the local human and financial resources. His plan for changing America went soon past a "transitional" process from one presidency to another, reaching an ampler perspective, and implicitly a more ambitious design of the future, prompted by the severity of the crisis. Quite soon, it appeared that Barack Obama was aiming his campaign to launch a complex social and political transformation of America, for the implementation of which he made use

of a rich rhetorical arsenal, plucking sometimes too loudly the populist chord.

In the following I want to refer to some cultural developments in Barack Obama's electoral race, as these were noticed and commented by the American and international press. As for the time being there have not been published significant analyses of Barack Obama's slow but steady advance to the White House, presenting the score of gains and losses in his campaign agenda, I chose to examine the journalistic mirroring of his political achievements as a litmus test to his successful political agenda, to prove as well that his electoral outcome was intently and carefully planned as a media event, in other words, making use of a well designed cultural persuasion.

Similar to a frontier hero, lacking political patronage and belonging to the non-white American majority, learning to build his legitimacy as a politician on education and self-improvement, Barack Obama conquered the respect of his voters due to the span of his projects of reform and to the idealistic expectations of the American middle class while confronted with the rising executive authority in society and with the specter of the economic downfall. The poignancy of the message of change would have been dulled in the absence of the general disappointment with the state of affairs in the United States after 9/11, and more obviously after the devastations of Katrina. At the same extent, a sort of well designed "coincidence" between the "real" Barack Obama and senator Obama, the politician, heightened his image as the most credible one as to be liable to undertake the tasks of a new presidential office.

Barack Obama's multicultural experience was eventually interpreted as an inspiring solution to the complex redefining of American identity. His choosing to join a Christian religious denomination underscored his interest for the idea of community and his respect for the role of the Church in the history of American emancipation. As a new political actor, Barack Obama blended traditional liberal values (individualism, freedom, respect for difference and self-determination) with conservatives ones (faith, family, the sense of community, the interplay between culture and politics). In this respect, his effervescent pleading for change in the American society outdistanced the other candidates' promises of change, showing a more reflective, yet pragmatic vision upon American modernity and the need for solutions in the immediate future.

Barack Obama managed to enhance the importance of a blueprint for transforming American politics and administrative power in a citizen-oriented, democratic set of policies. The elegance of his speeches, his allusiveness to great forerunners, the critical arrows pitched at his adversaries, and chiefly the realistic analysis of the impending general impasse were transparent to any American, so that his orator's gift made clear to any good-willed citizen his political program: change. But, first of all, it was about changing of the frame of mind, freeing people from current clichés, reshaping the vision of the future while demanding for a new assessment of the Americans' political will, providing America with a rationale for its rebirth. Barack Obama displayed through his campaign a *sense of anticipation*, which I regard as the first-hand cultural asset of his political performance.

The sense of anticipation provided his communicational talent with an exhortative and a reassuring quality, bringing into the limelight the political flaws and errors stemming in concentration of executive power within the narrow circles of the neoconservative elite. The continuing war lacking in a precise timeline and its toll in human lives, as well as the deteriorating condition of standards of life and safety at home, demanded for a different degree of political involvement on the part of the politicians, and a different meaning of civic participation on the part of the public. In spite of his alleged lack of experience, Barack Obama stepped on the political arena with the unflinching conviction that he was in hold of an exact plan of America's ensuing years' development. Though he exploited skillfully the mistakes of his political adversaries, he did not dwell endlessly on them, unmasking and accusing others' deficiencies. In search of a balanced assessment of the critical moment, he counted on projecting a lofty revival of American ideals, beyond the errors of the present. This enabled him to provide the electoral race with a different image of the role of the president and of his incumbent relations with various spheres of interests, after a long period of confusions and failures which undermined the prestige of the presidential office.

Change in senator Obama's vision was therefore perceived and consequently launched as an *iconic strategy*. The transparent allusions made at the spiritual ascendancy of Abraham Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, J. F. Kennedy managed to carry across the idea that the democrat candidate was ready to employ a style of governing worthy to be recognized in the lineage



of his celebrated predecessors. Relatively discreet as to his future international policies, Barack Obama strongly differed from John McCain, in portraying himself as a man of peace, a moderator of local as well as of international tensions. Negotiations and the spirit of moderation were reiterated by senator Obama to be the best ways to dispel suspicion among former foes and to bring round rivals to the fair opportunity of dialoguing.

Moderation did not mean however overlooking either the deficiencies of the American foreign policies, or the aggressive actions directed against American symbols and/or citizens. The accent laid on moderation was meant to bring along the necessity of rebuilding the national consensus. The conflict between ideals and institutions was a major divisive cause for the democrat candidate, determining him to test his salvation plan before getting to power, by gathering a team of experts to hold in check the further developments of the campaign. As it clearly came out from his inaugural address, victory, as memorable as it was, ought to face more preponderant matters, concerning the transposing of the goals of the campaign promises into the reforms. The iconic strategy was not meant for an “imagistic” triumph, but to expand and buttress future strategies needed for the implementing of a different type of governing.

*“That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.*

*These are indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable but no less profound is a sapping of confidence across our land - a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.*

*Today I say you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America - they will be met.*

*On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Text of President Barack Obama inaugural address, Associated Press, Tuesday, January 20, 2009

The presence of an Afro-American senator in the presidential race was regarded by many as having scored already a resounding victory, an unthinkable one, a few decades ago. Monthly statistics accounted for Obama's rise in the white and black support, but beyond the voices coming out from the "red" and "blue" America, a new political struggle was set in motion by the impetus of a larger democratization process at the bottom of the American society. Senator Obama reiterated that his vision of America was not a racial blind one, yet it was not simply keyed on race, either. Reiterating that the main scope of his campaign was to deliver America from the binding constraints of the crisis, not only an economic one, but also a crisis of the American idealism, Barack Obama persisted in tuning up the American's expectations by drawing a separating line between a likely superficial improvement of the conditions under which America was faring in a new century, and the hard tasks of truly reforming America. The so-called "Obama effect"<sup>2</sup> was on. Construing Barack Obama's increasing popularity which paved eventually the way to his electoral victory, apart from the blunders and mistakes of his political adversaries, may be referred to being contained in a minimal and a maximal representation of the same narrative of hope and change.

The minimal side deals with the issue of equality between whites and blacks, a divisive subject undermining American democracy, which was eventually broached after the 1960's. Whether conservative minded people consider that America entered the so-called "post-racial" age, a largely spread opinion sustains that racial attitudes and views continue to matter in America.<sup>3</sup> It is equally true that no other democracy (not to speak about other political regimes in the world) could afford and sustain the coming to power of a member of a racial group who did not belong the majority. The proficiency of American democracy tested thus the meaning of democracy in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, differing obviously from other parts of the world, where ethnic differences subvert if not rule out the idea of democratic representation. At the same time, the racial component of the elections pointed out that the political constituency of the American nation versus its ethnic one was prevalent, without marginalizing the different perceptions

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<sup>2</sup> See *Newsweek*, November 24, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> As according to two different voices in the American present-day debate on the issues of race: Cornel West and Dinesh d'Souza.

of the American citizenship. Barack Obama often mentioned the particular nuances in which the content of the American citizenship fell under, being experienced differently by African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians. Yet, as he often pointed out, the cultural and ethnic bases of American citizenship were harmonized with the content of American citizenship, in the expression of political equality, a hard fought conquest of the 1960's, illustrative of senator Obama's own participation to the electoral presidential race of 2008.

The maximal side underscored that the idea of change became a topic of national debate, leaving behind compartmental interests and approaches, not only due to the failures of the neoconservative policies and to the rising level of anti-Americanism, but mainly because that images of change multiplied with the political personalities competing for recognition within their political parties' elections. The media coverage added its decisive influence to the depiction of an unremitting electoral duel, the Obama-McCain public appearances, as a two-sided national dramatic option. If the battle inside the Democratic party was given between the Clintons' prestige and the appearance of a new challenger, the confrontation between the Democratic nominee and the Republican one soon turned, under the pressure of partisanship, into a fight between the "new" and the "old", running the risk of an intended oversimplification of the messages delivered by the two candidates. The anniversary of Martin Luther King's celebrated speech, the republicans' hesitations to rally behind their "maverick" representative, the international conjecture of threats and alliances, the continuing fall of the dollar, all had a part in tipping the balance of the electoral preference on favor of one candidate, only.

The American and the international press rendered first cautiously and then whole-heartedly Barack Obama's ascending course to the last day of the electoral campaign. Emphasizing the candidate's oratorical gift, as well as his charisma, the written media intently pointed out the American and the cosmopolitan roots of senator Obama's intellectual and political assets. The identity of the presidential candidate was interlocked with his life experience as a sort of warrant symbol for the achieving of a more democratic representation of Americans. Some examples will illustrate the manner in which from under the magnifying lenses of the newspapers and magazines, the new leader of America emerged in the full recognition of a long expected man of change.

So for instance, *Der Spiegel* was reporting at the beginning of 2008, somehow ironically, about the electoral atmosphere in America, seeing in the democrat candidate a "Messia faktor".<sup>4</sup> It described his campaigning as being a mixture of pathos and kitsch, not forgetting to point to senator Obama's relation to Jeremiah Wright and to draw on the exotic content of the candidate's biography. Wondering about the chances of the "political theater" which was reaping cheers from huge audiences, the reputed German magazine argued whether Obama's goading the audience at the Civic Center in Hartford Connecticut, to "believe", and the fact that the audience repeated mesmerized "yes, we believe", could solve the problem of change, doubting that a black president could make such a change happen.

„Whatever happens, Mr. Obama is already a rare thing – a political phenomenon" wrote *The Economist*,<sup>5</sup> remarking that he avoided "with grace" the media slaughter designed by the political machine wroking behind senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, a fact which denoted a rare quality for an emerging politician, foretelling thus the approaching success of a new political challenger. Though his slogan "yes, we can" became a video pop, warned the British magazine, the right answer fort it would be "don't stop thinking about tomorrow". The American presidents are as magnets which set and reset the iron filings, argued the magazine, declining to cast any prophecy as to the immediate future of race, but signaling that senator Obama's campaign might turn into the great surprise of the presidential campaign. To the extent to which senator Obama's chances grew more consistent, and his appeal to change given a more considerate understanding, his image loomed as the one of a „winner".<sup>6</sup>

The *Time* magazine, a hefty ally of the future president specified that simplifying his Harvard rhetoric as to be understood by the average American opened Barack Obama's access to the empathic approval of large crowds of Americans, irrespective of color. The democratic presidential candidate learned to cultivate those in power, claimed the magazine, without however becoming dependent of them. Nevertheless, the name of Antoin Rezko was mentioned in the quoted article, showing that there were

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<sup>4</sup> *Der Spiegel*, 11.2.08, "Der Messias-Faktor". Barack Obama und die Sehnsucht nach einem neuen Amerika", pp. 88-96.

<sup>5</sup> *The Economist*, February 16th-22nd, 2008, "But could he deliver?", p 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Time*, May 19, 2008, "How He Learned to Win", pp. 26-30.

voices asking about the origins of senator Obama's financial resources, apart from official assurances. The enigma of success was, according to the *Time* "how to appeal to different constituencies without being inconsistent". As Barack Obama emerged as the winner of the nominalization of the Democratic Party, it was still debatable whether he deserved to spend his future four years in the White House, though he „articulated an idea of a nobler America“, claimed the American magazine.<sup>7</sup>

The image of the democratic candidate became conversant with the image of a new America, once senator Obama traveled to Germany, in a crucial meeting with the world, and especially with Europe whom with relations had been strained due to neoconservatives' claims regarding the American prerogatives and preemptive initiatives. The significance of the visit, shedding light to one of Barack Obama's predecessor, J.F. Kennedy, was hailed as a great political achievement by *Der Spiegel*.<sup>8</sup> Senator Obama was awaited in Berlin as "a magician whom could change the murky world into a beautiful one", and as a "hope of the West". It is noteworthy mentioning that that his electrifying forte to dialogue with voters was explained on the basis of his belief to win, nourished as *Newsweek* wrote, by his religious faith.<sup>9</sup>

Barack Obama turned to be not only a political reformer, wishing to reestablish the coordinates of the America dream, but also a spiritual searcher, relying on Christian values, respecting as well the other religious traditions for their humanistic messages. The American magazine drew on the relevance of the issues of religion in the context of the pastor Jeremiah Wright's opinions or rather imprecations, as well as from the other side of the African-American specter, the voices of the black conservatives. For instance Shelby Steele a reputed black conservative author claimed that Barack Obama did not truly represent African-Americans, and consequently the senator of Illinois would fall short of national support. Such views, not at all rare in a democratic atmosphere of prediction and assessment, of valuing and setting forth moral and political judgments did not eventually thwart senator Obama's electoral victory, later on celebrated as an American historical event, largely echoed in the whole world. It was

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<sup>7</sup> *The Economist*, May 10th-16th, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Der Spiegel*, 21.07.08, "Obama für Deutschland", pp. 22-27.

<sup>9</sup> *Newsweek*, July 21, 2008, "Finding His Faith", pp. 19-24.

the most resounding electoral victory of an American presidential candidate, coinciding with America's awakening from a long dogmatic slumber.<sup>10</sup>

The campaigning "portrait" of Barack Obama became increasingly popular, sending a clear message of electoral comfort in comparison with the other two presidential candidates. His physical sportive allure, his casually stepping on the rally stages and self-confident greeting the cheering audiences, became among other episodes of a unprecedented wide coverage of a candidate, while either surrounded by his family members or by his nearest advisers, or relaxing in a gym compound, reading in an armchair or composing his nest speech, watching a tv. coverage of the campaign, etc., the image of a successful man, even before scoring a historical great electoral victory. The media popularity of the Illinois senator was certainly the most powerful electoral advantage which added to his public unequalled performance. To assess the enthusiastic feelings with which his electoral victory was hailed around the world, it would be sufficient probably to mention the socialist Mário Soares' opinion that the world needed Obama as much as the United States.<sup>11</sup> The popularity of the forty-fourth American president was already on the rise since the beginning of May 2008, enjoying the highest capital of trust since probably F.D. Roosevelt, ready to keep abreast with the greatest difficulties of the mandate, looming menacingly as in Truman's times.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, though Barack Obama had to defeat two great opponents, the American "hybris" appeared to be the most powerful adversary of the Democratic nominee's determined will of change. If looking at the menacingly accumulating list of political and administrative deficiencies characterizing the end of the George W. Bush's mandate and the rising discontentment of American citizens, national debt, the medical health care,

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<sup>10</sup> *El Pais*, 04 / 11/ 2008 " EE UU elige hoy entre pasado y futuro" , *The New York Times*, November 4, 2004, "After Epic Campaign Voters Go to Polls", *Der Spiegel*, 05.11.08, "Die Wiederauferstehung des amerikanischen Traum", *El Pais* 05/ 11/ 2008 " Obama culmina el sueño de cambio", *International Herald Tribune*, November 5, 2008 "Obama Moved America Beyond Racial Politics", and "Election Unleashes a Flood of Hope Worldwide", *The Guardian*, November 05, 2008, "Barack Obama's Election Victory Brings a New Dawn of Leadership", *El Pais*, 06/11/08, "América vuelve a ser América", *The Guardian*, November 6, 2008, "America Under President Obama. Welcome Back".

<sup>11</sup> *El Pais*, 21/01/2009.

<sup>12</sup> *The Economist*, "The World in 2009", pp. 61-62.

the absence of a green energy, a failing education, terrorism and interventionism, one could realize that prospects of change were counterbalanced by skepticism and a general disillusionment with politics. They were resulting from the critical condition of the American economy, or hinged on the “unique” condition of the United States after the collapse of communism and the remapping of the democratization process. *The ability of redrawing the future dimension of the American politics* became the priority of the Democratic presidential candidate, and it concerned the capability to translate into concrete terms the new version of the American creed, enhancing the role of America as a world leader, though employing dialogue options before punitive policies.

Speaking indirectly about the American “hybris”, senator Barack Obama was facing the task of reinterpreting globalization and its effects, introducing or not protectionist measures, saving American banking and car industry, renouncing the policies of liberalism supporting the minimal state, liable to accusations of waste, fraud and a financially carefree public demeanor, to say the least. Likewise, the question of change was addressed to the specific ways in which American interests would be preserved, diminished or possibly lost, according to the compliances to a new world order, or to the establishment of a new Pax Americana in the war theaters of today. But, the most expected form under which the American hybris could make its presence noticeable, was thought to be the transformation of the popular aureole of senator Obama’s into a kind of Jacksonian caesarism, fueling not only the smoldering critiques of the Republicans’ bereft of a credible helmsman, but also boosting the silent discontentment of a part of the democrats who saw their candidate sacrificed in the name of the democrats’ truce.

The necessity of change remains to be articulated by Barack Obama in the future months. It is not a promise that should be carried out without intelligence and aplomb, but the very process of trust building, as it was shown by the massive vote given to a new political leadership. The theme of political change germinated after some on 2002 in a speech held by senator Obama about Irak, after others in 2004, at the Democratic Convention, getting the cadenced rhythm of an urgent appeal in the summer of the Katrina hurricane. Senator Obama competed with his

powerful political rivals displaying his of “his soaring vision of America”.<sup>13</sup> Hillary Clinton’s and John McCain’s candidatures were equally inspired by a sense of change, tailored to the each of the candidates’ perception of opportunity and actual political charisma. The classic Machiavellian definition of “chance” vs. “fortuna” was embraced differently by senator Obama’s two competitors. Whereas he defended the “chance” of a new start, the other two candidates were pretty confident that they gathered from their previous years of public service the necessary amount of political wisdom and prestige to bring the majority of voters to sustain their of versions of envisioning America’s future.

Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain showed from the beginning of their campaign a significant confidence of “merit” they deserved in leading America, due to their former public service. Hillary Clinton modeled her political discourse on the critique of the Republican administration and on the feminist ideology, seeking to transform the victimization of the American woman in a solving answer to the problems of the American individualism. Criticizing the deficient communality policies, the health system, education and social insurance, senator Hillary Clinton took the lead of the presidential race, helped by an impressive network of political liaisons and administrative contacts, besides a strong determination to win the White House. The pragmatic program of the senator of New York targeted Obama’s discourse of change as being vulnerable in its very substance, in the sense of being build only “by words”, a remark to which one could add Rudolf Giuliani’s observation that Barack Obama did not come manage to lead a single small enterprise in order to know the ropes of administration. Both senator Clinton and mayor Giuliani (a Democrat, an Independent and then a Republican), miscalculated the idealism of the average American voter, dismissing the possibility that voters could lend their preferences to a newcomer.

Senator John McCain had illustrated probably the most the heroic part of the last stages of the electoral campaign. In his case, experience and age came into a stark contrast, which took its toll on the charisma of the Republican nominee. The Republican Party did not rally behind John McCain’s sincere appeal to relaunch a conservative vision of America, and inner party divisions thwarted his intention to defend the interests of the

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<sup>13</sup> *Time*, December 29, 2008, “Why History Can’t Wait”, pp. 43-50.



American entrepreneur and respect for the American power. Under the circumstances, the Republican candidate could not be but a powerful contender of the presidential campaign, extolling his experience of a military man, a war survivor, a republican and an independent political actor, but lacking in the final necessary impetus to lead his campaign to success.

The senator of Arizona defended stoically his program as well as the relevance of his own past, beginning to feel uncertain about the final score of electoral battle after having selected Sarah Palin to fill in a would-be vice-president office. McCain's political message was perceived not only as saber-clattering lesson by younger generations, but also as a suggestion of a possible surge of paternalism, though the non-conformist conduct of the senator of Arizona within the ranks of the GOP was far from inducing such a probability. A more costly political deficiency of McCain's program marred his electoral performance: his inability to create an economic strategy necessary to pull out America from growing unemployment. Trying to mellow down the martial pose in his media appearance with the populist "red-neck" sort of humor as shown in his conversation with Joe the Plumber's, or worse, in relying on Sarah Palin's help, the senator of Arizona ended before soon his gladiator's career, recognizing Obama's outdistancing advantage. Nevertheless, his political courage and elegant public demeanor marked the end of a political chapter from which the G.O.P would probably commence a new one in the post-Bush era.

Compared with his two political adversaries, Barack Obama highlighted a less trodden path to the conquering of the White House. Being aware that he was a new name in the corridors of power, he transformed a much talked about disadvantage into an asset of the momentary political game. Senator Obama built his actual legitimacy on showing that his past was created outside the walls of power, and that his ex-centric position was the best one to maneuver between the political reputations of his two adversaries. Encouraging persistently each citizen to judge for himself/herself the chance of a change in favor of the many, Barack Obama succeeded in rekindling the interest of the masses for politics in a troubled moment of the American republic, by taking the pledge that he would defend the interests of the many against the few.

Actually, the democrat candidate intended to delegate political and administrative responsibility in a different manner, by taking it from the

hands of a small circle of experts, and granting it to those become publicly accountable for their decisions. The seriousness of Obama's change plan consisted thus in the manner in which he made room to hope by rendering the managerial experience in leading state affairs, fully transparent and accountable. It rests with the future to judge whether his skilful identification with a people "chosen" leader and the skill of governing America in crisis will respond to the actual consequence of change, or it will be only a masterful orator's forte.

An uncommon gift of Barack Obama's political charisma resides in the nature of communication with the American and international audience. In writing *Dreams from My Father*, he succeeded to construct his personality as a public persona, to come to terms with his own past, and to revisit it, while make it significant for himself first of all. His sense of anticipation, as I called Barack Obama's first great cultural asset, made him seek for his own experience in order to teach others about the political exemplarity and moral life. Clearly enough, the author of the *Dreams from My Father*, sets in the center of his autobiographical narrative along with the postmodern issue of identity, the figure of the father, absent and at the same time sought for, which might be speculated as a highly interesting subjective rendering of the principle of authority in post-modern America.

It is not by chance that the figure of the father in Barack Obama's first autobiography is represented in the figure of stranger. The relationship between the family circle and the figure of the stranger brought for young Barack the diverse faces of otherness whether in Indonesia, Kenya, Hawaii, but mostly in America. The recollecting of the familial memory means a profound cultural gesture coinciding with the describing on the perimeter of the self, race and citizenship in a global world. The changing significance of authority stands out as the main challenge of the book, betraying in profoundly meditative voice the nostalgia for the family and the familiar, while being aware of the necessity to understand the other and otherness.

*„They, they, they. That was the problem with people like Joyce. They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you noticed that they avoided black people. It wasn't a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitational pull, the way integration always worked, a one-way street. The minority assimilated into the majority culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white*

*culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic within its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think of ourselves. Why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don't have to? We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America's happy, faceless marketplace; and we're never so outraged when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse, not so much because we're bothered by the fact that such indignities are what less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives – although that's what we tell ourselves – but because we're wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet they have somehow been mistaken or an ordinary nigger.*

*Don't you know who I am? I'm an individual."*<sup>14</sup>

*Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama's second autobiography, reviews the political coming of age of a young politician (the book was published in 2006) in a dangerously divided world, seeking for the expression of individualism and social consensus. Focusing on the place of values in the American society, the author of *Audacity of Hope* reasserts their meaning and makes evident his intentions for the renewal of America, in a moment when one needed both a cultural change and a political one. The realm of culture appears for the American senator as the seat of a permanent "transformation", eventually fulfilling the wishes of individuals and communities according to the common good. Not intending to comment on this particular representation of culture as emanating from the humanistic, rational and progressive sources, I want to underline the moralistic fragrance breathing in Obama's book. The "audacity" residing in hope, in other words the common breadth of entertaining hope as an everyday attitude of believing or as a sort of discipline in a more ambitious project of one's transcending a crisis, leads quite clearly to the religious fundamentals of hope. The "audacity" of entertaining hope in mass society singles out the individual, stressing his/her identity as opposed to the relativistic and hedonistic mainstream American culture.

Writing about hope, Barack Obama touches upon one the most sensitive and at the same time conflicting areas of the American modernity. It is a relatively habitual to regard the American society as a secular one, a society

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<sup>14</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Canongate, 2004, pp. 99-100.

whose theocratic beginnings have been long forgotten, though the Church remained relatively powerful institution in the postmodern age, especially for African Americans. Religion in America has proven a lively part of the communitarian life, and, as Tocqueville observed almost two centuries ago, it appeared in many instances as the mentor and the guardian of political and civic liberties. It is almost a truism, wrote Barack Obama to say that Americans are a religious people. It has been rightly said that America is the only heir to the Enlightenment in all its complexity, including the rational, objective, secular attempt to define the human being and society, but also the subjective, pious, religious affirmation of the belief in God.

The rather paradoxical revival of religion showed that postmodernity in America caused "a more profound religious engagement". It is relevant to mention in this regard that Barack Obama's early religious education started under the teachings of his mother, an anthropologist, as known. But the author of *The Audacity of Hope* began to acknowledge the importance of religion only after he had ceased to perceive it only as cultural phenomena which required a sort of respect, bordering on a polite form of indifference. From a rather blind religious standpoint, the author became aware, due to his experience of a social organizer in Chicago, of the need of being in touch with human community under the sign of sharing Christian beliefs. He confessed that he did not wish to follow the example of his mother, condemned to remain "alone and isolated" to the end of her life. For the author of the *The Audacity of Hope* religion is structurally linked to society, and the example of the Black Church remained a telling one for the building of the modern identity of the Afro-Americans. Moreover, religiousness provided white and black reformers with the purport of mission, the significance of public involvement, the attachment to concrete life and real people, rather than with their idealistic shadows.

Seemingly, Barack Obama grew conscious of the effect of globalization on religion(s), observing at the same time the webbing of the religious spirit in the social one, bolstering pluralism. For him, the religious experience is a form of social integration, a mood of transforming "specific religious values" into "universal" values. It is obvious that in *The Audacity of Hope* religion and politics overlap in the imaginary of a community, but they wholly differ from the perspective of the possible (politics) and the sublime (religion). In fact, Barack Obama warns about the destructive result of the sublime in politics, which might be seen as way of understanding the

significance of religion as an experience of communion, an irenic benevolence to moderate extremes and to elude sheer confrontation.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, the imagistic capital of religious faith used to create separations whether cultural, social or political (as in the case of pastor Jeremiah Wright), to buttress the national or communitarian nuclei dispersed in the sea of a consumerist society. Religious syncretism, as general characteristic of globalization in America, stripped religious practices of their canonicity, so that accordingly religion appears as a cultural and social experience less divisive than race. I shall not elaborate within this space on the complexity of race in postmodern America. Condemning publicly pastor Jeremiah Wright's opinions<sup>15</sup>, Barack Obama reiterated that American cannot be envisioned as being ethnically balkanized, and that the fiery dispute over the entrenched lines of the 1960s, Martin Luther King's view of the emancipation of the black population against Malcolm X's radical discourse have been outdated by the current developments in the very heart of the Afro-American community. The post-1960's racial policies, positive discrimination, the changing racial composition of the United States as well as the rise of the Afro-American middle class have definitely altered the premises of the racial issues. Afro-centrist tendencies, the survival of racist attitudes, not only on the part of the blacks are nevertheless marginal incidents. Still, they might channel down, if not kept in check, a feeling of incertitude on the part of individuals, irrespective of their color, a rising race anxiety, especially when the economic conditions cannot supply any longer equal standards for education and job opportunity.

The knowing of the of the racial past of America is a binding cultural condition for a politician, but to remain anchored in a historicist understanding of race, without allowing hope to transcend the memory of suffering and the symbols of hatred means to reaffirm obstinately the racial barriers, and rebuild a mental ghetto. Racial stereotypes should not disappear overnight, and neither would the so-called "post-racial" policies solve an ethnic rapprochement for the sake sociologists' optimistic statistics and politicians' radiant visions. The identity of the great racial groups will probably tend to reflect not only in the United States but also in Europe the

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<sup>15</sup> See Darryl Pinckney, "Obama and the Black Church" in *New York Review of Books*, volume 55, Number 12, July 17, 2008.

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alterations occurring at the micro-level of the individual, a reason for Barack Obama to seek for actual meanings of the American way of life.

Nevertheless, the American experience of immigration upholds Martin Luther King's conviction that the „judgment“ of America will not happen according to its color but to its „character“. Civil equality cannot be observed unless work opportunities exist to such an extent that they should not be a matter of preference, giving way to the help of social assistance. The old *E pluribus unum* strengthens the idea of pluralism, without slighting the self-assertion of the ethnic communities. But likewise, one should not overlook racial fundamentalisms tending to insinuate themselves in the loopholes carved out by moral relativism and hedonism.

The year 2009 is the year of Abraham Lincoln's bicentennial.

The destiny of the most revered American president, his passion for dialoguing with the Americans, and his dramatic confrontation with the American hybris, slavery, internal division, immigration and American exceptionalism, stand a challenge for the nowadays president of the United States.



## LEGAL ASPECTS OF THE VERY RECENT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE USA

Doina Micu\*

### Abstract

*The article presents the legal provisions concerning the legislative process in the USA and it refers to the federal and states' procedures in the presidential elections. Starting with the topic of privileges and immunities and the right to vote, we underline the characteristics of the vote, the qualifications to exercise the right, the enrollment of the voters, the process of apportionment and the procedure to elect The President and Vice President of the USA.*

**Key words:** *Presidential elections, Constitutions, vote, voting rights.*

Different legal regulations were applied in the 2008<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in the USA. To analyze the juridical perspective we have to refer to the right to vote as an entitlement conferring to individuals the right to vote and the right to be elected. The US Constitution provides in:

*Art. IV, S 2* "The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all **Privileges and Immunities** of citizens in the several States..."

*A XII* "The Electors.... **Vote** by ballot for the President and Vice President..."

*A XIV* "No State shall make or enforce **any law which shall abridge** the privileges or immunities of the citizens of the US..."

*A XV,S 1* "The right of citizens of the US **to vote shall not be denied** or abridged by the US or by any State **on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude...**"

*A XIX* "The right of citizens of the US **to vote shall not be denied** or abridged by the US or by any State on account of **sex.**"

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According to these constitutional provisions, we may understand that an individual who is legally an American citizen, enjoys all the privileges and immunities and among them the right to vote.<sup>1</sup>

A privilege or immunity of an American citizen exists based on the A XIV, S 1 of the US Constitution, known as the Privileges and Immunities Clause. Due to the fact that the clause does not list all or some of the rights like examples, that an American citizen will enjoy, the right to vote is consider to exist as an indirect (not expressly provided) right of the citizens. It is not a privilege or immunity provided by the constitution, but it is a natural right<sup>2</sup> or a right provided by the judiciary (US Supreme Court ) when will interpret the US Constitution, A XIV,S1' notion of privileges and immunities, in a concrete circumstances of a case.<sup>3</sup>

There are two ideas about the meaning of the privileges and immunities: - the equal protection of the laws when enjoying privileges and immunities; - privileges and immunities are fundamental principles referring to the enjoyment of life, liberty and property.

The first idea is emphasized by the case of **Corfield v. Coryell** (6 Fed.Cas. 546, no. 3,230 C.C.E.D.Pa. 1823), the Court –justice Washington as the Chief justice – listed the privileges and immunities enjoyed by the citizens of the US. Among the fundamental rights or the privileges and immunities, is included the *elective franchise* as regulated and established by the laws and constitutions of the States in which it is to be exercised; the privileges and immunity clause as a fundamental principle, which prevents interstate discrimination when basic rights are provided by the State's legislation , Art. 4, S 2, and Amendment 14<sup>th</sup>, S 1 of the USA Constitution are referring to the equality of the citizens in each State and several States' rights which are equally for all the American citizens. As an example, we may refer to the case of **Baldwin v. Montana Fish and Game Comm'n**, 436 US.371 from 1978, in which the Supreme Court decided that

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Keyssar, *The right to vote: the contested history of democracy in the US*, New York, Basic books, 2000; US Commission on Civil Rights: *Reports on voting*; Williamson Chilton, *American suffrage. From property to democracy*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> Shankman Kimberly, Roger Pilon, *Reviving the privileges and immunities clause to redress the balance among States, individuals and the Federal Government*, Cato Policy Analysis, No. 326, 1998, [www.cato.org/pubs](http://www.cato.org/pubs).

<sup>3</sup> Clarence Thomas's motivation in the case Saenz v. Roe, 526 US 489, <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com>.

every State makes its own legal policy concerning how to treat its own citizens and that treatment has to be in accordance with the privilege and immunity clause; that means that the legal status of the citizens and non-residents is not different when equal protection is in place and they enjoy the same basic rights.<sup>4</sup>

Privileges and immunities and civil rights or civil liberties, are synonyms, with small differences in the area of the obligations which have to be performed by the federal or states' agencies as a pro-active behavior.

The second idea about privileges and immunities, refer to them as fundamental principles which will entitle the individuals to enjoy the protection of the Government and to be restraint in the exercise of these fundamentals' only when the restraint is legally proscribed for the general good of the whole society.

Privileges and immunities and civil rights or civil liberties, are synonyms, with small differences in the area of the obligations which have to be performed by the federal or states' agencies as a pro-active behavior.

**Civil rights**<sup>5</sup> exist in the civic or social community in which the individuals may enjoy the same legal rights existing for a certain legal category, if they are part of that category. (e. g. employee as a legal category: men or women have the same right to be promoted as an employee, if legal conditions are in place.) These civil rights refer to the nondiscrimination aspect of a right and is exercised by the individuals on a horizontal level (individual – individual, as a comparison), which means that the individuals with the same legal status have the same rights and they ought to be treated equally in front of the law, or they have to be non-discriminated (e.g. *veterans* have to enjoy the same legal civil rights; *mothers* have the same civil rights;).

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<sup>4</sup> Adam J. Rosen, "Slaughtering Sovereignty: How Congress can Abrogate State Sovereign Immunity to Enforce the Privilege and Immunity Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment", in *Political and Civil Rights Law Review*, 111, 2001; Seth Kreimer, "Lines in the Sand: the importance of borders in American Federalism", in *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 150, 2002, pp. 973-1017.

<sup>5</sup> Otis H. Stephens, J.M. Scheb, Kara E. Stooksbury, *Encyclopedia of American Civil Rights and Liberties*, Greenwood Press, 2006.

**Civil liberties**<sup>6</sup> are basic rights and freedoms, identified in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the USA, explicitly provided or interpreted by the courts and lawmakers. The right to vote is a civil liberty explicitly provided in the Bill of Rights (the XII<sup>th</sup>, the XV<sup>th</sup>, the XIX<sup>th</sup> Amendments of USA Constitution). It is a right of a citizen in its' relationships with any form of the Government (e, g. Food and Drug Administration as a federal agency or the Board of Education in every State). Due to the fact that the relationship exists between the citizen and the Government, we may consider that these civil liberties exist always in the vertical relations.

The American legal system is a common law one. That means that the law derives not only from the legislative branch, but from the judicial decisions which are also known as the judicial precedents, or the decisions of the US Supreme Court, or the non-statutory law. The legal system is a dual one: at the federal and at the states' level. The federal law is superior to the states' law.<sup>7</sup> The legal hierarchy has on the top of the system, the US Constitution which is the standard to be applied by the Courts when considering the constitutionality of the laws. Then it comes the federal legislation (Acts or statutes at the federal level, administrative regulations like or executive orders, judicial precedents) and the states' legislation (statutes, administrative regulations, municipal codes and ordinances). International treaties are equal to the states' statutes and have to be in accordance with the US Constitution.

The main relationship between the individuals and the Government is legally established by the Constitution, which is the law of the land and provides as the US Constitution or as the state's constitution, the powers of the Government, their attributions, the check and balance principle, the privileges and immunities and the basic, fundamental rights and liberties. The legal status of the citizenship grants to the individuals having this quality, rights and obligations in their relationship with the branches of the Government. It creates, the accountability and responsibility due to the fact that officers of the public offices are elected by the citizens through the universal, equal, secret and direct (indirect when electors vote) suffrage.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Rathbone, "The US Supreme Court and Civil Rights", in *History Review*, 48, 2004, pp. 41-46.

<sup>7</sup> W. Cohen, J.D. Varat, *Constitutional Law. Cases and Materials*, University Casebook Series, New York, The Foundation Press Inc., 1997, p. 361.

The electoral system in the USA is regulated basically by the US Constitution, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Voting Rights Act of 1965, the jurisprudence in the field and every state's legislation concerning the suffrage. Chronologically the voting rights' legislation evolved as follows:

**1790** Only white male adult property-owners have the right to vote.

**1810** Last religious prerequisite for voting is eliminated.

**1850** Property ownership and tax requirements eliminated by 1850. Almost all adult white males could vote.

**1855** Connecticut adopts the nation's first [literacy test](#) for voting. Massachusetts follows suit in 1857. The tests were implemented to discriminate against Irish-Catholic immigrants.

**1870** The [15th Amendment](#) is passed. It gives former slaves the right to vote and protects the voting rights of adult male citizens of any race.

**1889** Florida adopts a [poll tax](#). Ten other southern states will implement poll taxes.

**1890** Mississippi adopts a literacy test to keep African Americans from voting. Numerous other states—not just in the south—also establish literacy tests. However, the tests also exclude many whites from voting. To get around this, states add [grandfather clauses](#) that allow those who could vote before 1870, or their descendants, to vote regardless of literacy or tax qualifications.

**1913** The [17th Amendment](#) calls for members of the [U.S. Senate](#) to be elected directly by the people instead of State Legislatures.

**1915** Oklahoma was the last state to append a grandfather clause to its literacy requirement (1910). In *Guinn v. United States* the [Supreme Court](#) rules that the clause is in conflict with the 15th Amendment, thereby outlawing literacy tests for federal elections.

**1920** The 19th Amendment guarantees [women's suffrage](#).

**1924** Indian Citizenship Act grants all [Native Americans](#) the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote in federal elections.

**1944** The Supreme Court outlaws "white primaries" in *Smith v. Allwright* (Texas). In Texas, and other states, [primaries](#) were conducted by private associations, which, by definition, could exclude whomever they chose. The Court declares the nomination

process to be a public process bound by the terms of 15th Amendment.

**1957** The first law to implement the 15th amendment, the Civil Rights Act, is passed. The Act set up the Civil Rights Commission—among its duties is to investigate voter discrimination.

**1960** In *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* (Alabama) the Court outlaws "[gerrymandering](#)."

**1961** The 23rd Amendment allows voters of the [District of Columbia](#) to participate in presidential elections.

**1964** The 24th Amendment bans the poll tax as a requirement for voting in federal elections.

**1965** [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), mounts a [voter registration drive](#) in Selma, Alabama, to draw national attention to African-American voting rights.

**1965** The Voting Rights Act protects the rights of minority voters and eliminates voting barriers such as the literacy test. The Act is expanded and renewed in 1970, 1975, and 1982.

**1966** The Supreme Court, in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*, eliminates the poll tax as a qualification for voting in any election. A poll tax was still in use in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia.

**1966** The Court upholds the Voting Rights Act in *South Carolina v. Katzenbach*.

**1970** Literacy requirements are banned for five years by the 1970 renewal of the Voting Rights Act. At the time, eighteen states still have a literacy requirement in place. In *Oregon v. Mitchell*, the Court upholds the ban on literacy tests, which is made permanent in 1975. [Judge Hugo Black](#), writing the court's opinion, cited the "long history of the discriminatory use of literacy tests to disenfranchise voters on account of their race" as the reason for their decision.

**1971** The 26th amendment sets the minimum voting age at 18.

**1972** In *Dunn v. Blumstein*, the Supreme Court declares that lengthy [residence requirements](#) for voting in state and local

elections is unconstitutional and suggests that 30 days is an ample period.

**2003** Federal Voting Standards and Procedures Act require states to streamline registration, voting, and other election procedures.”<sup>8</sup>

Suffrage may be seen as a political institution in a representative democracy but also as a legal institution due to the fact that the laws provide the right to vote and to be elected and all other rights concerning the electoral procedures at the federal and states level. When referring generally to the voting right, we mean federal or states’ elections in the legislature and the election of The President of the USA. Title I, B c, of the Civil Rights Act provide: “Federal election shall mean any general, special or primary election held solely or in part for the purpose of electing or selecting **any** candidate for the office of the President, Vice President, presidential elector, Member of the Senate, or Member of the House of Representatives“. Based on these civil rights provided federally, we may conclude that, there is a federal privilege of voting for every American citizen. The Voting Rights Act was adopted to enforce the XV<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the US and to enforce the guarantees of the fifteenth’s, meaning the equality of rights no matter of the race or color of the voters (sec. 3 a and 4 a of the Voting Rights Act).

The elections rules are referring to: the apportionment into the electoral districts, the systems to choose the winner, the type of election, the voters’ qualifications and the decision about who is the winner.

The elections to the Presidency refer to the Electoral College System, primary elections, party Conventions, electoral campaign, Electoral Day and Inauguration. The apportionment, is the procedure to establish the electoral districts, on the territory of a state, according to the voting rights population or electorate (Art. I, S 2, par.3, US Constitution). Every ten years a census is performed in every American state, that way the voting rate being established and renewed. We will use as an example the case of **Abrams v. Johnson** 521 U.S. 74 (1997),<sup>9</sup> to emphasize how the apportionment is sometimes a gerrymandering method to establish the electoral districts; in Georgia, the African American population might be

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.infoplease.com/timelines/voting.html>, 22 April 2009.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/95-1425.ZS.html>, 15 April 2009

considered as a race majority, and there are three electoral districts where race was a predominant factor to create the drafting. The U.S. Supreme Court has to decide if the redistricting plan violates the 1965 Voting Rights Act or Article I of the Constitution, guaranteeing "one person, one vote". These are the facts of the case: following a suit by Georgia residents challenging the constitutionality of a legislative redistricting plan (*Miller v. Johnson*, 515 US 900), and seeking an injunction against its further use, a District Court found the plan unconstitutional. On appeal, the Supreme Court affirmed - holding that race was a predominant factor in the plan's creation - and remanded it for redrafting. Shortly thereafter the composition of another of the plan's districts was challenged in a District Court which, after unsuccessfully deferring the matter to Georgia's Legislature for redrafting, drew its own plan creating one black-majority district in place of the proposed three. After the 1996 elections were held under the court's new plan, Abrams and several other voters challenged its constitutionality. Again, the Supreme Court granted certiorari. The decision was No, in a five-to-four decision. First, the Court held that in re-drafting the plans, the District Court had no obligation to preserve all three of the old plan's black-majority districts, if this would result in racial gerrymandering. Second, the Court supported the District Court's decision not to preserve two black-majority districts as it held that the area's black population was not sufficiently compact to sustain such a plan. Third, the Court ruled that the plan's creation of only one black-majority district would not violate the 1965 Voting Rights Act by causing a retrogression in the political position of Abrams and his fellow plaintiffs. The Court, in addition to noting Abrams' failure to meet his retrogression claim's population density requirement, found that in the last election, held under the challenged plan, all three black incumbents won re-election, two of whom while running against white candidates from white-majority districts. Finally, the Court concluded that the District Court's redistricting plan did not violate the Constitution's guarantee of "one person, one vote." In addition to finding that the plan's overall and average population deviations were acceptable, the Court held that even if these deviations were slightly "off" they must be tolerated given their six year tenure in an area which has seen significant

population shifts. Accordingly, any minor errors would be best corrected by the next census rather than by judicial intervention.

In the case of **Branch v. Smith** 538 U.S. 254 (2003),<sup>10</sup> the Mississippi State lost one congressional seat, after the 2000 census. The State legislature failed to pass a new redistricting plan. Subsequently, lawsuits were filed in both the Mississippi State Chancery Court and the Federal District Court, asking that each court issue its own redistricting plan. While the federal court stayed its hand, the Mississippi Supreme Court ruled that the Chancery Court had jurisdiction to issue a redistricting plan. The Chancery Court adopted such a plan, which was submitted for preclearance pursuant to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Meanwhile, the Federal District Court promulgated a plan that would fix the State's congressional districts for the 2002 elections should the state-court plan not be precleared by the state-law deadline. Ultimately, the District Court enjoined the State from using the state-court plan and ordered that its own plan be used in 2002 until the State produced a precleared, constitutional plan. The State did not appeal and no determination was made on the preclearance submission because the District Court's injunction rendered the state-court plan incapable of administration.

Did the District Court properly enjoin the Mississippi state court's proposed congressional redistricting plan and properly fashion its own congressional reapportionment plan? The US Supreme Court's decision said Yes. In a plurality opinion delivered by Justice Antonin Scalia, the Court held, 9-0, that the District Court properly enjoined enforcement of the state-court plan that lacked the required timely preclearance.

In the USA, eligible voters are citizens over 18 years old, with the exception of the convicted felons. They must register with the state's election boards, according to their enrollments' (affiliation with the republican or democrat party). Registration requirements make the participation of the people low among the poor whites, African Americans and immigrants.

In the states, the law provides what method to elect the winning candidate is to be applied. It exist (in the most states) the plurality system, according to which the winning candidate is that who receives the more popular votes than the opponent candidate. In the proportional

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/01-1437.ZS.html>, 15 April 2009



representation system which exists in a few states (e.g. Nebraska and Maine), the electoral votes are divided between candidates, proportionally to the percentage of the popular votes. In the plurality system the winner takes all the electoral votes, no matter who received the small percentage of the popular votes.

In the Presidential elections in the USA, the system is organized to hold primary elections before to the general electoral campaign. In primaries, the voters select the party's candidates for the office. This vote is characterized by being a universal, direct, equal and secret. When voting American citizens identify themselves with the Democratic or the Republican Party, based on their political preferences, their perception of honesty and morality, the ability of the candidate to lead. Religious and ethnic background is also important in solving different issues concerning abortion, Medicare, euthanasia, etcetera. The voters in the primaries will choose delegates who support their favored candidate nominated at the party's caucus ( meeting ). At the Party's convention, the winner of the primaries and caucuses is nominated. Based on the XII<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution the President and Vice President are the only officials elected by all the citizens, for a term of four years. In the most states the Presidential candidate who wins a majority of the popular votes in a State also earns all the votes of the state's electors. Each state has the same number of the electoral college members ( who are presidential electors representing their state ) as the total of the state's senators and representatives ( e.g. of electors in different States: California 55, Texas 34, New York 31, Florida 27, Illinois 21, Ohio 20 ). This system in which the winner takes all the votes, removes the choice of electing the President by the **direct** popular vote (Nebraska and Maine are the exceptions). Critics of this electoral method "the winner takes all", contend that the sentiments and the will of the voters are distorted. They point out that a candidate receiving a plurality of the popular vote in a State, no matter what the vote's rate is, might loose the electors' votes, in effect disfranchising through the electoral process.

The federal Electoral College nominally chooses the President and the Vice President of the USA (Art. II, S1, of the US Constitution). The legal procedure provides that presidential electors meet in each state at a place designated by the state legislature, usually the state capitol. They vote

simultaneously in all states, on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December of presidential election years. On January the 6<sup>th</sup>, following the meetings of the electors, their votes are counted, in the presence of both houses of the US Congress ( Art. II, S1, par.3, US Constitution ). In the Art. II, S1, par.5, US Constitution, the law of the land provides that the person who is eligible to the office of the President has to be of 35 years and a resident within at least for 14 years, or a natural born citizen. The election process during American history time changed, narrowing the field of viable candidates due to the necessary funds and the political knowledge procedure of the elections. The candidates are usually former senators, governors or persons who distinguished themselves in remarkable ways, enjoying the backing of a major political party. Every presidential candidate who won the convention's nomination gives his or her acceptance speech and supports the party's political program for the country. That program is known as the party's platform and has to be approved by the convention. The presidential candidate has a running mate for the vice presidency. He establishes during the campaign an image of a national leader who has experience in foreign and domestic affairs and must be capable of attracting voters support and raise millions of dollars to pay for the campaign costs. Barack Obama succeeded to fulfill these requirements. The campaign for the presidency traditionally begins in early September and ends on The Election Day – the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. During the campaign the candidates enjoy the support and help of the followers and rely on loyal party's organizers to raise issues that might convince undecided voters. They appear on national radio, television and press and debate important topics for the nation. The candidates make speeches in cities and towns across the country to appeal to a specific group of voters. Due to the fact that the person who wins the greatest number of the popular votes in a state receives the entire electoral vote of that state, the campaign strategist focus to win the key populous states. Then the formal balloting process will take place, on the first Monday after the second Wednesday of December. "The Electors shall meet in their respective states, and vote by ballot for President and Vice-President, one of whom, at least, shall not be an inhabitant of the same state with themselves; they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as President, and in distinct ballots the person voted for as Vice-President,

and they shall make distinct lists of all persons voted for as President, and all persons voted for as Vice-President and of the number of votes for each, which lists they shall sign and certify, and transmit sealed to the seat of the government of the United States, directed to the President of the Senate. The President of the Senate shall, in the presence of the Senate and House of Representatives, open all the certificates and the votes shall then be counted. The person having the greatest Number of votes for President, shall be the President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed; and if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by states, the representation from each state having one vote; a quorum for this purpose shall consist of a member or members from two-thirds of the states, and a majority of all the states shall be necessary to a choice. And if the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the Vice-President shall act as President, as in the case of the death or other constitutional disability of the President. The person having the greatest number of votes as Vice-President, shall be the Vice-President, if such number be a majority of the whole number of Electors appointed, and if no person have a majority, then from the two highest numbers on the list, the Senate shall choose the Vice-President; a quorum for the purpose shall consist of two-thirds of the whole number of Senators, and a majority of the whole number shall be necessary to a choice. But no person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States" (Amendment XII of the US Constitution). Then a joint session of Congress will take place on January the 6<sup>th</sup> and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January the Inauguration Day will begin with the Oath or Affirmation ( Art. II, S1, final par, US Constitution). Based on the XXII<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, a person might be elected on the Office of the President, twice terms.

In the 2008<sup>th</sup> Presidential elections, the minimum electoral votes were 230; Barack Obama won 344 from a total of 537. The selected electors from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia voted for the President and Vice President of the US, on December the 15<sup>th</sup>. Those votes

were tallied before a joint session of Congress on January the 8<sup>th</sup> 2009 and B. Obama received 365 electoral votes. There were several unique aspects about the very recent elections: is the first time in US history that an African American was elected the President and the first time a Roman Catholic, Joe Biden, was elected as a Vice President. The poll participation was the highest in the last 40 years.

The citizens who had the right to vote in these presidential elections needed to fulfill these qualifications: to register to vote; to be 18 years old by December 31 of the year in which the person file the Voter Registration Form; to live at the present address at least 30 days before the election; not be in jail or parole for a convicted felony; not claiming the right to vote elsewhere. A person might need to re-register when he/she changed the address, the name the party affiliation, or did not vote in the last two presidential elections. The qualifications to vote by absentee ballot are: the unavoidable absence on Election Day (in 2008, November the 4<sup>th</sup>); the unable ness to appear at the polls due to illness or disability; being a patient in a Veterans' Administration Hospital; being detained in jail or prison.

A relevant case of the ballot access and voting is **Cook v. Gralike** 531 U.S.510 (2001),<sup>11</sup> in which the US Supreme Court decided the unconstitutionality of the Article VIII of the Missouri Constitution, as amended in 1996 to prompt the adoption of a "Congressional Term Limits Amendment" to the Federal Constitution.

In *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*, 514 U.S. 779, the Court held that an Arkansas law prohibiting otherwise eligible congressional candidates from appearing on the general election ballot if they had already served two Senate terms or three House terms was an impermissible attempt to add qualifications to congressional office rather than a permissible exercise of the State's Elections Clause power to regulate the "Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives," U.S. Const., Art., I, §4, cl. 1. In response, Missouri voters adopted an amendment to Article VIII of their State Constitution designed to bring about a specified "Congressional Term Limits Amendment" to the Federal Constitution. Among other things, Article VIII "instructs" Missouri Congress Members to use all their powers to pass the federal amendment; prescribes that "DISREGARDED VOTERS' INSTRUCTION ON TERM LIMITS" be printed

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/99-929.ZS.html>, 17 April 2009

on ballots by the names of Members failing to take certain legislative acts in support of the proposed amendment; provides that "DECLINED TO PLEDGE TO SUPPORT TERM LIMITS" be printed by the names of no incumbent candidates refusing to take a "Term Limit" pledge to perform those acts if elected; and directs the Missouri Secretary of State (Secretary), the petitioner here, to determine and declare whether either statement should be printed by candidates' names. Respondent Gralike, a no incumbent House candidate, sued to enjoin petitioner from implementing Article VIII on the ground it violated the Federal Constitution. The District Court granted Gralike summary judgment, and the Eighth Circuit affirmed. In conclusion the US Supreme Court *held*" Article VIII is unconstitutional Such "regulation" of congressional elections is not authorized by the Elections Clause".

The legal rules and judicial precedents which we presented in order to underline how the common law system is applied, are those which maintain the rule of law, and the supremacy of the US Constitution, when elections are to be decided by the Supreme Court of the US.

The presidential elections of the 2008, reflected the entrusted hope of the American people and their commitment as a unique society on the course of a more globalize world, in which the privileges and immunities will be exercised based on the law of the land . The existence and the exercise of the voting right in the USA and in other world countries is a real fact due to the international legal provisions like The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The European Convention on Human Rights, The American Convention on Human Rights and the national legal provisions of the fundamental law. All Party States to these International Human Rights treaties undertook the international obligation, when ratifying the treaty, to assure to their citizens the democratic participation to the public life in the society in which they live<sup>12</sup> Their domestic legislation being in accordance with the international human rights treaty, guarantees the harmony between the individual civil rights (e.g. the right to vote) at the national and

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<sup>12</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art.21; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art.25; The European Convention on Human Rights, art. 14; The American Convention on Human Rights, art. 23.

international level. The voting right is The Right that makes the difference at the society level, transforming it, in a democratic, active, accountable and responsible one, where “we the people” is every American citizen.



## A TALE OF TWO CLINTONS: MEDIA BIAS IN THE COVERAGE OF HILLARY CLINTON'S 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN<sup>1</sup>

Raluca Moldovan\*

### Abstract

*The 2008 presidential election will probably be remembered for many years to come in more ways than one: first of all, the battle for the Democratic nomination between the Illinois senator Barack Obama and the New York senator Hillary Clinton had no parallel in recent history. The fact that the potential president of the United States could have been either a white woman or a black man inevitably raised issues of class, race and gender, to name but a few. Under these unprecedented circumstances, it became evident that the press played a major role in providing the people (who showed up in great numbers to vote in the primaries and caucuses) with information about the two candidates. But, as it happens, media is never free of bias. The following article will attempt to show, by means of media content analysis, that the media bias in this particular case was more evident to the detriment of Hillary Clinton, which may have ultimately influenced the fact that she lost the Democratic nomination for president.*

**Keywords:** *Hillary Clinton; presidential elections; media bias; Barack Obama; media coverage.*

### 1. Preliminary remarks

The influence of the mass media when it comes to creating and perpetrating stereotypes is undeniable. This influence becomes even more significant when the subjects presented carry greater weight – and

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article is of course loosely inspired by Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and points to the fact that, throughout the entire primary election season 2008, the Hillary Clinton campaign coverage published in the two magazines analysed, *Time* and *Newsweek* almost invariably made reference not only to the candidate herself, but also to her husband, former president Bill Clinton.

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presidential elections in the United States have always been a well-exploited topic by the media. Thus, it should have been only natural that the 2008 presidential race be subject to extensive coverage, especially since the contest for the Democratic nomination between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama had the potential of being the most passionate one that America had seen in decades. The fact that the dispute was between a black man and a white woman was but one aspect of the problem; after the two highly criticized terms that George W. Bush had served in the White House, the chances of the Republicans to win again were undeniably slim, so it soon became evident that whoever candidate managed to secure the Democratic nomination had the greatest odds to be elected president in November 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The present analysis of media coverage of the 2008 election campaign will focus on two of the weekly magazines with the widest readership, *Time* and *Newsweek*, during the period between January 2007 (when both Clinton and Obama announced their decision to run for the supreme office) and June 2008, when Hillary Clinton suspended her campaign and withdrew from the race for the Democratic nomination, close to the end of the primary season.

The reason for choosing these two publications is that they are the largest-circulation weeklies in the United States – *Time* has a weekly circulation of 3,3 million copies, while *Newsweek* is a close second with 3,1 million copies weekly. *Time* is owned by Time Warner, Inc., while *Newsweek* is owned by *The Washington Post*, which probably explains the general view that it has a more liberal bias than its rival.<sup>4</sup> The target readership of the two publications is roughly the same, namely middle class Americans between the ages of 25 and 55 having at least high school education. Previous studies analyzing the bias of the two magazines

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<sup>3</sup> This observation is based on the opinion polls and surveys showing incredibly small approval rates for President Bush upon leaving office (around 23%) and on the fact that the reputation of the Republicans had been severely compromised during the two Bush administrations on account of numerous scandals such as Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, etc.

<sup>4</sup> The issue of the liberal bias has been explored in a seminal work published in 1986 by Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter; their findings also included references to *Newsweek*, in addition to publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. (Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, Linda Lichter, *The Media Elite*, Bethesda, MD: Adler&Adler, 1986).

reflected the fact that both tend to display a slightly more visible liberal bias; however, with specific reference to the 2008 election campaign, *Newsweek* was rightfully accused of blatantly favouring the Democrat candidate Obama over his Republican counterpart, John McCain (and implicitly over his own Democrat rival for the nomination, Hillary Clinton).<sup>5</sup> Another important study on the type of bias of the two weeklies was published in 2008 by Tawnya J. Adkins and Philo C. Wasburn under the title *Media Bias? A Comparative Study of Time, Newsweek, The National Review and the Progressive, 1975 – 2000*,<sup>6</sup> while in historical perspective, Jim A. Kuypers's 2002 study, *Press Bias and Politics: How the Media Frames Controversial Issues* revealed that the mainstream print press in the USA (including the two publications discussed here) operate within a narrow range of liberal beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this media analysis, carried out using the method of positive vs. negative coverage analysis, (one of the most important twelve methods used to examine and quantify bias, according to the 2003 study by Richard Alan Nelson, *Tracking Propaganda to the Source: Tools for Analysing Media Bias*<sup>8</sup>), is to reveal whether Hillary Clinton was subject to a greater media bias, which may have affected her chances of winning the nomination. Although a direct causal link between such media bias and her electoral defeat may be hard to establish, there were nonetheless moments when the press attacked her for any number of reasons, ranging from her marriage to former president Bill Clinton to her make up style and fashion choices, whereas the treatment that the press gave to Obama was softer, even when it came to such issues as his ties with people who were known for proffering powerful hate speeches directed at the US (as was the case with his former reverend and mentor, Jeremiah Wright).

There were a number of issues that the press mentioned most frequently in relation to Hillary Clinton: her marriage, her toughness, her apparent phoniness, her perceived unelectability and high negative rates,

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<sup>5</sup> This is a point I will come back to towards the end of this study.

<sup>6</sup> Tawnya J. Adkins, Philo C. Wasburn, *Media Bias? A Comparative Analysis of Time, Newsweek, The National Review and the Progressive*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Jim A. Kuypers, *Press Bias: How the Media Frame Controversial Issues*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Alan Nelson, "Tracking Propaganda to the Source: Tools for Analysing Media Bias", in *Global Media Journal*, vol. 2, issue 3, Fall 2003, pp. 45-68.

her refusal to disclose her tax returns, her gender and class, her penchant for secrecy, her attempts to go negative on Obama and her spectacular comeback in the New Hampshire primaries. My analysis will follow the way the media presented these issues, trying to reveal instances of bias against Clinton and the way these were perceived by the general public. In parallel, I will also look at the way Barack Obama was portrayed in the press by taking into consideration the way the media reflected his inexperience, his appeal to the public, his charisma, his desire for a “fair, post-racial politics” and last but not least, his race.

## **2. Media bias in the coverage of the Clinton campaign**

The existence of media bias is nothing new. According to a recent book by Erica Falk, media bias against women candidates for public office dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Commenting on the particular case of the 2008 elections, the author argues that “even though Clinton polled better than Obama, in the month in which both candidates announced they would run for president, the six top circulating newspapers in the US ran 59 stories that mentioned Obama in the headline and just 36 that mentioned Clinton. That the press seemed biased against a woman running for president was not surprising. In fact, historical trends show that women candidates for presidency consistently receive less press coverage than equivalent men running in the same race. What was surprising was that such a disparity was present when the woman was the front runner and that such a pattern, which had been manifest in press coverage since 1884, still held in 2007”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in statistical terms, in the period between January 2007 and June 2008, *Newsweek* published 294 articles on Hillary Clinton and 364 on Obama, with three covers featuring Clinton, one featuring both Clinton and Obama and one featuring Bill Clinton, where the journalists analysed the role he played in his wife’s campaign. Over the same period, *Newsweek* had 6 covers featuring Obama and one presenting his wife, Michelle. As for *Time*, they published 301 articles on Hillary Clinton, of which 29 were cover stories, while Hillary was on the cover of the magazine twice, on two other occasions sharing the cover with Obama. The same magazine published 319 articles on Obama, of which 25 were

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<sup>9</sup> Erica Falk, *Women for President. Media Bias in Eight Campaigns*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 1.

cover stories, while he was featured on the magazine cover five times in the period discussed. In consequence, what Falk argued becomes evident: even though Clinton continues to lead in opinion polls, both nationally and regionally, she received less press coverage and fewer magazine covers than her rival for the Democratic nomination. What could then be the possible explanations for this apparent bias in numbers, if I might call it that? What does the actual content of these articles reveal about the media bias expressed against Hillary Clinton?

Jonathan Alter, one of the leading *Newsweek* columnists, writing in the December 25, 2006 – January 1, 2007 issue, begins his article with the following observation: “Hillary’s hair and hemline won’t be issues; her tough national-security approach and famous husband will”,<sup>10</sup> introducing, from the very beginning, two major issues that will be analysed by the press in relation to Hillary over the next eighteen months: her gender (one would hardly expect an article about a male candidate to start with references to his hair style and clothing) and the fact that she is married to the former president. Alter goes on to quote a longtime Bill Clinton advisor, who claimed that “People don’t view her first as a woman, they view her as a Clinton”,<sup>11</sup> making then the following comment: “Hillary’s big problem might be less her sex than her husband’s - the risk that despite a powerful nostalgia for his intelligence and competence, Bill Clinton’s sexual history and its myriad complications for her public persona will somehow intrude in ways that feel very yesterday”.<sup>12</sup> What Alter does here is to very subtly suggest that, in contrast to Obama, who, at that time, had not yet shaped its message of change and his famous “Change we can believe in” logo, Hillary Clinton, a Washington insider and a longtime member of the establishment, represents to some extent a case of “more of the same”, which was precisely what the Americans did not need after two George W. Bush terms. Alter’s comments on Obama are somewhat softer: “Obama’s problem may be less that he’s black than that he’s green – the least battle-hardened major candidate in modern memory”.<sup>13</sup> The lack of experience,

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Alter, “Is America Ready?” in *Newsweek*, Dec. 25, 2006 – Jan. 1, 2007, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, art. cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, art. cit. Alter even uses the term “Obambi”, quoting a Chicago columnist, to describe Obama’s innocence in political matters.

which in real terms might be perceived by the public as a negative feature in a future president, is somewhat played down by the press in Obama's case, as the journalists tended to more enthusiastic about his oratory skills and his "usual offhand baritone cool".<sup>14</sup> As this was the first extensive article published by *Newsweek* analyzing the chances that both Hillary and Obama had of winning the White House, given their various qualities and flaws, it can be argued that in a sense, it set the tone for the future articles dealing with the same issues that the magazine would publish in the following months: "at first glance, Clinton looks tougher than Obama, a big advantage in a bruising campaign. Obama isn't weak, just a blank slate".<sup>15</sup> The reaction of the public to this first article was mixed: while some considered that the two candidates would be much better off if they joined forces instead of engaging in political confrontation, some others viewed the candidacy of either as a joke, at most: "can anybody seriously envision either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama as commander in chief of our nation's armed forces? [...] whatever happened to seasoned statesmanship being a quality in a presidential candidate?"<sup>16</sup>

The extensive coverage that the press gave to the issue of the Clinton marriage appears to have been a double-edged sword for Hillary: "Hillary Clinton's husband is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, he draws a lot of attention. On the other, he draws a lot of attention";<sup>17</sup> her husband was described in various terms, more often than not as a drawback rather than an advantage to his wife's campaign: "'The Bill Factor' is a complex one. To some, he's a shrewd politician, a clear thinker, a brilliant explicator who was president during an era of relative peace and indisputable prosperity. To others, he's 'Slick Willie'".<sup>18</sup> The tone of the articles change as the election calendar moves further into the primary season: "History may record primary day in Pennsylvania as the day Bill Clinton officially became the most tragic figure of the 2008 campaign.<sup>19</sup> [...] Playing the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> "Mail Call", *Newsweek*, January 15, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Joe Klein, "Bills Lets Loose" in *Time*, November 19, 2007, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Darman, "His New Role" in *Newsweek*, May 28, 2007, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> The article makes reference to an incident before the South Carolina primary, when Clinton accused Obama of having played the 'race card' on him.

aggrieved party in South Carolina, Bill showed touches of his ugliest self".<sup>20</sup> Otherwise said, by constantly bringing up the subject of Bill Clinton and especially the faux pas he took during the campaign, the media drew a conclusion that it readily presented to the public: "it's not her [Hillary]. It's *that* marriage".<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Michelle Obama's remark that, after her husband's victory in several primaries, she felt proud of her country 'for the first time in her life' was treated only marginally in the press, which means that the harm it may have caused to Obama's campaign was minimized.

The journalists themselves have admitted the existence of media bias against Hillary Clinton: "ask any woman over 35, Clinton supporter or not: the media hate Hillary. After all, reliable voices on the left have launched scathing critiques of her campaign, her ethics and her motives. [...] From December [2007] to mid-February [2008], 83 percent of network news coverage of Obama was positive. For Clinton, the number was 53 percent. After Super Tuesday, even as more Clinton supporters demanded more balanced coverage, Obama's proportion of good press dropped only to 67 percent, while Clinton's remained at about 50 percent".<sup>22</sup> Hillary Clinton herself observed the unfair media treatment she was received at the expense of her opponent: Evan Thomas of *Newsweek* commented on a remark she made during a television appearance in which she joked that "maybe we should ask Barack Obama if he is comfortable and needs another pillow". The journalist admitted that "she is sore at the press for seeming to go easier on her opponent. She has a point [...]".<sup>23</sup> While Thomas is correct in observing that it is virtually impossible for the media to be completely objective, he argues that "the press's real bias is for conflict";<sup>24</sup> he also offers some motivation for the perceived harsher criticism that the press displayed towards Clinton: she has a much longer

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Darman, "The Natural No More" in *Newsweek*, May 5, 2008, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Miller, "The Bill Factor" in *Newsweek*, March 17, 2008, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Deirdre Depke, "Push Us Around at Your Own Peril" in *Newsweek*, March 17, 2008, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Evan Thomas, "The Myth of Objectivity" in *Newsweek*, March 10, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, art. cit.

political career than Obama, so there are many more issues to examine in her past.<sup>25</sup>

Another very important issue that was extensively discussed in the media was that of gender. Probably the most extensive coverage involving this issue occurred on the occasion of her winning the New Hampshire primaries. The press were very quick to turn the fact that Hillary proved to be slightly more emotional than her usual cool demeanor into a national sensation, trying to put her victory down to this one fact: “the mere opening of a tear duct seemed to expose gender issue that had percolated under the surface of this Democratic race. [...] the folks who have always accused the Clintons of being phonies quickly pronounced this incident a ploy. William Kristol: ‘She pretended to cry, the women felt sorry for her, and she won’. Maureen Dowd: ‘Can Hillary cry her way back to the White House?’”<sup>26</sup> However, on this issue, the opinions of the press were somehow divided: in all fairness, some journalists admitted that her New Hampshire victory had very little to do with crying and very much to do with the superior organization of her campaign in the state. In addition, the media also reported widely on a story that made Obama appear much less gracious than usual by seemingly attacking Hillary on the gender front: when Clinton was asked why more people in Iowa and New Hampshire seemed to like Obama better than her, she jokingly responded “well, that hurts my feelings”, while Obama retorted in a condescending, off-putting manner, “You’re likeable enough, Hillary”.<sup>27</sup> This is one of the very few examples when the press appeared to be more critical against Obama, but this was only a temporary state of facts: before long, they went back to vilify Hillary Clinton.

One of the reasons why she often came under media fire was her refusal to disclose her tax returns: *Newsweek* alone published, between October 2007 and February 2009, four long articles discussing this issue, the common thread that runs through them being the emphasis on her “penchant for secrecy” very similar to the manner in which George W.

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas’s actual phrase is “[Hillary is] the rare presidential contender, for instance, who is married to a buckraking former president who lobs grenades at the first plausible African-American candidate”. *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Dahlia Litwick, “The Tracks of Her Tears” in *Time*, January 21, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Meacham, “Letting Hillary Be Hillary” in *Newsweek*, Jan. 21, 2008, p. 27.

Bush or Richard Nixon chose to ran the White House (Obama's campaign manager was quoted as saying, "What the American people don't need is more George Bush secrecy in the White House").<sup>28</sup> *Newsweek* even published an interview with Barack Obama on November 12, 2007, in which the question of Clinton's tax returns was touched upon, the Illinois senator calling his opponent "disingenuous" (he was very careful to avoid the word "dishonest").<sup>29</sup> However, the press had no such reservations, often drawing attention to Clinton's perceived 'phoniness', 'unelectability' and high negative approval rates. She was in turn described as "tough, persistent, forgets, nothing",<sup>30</sup> "the Devil in a pantsuit",<sup>31</sup> a "fatally flawed, secretive candidate"<sup>32</sup> who tried to make the public believe that her experience as First Lady would make her qualified for the job of president.<sup>33</sup> Under these circumstances, in which the press had a significant contribution to creating the "world of Hillary hatred",<sup>34</sup> it comes as no surprise that the reaction of the public was immediate and strong: "After 15 years of watching Hillary in action, I still have no idea what her true beliefs, convictions and motifs are. I find that unsettling, to say the least. I would love to see a woman president someday, but on Election Day, my vote will definitely not be cast in her favour"; "a serial sycophant is not my idea of an inspiring decider"; "Americans don't need another 'family dynasty' in the White House"; "as has become the norm in our political culture, Clinton outlines the failures of others and highlighted her own accomplishments while never fully answering the question [about whether she had made any mistakes in her political career]".<sup>35</sup> Even the former

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Hosenball and Michael Isikoff, "In a Spat over Secrecy, Two Rivals Go Their Separate Ways" in *Newsweek*, March 17, 2008, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Howard Fineman and Richard Wolffe, "What She Can't Do Is Have It Both Ways" in *Newsweek*, Nov. 12, 2007. See also Michael Isikoff, "Papers? I Don't See Any Papers" in *Newsweek*, October 29, 2007; Idem, "The Hillary Paper Chase: 3,022,030 Documents to Go", in *Newsweek*, Nov. 12, 2007 and Mark Hosenball and Michael Isikoff, "Accounting 101: the Clintons" in *Newsweek*, Feb. 18, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Rove, "How to Beat Hillary (Next) November" in *Newsweek*, Nov. 26, 2007, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Howard Fineman, "In Search of a GOP St. George" in *Newsweek*, September 17, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Rove, "How to Win in a Knife Fight", in *Newsweek*, April 7, 2008, p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> The media also drew attention repeatedly to the fiasco of the healthcare reform campaign that Hillary Clinton was in charge of during her husband's first term.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Lowry, "The World of Hillary Hatred" in *Time*, November 19, 2007, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Mail Call, *Newsweek*, October 1, 2007, pp. 5-6.



Kennedy adviser and historian Arthur Schlesinger jr. expressed his surprise at the onslaught of criticism directed against Hillary primarily from the part of women: "I don't understand why educated and professional women, otherwise intelligent and tolerant, are so unreasonable possessed by Hillary hatred. I cannot extract a clear statement of why they all detest her".<sup>36</sup> The majority of the reasons quoted in the article have very little, if anything at all, to do with Hillary as a political leader or with her activity – everything seemed to revolve around her gender: "she doesn't have a hobby, aside from cleaning closets and completing crossword puzzles. She does not appear to have been deeply attached to her family pets. She lacks sensuousness. She showed a hint of cleavage. She wore turquoise earrings with a yellow pantsuit. She liked prim headbands. She changed her maiden name. She married Bill Clinton. She stayed married to Bill Clinton. She is still married to Bill Clinton".<sup>37</sup>

The last major issue that represented a reason why Hillary was came under attack by the press were her attempts to go negative on Barack Obama by raising doubts about his foreign policy experience, military toughness, economic policies, etc. The journalists were careful to highlight comments, political aides and innuendos coming from Hillary Clinton herself or from her campaign staff, all of which were seen as part of her strategy to win by destroying her opponent, a fact that (as they pointed out), stood in sharp contrast with Obama's repeated appeals to a "fair" type of politics. Hillary's remarks concerning Obama's stand on the issue of NAPHTA, his ties with the shady Chicago developer Tony Rezko, her accusation that he plagiarized parts of her speeches,<sup>38</sup> even her half-joking reply that her staff had found Obama's kindergarten essay entitled "I Want to Be President", her comment that the name Obama "is not Islamic as far as I know",<sup>39</sup> not to mention the well-known ad featuring the red phone ringing in the White House at 3 a.m., were picked up and dissected by the media, who, while criticizing Clinton for "stooping so low", never failed to

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<sup>36</sup> Julia Baird, "I Am a Woman, Hear Me Snore" in *Newsweek*, February 4, 2008, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, art. cit. By comparison, one cannot help but wonder how the Americans would react if they read an article criticizing Obama for the fact that he did not color coordinate his socks with his tie.

<sup>38</sup> In one of the televised debates, referring to this issue, Hillary Clinton said, "this is not change we can believe in, this is change we can xerox".

<sup>39</sup> Joe Klein, "The Race Goes On" in *Time*, March 6, 2008, p. 44.

praise Obama for “raising above such petty politics”: “Clinton won [the Pennsylvania primary] by throwing the ‘kitchen sink’ at Obama, as her campaign aides described it. Her campaign had been an assault on Obama’s character flaws, real and imagined, rather than on matters of substance. [...] Obviously, this is his [Obama’s] strategy – his appeal has been the promise of civility (and as a black man, he wants to send low-information signals that he is neither angry nor threatening)”.<sup>40</sup> The press used this opportunity to summarise this kind of behavior through (yet) another reference to ‘that marriage’: “An Arkansas state legislator once said of Bill Clinton that he would pat you on the back while he urinated down your leg. The corollary for Clinton’s wife Hillary could be that she will tell the world how honoured she is to share a stage with Obama even as she’s gearing up to smash him”.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Obama’s campaign – positive bias?

The Clinton campaign often accused the media of treating Obama with “kid gloves”. Is this really the case? The next section of my paper will look in more detail to the main issues of the press coverage of the Obama campaign, trying to reveal whether indeed the media bias functioned here in Obama’s favour. To begin with, he was widely quoted in the press by saying, in response to some of Clinton’s attacks, that “we have too much at stake at this time in our history to be engaging in this kind of silliness”.<sup>42</sup> While the media did comment on his relative lack of political experience, they did not do so by using a negative spin; rather, at some point, they even seemed in awe of his courage to undertake such a step: “he put an entirely different question on the table: is America ready to vote for idealism over hard-edged realism, for hope over experience? By framing his candidacy in such a way, he makes talk of racial limits, or racial voting, almost irrelevant – and makes a virtue of his biggest supposed weakness, his inexperience in actual governing”.<sup>43</sup> The preference of the press for seeing Obama, rather than Clinton, in the White House was expressed

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<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, “The Incredibly Shrinking Democrats” in *Time*, April 24, 2008, pp. 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Karen Tumulty and David von Drehle, “Clinton’s Collateral Damage” in *Time*, March 6, 2008, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Barack Obama quoted in *Newsweek*, January 28, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ellis Cose, “An Obama-Carter Reality Check” in *Newsweek*, January 14, 2008, p. 56.

quite early in the primary season<sup>44</sup> and may have been the result of the fact that the media had been won over by his charisma and positive, post-racial politics message: while the journalists were closely watching any wrong step that Clinton made in the same period, they were publishing one favourable article after another about Obama, drawing repeated parallels to revered historical figures such as JFK or Martin Luther King jr. The public's reaction was immediate and passionate: "His authenticity and sincerity trump opponents' Washington resume"; "we're behind him because he is not like any other candidate and because he is the one who can lead us to a new America. Our country hungers for fundamental change. Obama's unique experience as a community organizer, as a constitutional lawyer, as a legislator who brings people together make him our best hope"; "the results of the Iowa caucuses proved that the authenticity and sincerity of a supposedly inexperienced candidate like Barack Obama trump worn-out political platitudes and shallow lip service from opponents with longer Washington resumes. This proves that Americans are hungry for real, meaningful change and that we are colorblind when it comes to choose who we deem can best deliver on that promise".<sup>45</sup> Very few were the dissenting voices who dared to raise doubt about Obama's "mass messianism"; among them, Joe Klein, writing for *Time*, remarked that "the campaign is entirely about Obama and his ability to inspire. Rather than focusing on any specific issue or cause – other than an amorphous desire for change – the message is becoming dangerously self-referential. The Obama campaign all too often is about how wonderful the Obama campaign is. [...] Obama's strength is inspiration, and it's also his weakness. There is an odd, anachronistic formality to Obama's stump speech: it is always the same".<sup>46</sup>

The treatment of the press given to two important and problematic issues that involved Barack Obama and could have proven electoral disasters for him also shows signs of positive bias: unlike the press comments on Hillary's refusal to reveal her tax returns, the scandals surrounding the Chicago developer Anthony Rezko (who sold Obama a

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<sup>44</sup> See "Obama or Clinton: Which Candidate Can Best Take on McCain?" in *Newsweek*, April 28, 2008, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> "Mail Call: The Obama Appeal" in *Newsweek*, March 3, 2008, pp. 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Joe Klein, "Inspiration vs. Substance" in *Time*, February 7, 2008, p. 13.

house and some land and was then indicted on corruption charges) and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor, who engaged in virulent anti-American hate speech were not give very much space in the media and the general tone, more often than not, was that Obama should receive "the benefit of the doubt": "for all the scratches and dings he's suffered over his incendiary pastor, his 'bitter' aspersions and even his patriotism, Obama's Teflon is still working".<sup>47</sup>

The scandal surrounding the Reverend Jeremiah Wright contributed to bringing to the foreground another crucial issue that was more or less always mentioned in connected to Barack Obama: the question of race. In response to growing pressure from the press and the public and somehow against his wish to pursue a post-racial politics, Obama was forced to make the Philadelphia race speech. Many doubts were raised with regard to Obama's being a black man with a white mother (it is telling that he was never described as a white man with a black father) and the extent to which this would be a matter of serious concern in the 2008 presidential campaign. Race is undoubtedly still a factor in the American society and Obama's efforts were focused on creating the impression that he did not speak for Red America, Blue America, Black America or White America, but simply for America. The press often praised this post-racial politics of unity, while still wondering whether Obama could appeal to both blacks and whites and remain true to himself: "in his acclaimed Philadelphia speech on race, Obama tried to walk a fine line. He did not disown his controversial pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright jr. – who fulminated against America's foreign policy and history of discrimination in some of his sermons – or the black church tradition from which he had emerged".<sup>48</sup> What could seem surprising is that, although the 2008 presidential campaign started as a race implying questions of race and gender in equal proportions, in the end, it was the media presentation of the two that turned Hilary's gender into an "issue" that helped her either win or lose primaries and caucuses (depending on how much emotion she showed or how she color coordinated her wardrobe) while Obama's race was never mentioned as a grounds either for his success or his failure. The press contrasted the "visionary" Obama with the "technician" Clinton, "the

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Alter, "Adios, Sound Bites & Fat Cats" in *Newsweek*, April 28, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Dahlia Litwick, "A Complicated Record on Race" in *Newsweek*, April 7, 2008, p. 33.

candidate who could inspire the masses and the candidate who could get under the kitchen sink and fix the plumbing".<sup>49</sup> To quote the former Mexican foreign minister Jorge G. Castaneda, "symbolism plays a big role. While a Hillary Clinton presidency would mean that for the first time a woman would hold the world's 'macho' job par excellence, an Obama presidency would go much further. For starters, as many analysts have argued, his background is enormously appealing to the rest of the world. [...] but the main difference an Obama presidency would make is his race, which today trumps gender as far as symbolism goes".<sup>50</sup>

Surprisingly enough, the largest amount of negative press that Obama received was the fact that he was perceived as an elitist candidate who was out of touch with ordinary people and appeared as phony and forced every time he made efforts to "blend in" a crowds. From his education to his food choices, from his house in a Chicago upscale neighbourhood to the books he likes to read, the press painted Obama as "not one of the people": "Following Hillary Clinton's lead, the McCain team sees an opportunity to paint Obama as an out-of-touch elitist, a Harvard toff who nibbles daintily at designer salads while the working man, worried about layoffs at the plant, belts another shot".<sup>51</sup> The press coverage of Obama was hardly ever about race, but sometimes it was about class, although, as the authors of the above-quoted article, accusing a black candidate of being "too elitist" might seem a contradiction in terms; yet, "to pockets of America, he still seems to be the "other". He seems a little strange, exotic; those cracked e-mails whispering about his middle name (Hussein) and declaring, fictitiously, that he is a Muslim who insisted on being sworn into office on the Qur'an rather than the Bible, keep buzzing around the Internet. To some, his manner is haughty; he is a bit of an egghead, one of those pointy-headed intellectuals whom George W. Bush liked to ridicule".<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the reactions of the public to these media allegations are telling ("I want a president who is smarter, more talented

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Duffy, "Clinton, Obama: Why Not Both" in *Time*, February 6, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Jorge G. Castaneda, "A Cinammon-Skinned President" in *Newsweek*, January 12, 2008, p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> Evan Thomas, Richard Wolffe and Holly Bailey, "Only in America" in *Newsweek*, May 5, 2008, p. 34.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

and more powerful than the man next door. As an average American with a household income less than average, please give me an elitist president")<sup>53</sup> – it may well be that the favourable press coverage that Obama had received until the publication of the articles discussing his elitism resulted in a wave of sympathy that was very hard to shatter in the end.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present analysis included more quotes from *Newsweek* than from *Time* in the light of the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the magazine displayed a very evident bias in favour of Obama. To illustrate this point, I would like to make reference to an article published in the conservative journal *The National Review* on June 25, 2008, which makes a detailed analysis of several articles published in *Newsweek* in the period discussed: "[...] what *Newsweek* has been up to is begging for comment. So far this year, their Obama coverage has been a black hole of jaundiced so dense that few straight truths and impartial observations can escape".<sup>54</sup> The author discussed one particular article published by *Newsweek* on the topic of Obama's alleged anti-Jewish attitudes and opinions and comments that "*Newsweek* looked at the issue closely and determined that these problems are mythical. How, you might ask? Well, they got quotes from two self-professed Obama supporters – entertainment mogul David Geffen and New Jersey congressman Robert Andrews – saying so. Then they let Obama's campaign accuse the most prominent Jew in Congress of helping spread malicious rumours that Obama is a Muslim without asking him for comment. Classy".<sup>55</sup> Hemingway also noticed the fact that the whole Jeremiah Wright incident was given very little coverage in the magazine and virtually none of it reflected negatively on Obama, while highlighting the observation included in a *Newsweek* article that claimed "But he [John McCain] may not be able to resist casting doubt on Obama's patriotism".<sup>56</sup> This particular article actually prompted a lengthy response from McCain's campaign manager, published on the *Newsweek* website on May 11, 2008:

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<sup>53</sup> "A Candidate Perceived as Being Elitist" in *Newsweek*, May 19, 2008, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Hemingway, "Obamaweek in Review", *The National Review*, June 25, 2008, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

“The characterisation of Republican presidential campaigns as nothing more than attack machines that use 527s and other means to smear opponents strikes us as pretty offensive. [...]. Evan Thomas and Richard Wolffe offered a biased implication that Republicans have won elections and will try to win this one simply by tearing down through disreputable means their opponents. [...] without a trace of skepticism, your reporters embraced the primary communications strategy the Obama campaign intends to follow: any criticism of their candidate is a below the belt, Republican attack machine distortion that should discredit the authors.”<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, a quite evident preliminary conclusion is that *Newsweek* displayed an evident bias in favour of Obama, which hurt both his direct rival to the Democratic nomination, Hillary Clinton and his Republican opponent, John McCain, while *Time* adopted a more moderate tone, thus largely escaping the accusations of bias in favour of any one candidate.

American presidential election sometimes favour image over substance, but this should not be too surprising. People react much sooner and much stronger to something that appeals to their emotions rather than to the hard facts of economic charts and graphs. The role of the media in presidential elections thus becomes all the more substantial; the press itself sometimes falls prey to the temptation of writing about image over substance, as it can dissect in minute detail the contents of a candidate’s lunch yet devote a mere few lines to his position on green energy, for example. Another evident remark is that media is never free of bias: according to how the bias is reflected in the articles they publish, the journalists do have the power of shaping people’s opinions and reactions to any given subject based on the spin they include in their reporting. In all appearance, the study of the 2008 campaign press coverage shows that the *Newsweek* magazine did manifest a stronger negative bias towards Hillary Clinton when presenting a number of major issues connected to the New York Senator. As I mentioned at the start of this article, to what extent this negative bias represented one of the reasons why Hillary Clinton lost the Democratic nomination is hard to assess, for lack of precise measuring instruments (opinion polls, although useful, are not always able to provide us with reliable data on such sensitive subjects).

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<sup>57</sup> “The O Team: A Response”, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/136572>.

At the end of the day, what remains are questions referring to whether, in the more or less distant future, we will see another woman running for president in a campaign that the press will cover with more interest towards real political or economic issues and less towards fashion or marital choices.



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## SARAH PALIN: A BAD MOVE OR A MOVE THAT WENT BAD?

Hermina Vicol\*

### Abstract

*The 2008 US Election Campaign has been a historic one for many reasons. Not only did it bring the United States its first African-American President, but it also provided an extraordinary show in the process. One of the most controversial aspects of this campaign was Governor Sarah Palin's nomination as the Vice-Presidential candidate of the Republican Party. While her presence on the ticket may have been a step back for the Republicans, it certainly was a step forward for female politicians across America.*

**Keywords:** *US Elections, Vice-President, Sarah Palin, Gender, Feminism*

### Introduction

The present paper is intended to be a brief analysis of the impact that Sarah Palin's nomination as Vice-Presidential candidate has had on the success of the Republican campaign and on the outcome of the 2008 election. I argue that Governor Palin's presence on the ticket was more damaging rather than helpful for the Republicans, not because of gender bias but because she was not qualified enough.

For a democratic nation, elections are a crucial event. For mankind, the US presidential elections are a crucial event. With the advancement of the media during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of televised presidential debates in 1960, US presidential elections have been gradually turning from a political process into a spectacle.

The 2008 presidential campaign was one that America has rarely, if ever, seen, one filled with surprise nominations, moving speeches, infomercials and unprecedented private funding. From Hillary Clinton's fierce struggle to Obama's brilliant image campaign and ultimate victory, it

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provided an amazing show across the continent. It had something for everyone: race, gender, economic crisis, war.

In a presidential campaign, the role of the vice presidential nominee is to attract those groups of voters that the presidential candidate cannot. He/she thus brings political and geographical balance to the ticket.<sup>1</sup> What the Vice-President brings to the executive office, however, is still debatable, as the Constitution of the U.S. is not very generous in this respect: "the Vice President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no Vote, unless they be equally divided"<sup>2</sup> and he/she shall serve as President "in Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the President can be more generous, as he can may bestow upon the Vice-President several other responsibilities.

Historically, the office of Vice-President has been perceived as being of little importance, but in the past decades this view has begun to change. Individuals should not be nominated as running mates on a party ticket, unless they are presidential material,<sup>4</sup> or at least appear to be so.

Pundits and political analysts not only across America, but across the world, endeavored to portray this election as an unprecedented battle of race, gender and age, most of them disregarding the fact that perhaps for the first time in U.S. history this election year was one in which such considerations were of little importance. The most pressing issue for the American electorate in 2008 was not paradigm shifting or breaking the glass ceiling. They were preoccupied with much more mundane aspects, such as deciding which of the candidates was more likely to lead them out of the economic turmoil that had taken over the nation.

"I am Vice-President. In this I am nothing, but I may be everything." Never before have John Adams's words been truer than for Sarah Palin in 2008. In the midst of crisis, the Americans turn to Washington for guidance, for help, for strong leadership. They look for a figure that inspires strength

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<sup>1</sup> Ladd, Carll Everett, *The American Polity*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York: WW Norton & Co., 1991, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> The United States Constitution, Article 1, Section 3, <http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#A1Sec3>, accessed February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The United States Constitution, Article 2, Section 1, <http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html#A2Sec1>, accessed February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Ladd, Carll Everett, *op. cit.*, p. 193

and confidence. It was, therefore, more important for John McCain, given his age and his precarious health, than it was for Obama, to pick a competent running mate, someone that people would trust as the new President.

Governor Sarah Palin's nomination shook the world of campaign coverage to its core. Attention shifted dramatically from rock star candidate Barack Obama to the Wonder Woman of the Republican ticket. Pundits and politicians across national television sets and news rooms wondered about, pondered on, analyzed, evaluated and speculated. Was John McCain's shocking choice the right one?

One might argue that the rationale behind Sarah Palin's nomination is rather simple. The Republican campaign strategists must have figured that the substantial number of dissatisfied Hillary Clinton supporters out there could certainly be won over by a female VP nominee. Moreover, McCain was not exactly the most appealing candidate as far as the conservative wing of the party was concerned. Besides, they needed someone who was an outsider in Washington to go with the "theme" of this election, namely "change". Both camps struggled to bring someone new, to distance themselves from the current politics of Washington and the "old establishment." Democrat Barack Obama was a fresh face on the American political stage, but the same could not be said for Senator John McCain who had been serving as member of Congress for over 20 years.

Thus, the Republican solution was Sarah Palin, the profoundly religious, highly conservative governor of Alaska. She had taken office recently and was virtually unknown to the American public, which soon turned her in the target of endless media scrutiny.

The gender card had been played before in this campaign with Democrat Senator Hillary Clinton, who had managed to put 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling. In her acceptance speech, governor Sarah Palin appeared as a fierce middle-class hockey-mom who would shatter that ceiling altogether, vindicating all women.

The Republicans decided to play the gender card once more. However, they failed to see that the only thing Mrs. Clinton and Mrs. Palin had in common was the fact that they were both women. And that was not enough to win over the Clintonian electorate, as disappointed as they may have been with Obama's nomination.

It was presumptuous of the Republican strategists to assume that women would base their vote solely on gender. They disregarded the fact that female voters might prefer a Vice-President who represented their interests, rather than one who represented their gender. And given her stance on issues like abortion, Sarah Palin appeared as a highly unlikely choice for the female electorate.

In her disastrous interview with CBS anchor Katie Couric, the Alaskan Governor labeled herself as a pro-life feminist, which may very well be a contradiction in terms, as second-wave feminists fought for nearly two decades to secure reproductive rights for women and subsequent generations have struggled to uphold those rights.

Nevertheless, the Governor's decisive anti-abortion stance did appeal to the religious right, who were very unlikely to support Senator McCain, the maverick, and believed Sarah Palin was "God's answer."<sup>5</sup>

This campaign has been about change more than ever before. With the historic nomination of the first African-American to the presidency, the Democrats had clearly set themselves apart from the traditional politics of Washington. Barack Obama was the archetype of the American hero living the American Dream in its purest form: born in a modest family, he had managed through hard work to graduate from Harvard, secure a seat in the US Senate and was now running for the highest office in the country.

The GOP, however, had little to trade on the "change market", as John McCain was not exactly the breath of fresh air that American politics appeared to need so badly. In choosing Sarah Palin, the Republicans hoped to strengthen McCain's image as a reformer and distance themselves from Washington.

Senator McCain introduced Palin as his running mate on August, 29<sup>th</sup> in Dayton, Ohio: "She's not from these parts and she's not from Washington. But when you get to know her, you're going to be as impressed as I am."<sup>6</sup> And impressed the Americans were, indeed. The Republicans' shocking move seemed to have cured the nation from

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<sup>5</sup> Rosin, Hanna, *Why Christian Conservatives Love Sarah Palin*, in Slate Magazine, <http://www.slate.com/id/2199255/>, accessed March, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

<sup>6</sup> Transcript: *John McCain Introduces Sarah Palin in Dayton, Ohio*, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0808/29/cnr.04.html>, accessed March, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

"Obamamania", at least for a while, as Palin's nomination was the headline of every news report across America.

However, the moment she started giving interviews, the Americans suddenly lost their enthusiasm and started worrying. Although she made a strong first impression with her acceptance speech, her performance during the following weeks did nothing but hurt the Republicans' chance to win the election. After three disastrous interviews broadcasted on national television, it became quite clear that she was by no means prepared to serve as Vice-President, let alone as President.

All the gossip and speculation regarding the governor's personal life put aside, it came down to one thing: was she really qualified to be the next President of the United States? Because at the end of the day, more than McCain's running mate, voters viewed Sarah Palin as the possible future President. A detail that the Republican campaign must have overlooked, since they allowed her to look not only inexperienced, but highly unqualified too.

Her first interview with Charles Gibson of ABC News, as well as the following ones with Sean Hannity of Fox and Katie Couric of CBS News, focused not on who she was, but on whether she was prepared enough. The answer seemed pretty clear: she was not.

The three interviews covered generally the same topics, from the economic crisis, through abortion rights and gay rights to foreign policy, Iraq and Afghanistan. The young Alaskan Governor appeared to be having a hard time providing relevant, coherent answers. The interviews portrayed her as what she was: an inexperienced first-term Governor of a remote state who was by no means ready to become Commander in Chief if ever needed.

Barack Obama's victory was not the result of the fact that America has finally managed to solve and overcome what WEB du Bois termed "the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" – "the color-line." Barack Obama's victory was to a larger extent the result of a remarkably orchestrated image campaign and of a series of fortunate circumstances (*i.e.* the economic crisis, Bush's administration and its disastrous effects, etc) that paved his way to the White House. Sarah Palin's presence on the Republican ticket was one of those circumstances.



Perhaps the strongest argument of the Republicans against Obama was his apparent lack of experience, as compared to John McCain. By nominating Sarah Palin, the Republicans rendered useless precisely this argument.

Three years younger than Obama, former mayor of Wasilla, a city of approximately 7000 inhabitants,<sup>7</sup> first-term Governor of Alaska, with no foreign policy credentials and no contact with Washington whatsoever, Sarah Palin was in no way more experienced than Obama. The 47-year old Democrat was at least member of the Senate, which entailed that he was familiar not only with the issues facing the American government, but with the way the system operated. The President's ability to work with Congress, especially in times of hardship, is essential.

Now, after all the turmoil and craze of the election have subsided, the question still remains: was Palin's nomination a bad move or just a move that went bad?

In theory, the Republican strategy may have very well been a brilliant one. In practice, however, it backfired because they chose, in my opinion, the wrong person. Except for the religious right, who were charmed by the Godsend pious pro-life feminist of Alaska, Palin's presence on the ticket managed to alienate the vast majority of the targeted segments of voters. Most of Hillary Clinton's supporters felt offended by the assumption that they could be lured over to the other side by the presence of a female candidate on the ticket and even members of the Republican Party criticized Palin's performance and opposed her candidacy. The reasons for this appear to be quite obvious and they have little to do with the fact that she is a woman.

She lacked experience, especially in the foreign policy department. And when you are Vice-President of a country at war with terrorist forces, knowledge of and experience in foreign policy might come in handy.

Her poor performance in televised interviews slowly eliminated the gender issue, making room for the unqualified argument which proved to be stronger than any gender bias.

Women's rights movement emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and it has been ever since a continuous struggle for equality. Feminists of

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<sup>7</sup> Wasilla Facts, <http://www.cityofwasilla.com/index.aspx?page=49>, accessed March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009

different eras have focused their efforts on different issues, from the right to vote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to equal pay and reproductive rights in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

That women feel oppressed by a patriarchal society is a fact. That they actually are is true to a certain extent. The feminists of today believe that the male-dominated, gender biased society they live in is systematically attempting to prevent them from achieving power positions of any type, be they economic or political.

Political action committees across America, like EMILY's List or The Wish List, support and promote the advancement of women in politics and their election to office.

The 2008 presidential election will go down in history for many reasons. It occasioned one of the most skillful image campaigns ever, it opened a new battlefield for future elections, namely the internet, and it brought the first African-American President to the White House. Besides, this election has brought women to the spotlight like never before in American politics.

Alaskan Republican Sarah Palin was the first female Vice-Presidential candidate in 24 years, since Democrat Geraldine Ferraro's nomination in 1984. However disastrous her performance may have been, she remains the second woman to run for one of the highest offices in the country since the founding of the United States two centuries ago.

This election showed that female voters, be they fervent feminists or not, prefer to be represented in the federal government not necessarily by a woman, but rather by someone who has their best interest at heart. In this respect, Sarah Palin's nomination was a bad move that went even worse

Sarah Palin, pro-life feminist, conservative Republican Governor of Alaska, mother of five and former Miss Alaska runner-up may not be the best suited woman for the job, nor the heroine that feminists all over America dreamt of their entire lives, but she made it this far. And if she could do it, so can we. Yes, we can!

### **Conclusion**

Governor Sarah Palin's nomination as Vice-Presidential candidate had a disastrous effect on the Republican campaign and diminished the ticket's appeal to the electorate. Her poor performance in interviews and in

the vice-presidential debates proved to the American public that she was not qualified to become the nation's possible President.

In her case, given the age and health of John McCain, becoming President was more of a possibility than in the case of any other VP. Thus, her importance in the Republican campaign increased exponentially.

It is precisely because of the importance of the VP on the Republican ticket in this election that nominating Sarah Palin was a bad move that went even worse.

Her presence on the ticket definitely did not help the Republicans in their effort to secure the presidential seat and it is one of the many reasons why Barack Obama is now sitting in the Oval Office.

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## A DIALECTICAL AMERICA

Vlad Mureșan\*

### Abstract

*We analyze the ambiguous relation between idealism and realism in the United States global policy. The very emergence of America as a nation is saturated with a millennial investment that predetermined all its subsequent international discourse. The imperial conversion of this idealism is however exposed and criticized. But we argue that there is no jus gentium conceivable without such idealism. It is only the hypocrisy that must be eliminated, not the values as such. But anyway, it is not pure hypocrisy that explains cynical realism. We argue that no empire ever engaged into global dominance could avoid a dialectical attitude characterized by the mediation and alternation of the oppositions on the global scene. Apparent incoherence testifies thus for an entirely different logic.*

**Keywords:** *America, Manifest Destiny, Idealism / Realism, International Relations*

### 1. The New Terrestrial Jerusalem

The birth of the United States and their experience of liberty cannot be fully understood outside the frame of the founding religious exodus.

For all the „excluded” of the Old Europe, America – this virginal space of the planet, seemed like the only and ultimate chance. These „excluded” were also radical religious dissidents, extreme offspring of the Reformation. They contemplated, in accordance with their radical stance, the failure of the „historical” Christianity, torn apart into irreducible

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religious antagonisms. America seemed to open the contrasting possibility of a terrestrial paradise. And their only survival was the very typical protestant radical return to a pure experience of the Gospel – the only firm ground on which a terrestrial New Jerusalem could be erected.

„The discovery and the colonization of the New World were realized under the sign of eschatology (...). Today we recognize the importance of the religious factor, particularly the importance of the movements of revival and tension – the prophetic, eschatological, millennial movements<sup>1</sup>.

At the origin of America we do not find, therefore, simply a mean „land-hunger“, or the vengeful desire of England to crush her rival, Spain.

The pioneers of the colonization could not – and were not- simple instruments in the hands of some frustrated governments. Quite the opposite – their mobilization, that succeeded, in only 300 years, in building a real empire out of nothing, a combination of welfare and force, able to inspire direction to the entire history of mankind, must be understood as a result of a real project of millennial type.

„The emigration is, for them, a real hegira towards America, an expedition inspired by God, to build the New Sion on alien lands. They are dominated by the certitude of incarnating a providential destiny. In all the towns of New England, nobody doubts that they act in the name of God. The absolute reference point is the Bible, which becomes the framework through which they read all reality. For every one of its members, the new people is the People of God“<sup>2</sup>.

There’s a major difference, then, between a people that confronts sheer subsistence and a people that actively engages into building the very “promised land”. John Winthrop, the leader of one of the first puritan community was even compared to Moise leading his people to the Promised Land. This people, chosen out of the Old Europe’s chaos, were to be *the new Israel*, the new chosen people to erect an ideal country, through a new Covenant with God.

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *La nostalgie des origines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1991, pp. 140 - 145.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Bugnon-Mordant, *L’Amerique totalitaire. Les Etats-Unis et la maîtrise du monde*, Lausanne: Editions Favre, 1997, pp. 10 - 12.

in this work we have undertaken... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God... We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us til we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a-going"<sup>3</sup>.

"American pioneers judged themselves in the situation of the Jews after the crossing of the Red Sea – as their condition in England or Europe has been a kind of Egyptian slavery. After this terrible trial of traversing the dessert, they will finally enter Canaan"<sup>4</sup>.

These are the spiritual premises of what will come to be known as "American exceptionalism" (the national doctrine of an "American messianic call", of an American millennial investment).

The American nation is thus called to bring about the Liberty in the realm of history, under its political form: the democracy. Not only to be a land of liberty, but also to actively engage in a worldwide instauration of democracy, as a supreme form of human organization (Fukuyama). The American nation is endowed with a special vocation, with a powerful calling, with a *Manifest Destiny*.

It is beginning with this original endowment that some of the most important features of U.S. international conduct must be understood, however distant these spiritual origins may seem in relation to our turbulent present. The interest of a genealogical approach of the American exceptionalism lies in its core importance in most of the international doctrines that assessed the role U.S should find for itself as a global actor. Idealism is a doctrine profoundly <sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Owen Collins, *Speeches That Changed the World*, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999, pp. 63-64.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> "By the 'idealists' we have in mind writers such as Sir Alfred Zimmern, S. H. Bailey, Philip Noel-Baker, and David Mitrany (...) The distinctive characteristic of these writers was their belief in progress: the belief, in particular, that the system of international relations that had given rise to the First World War was capable of being transformed into a fundamentally more peaceful and just world order; that under the impact of the awakening of democracy, the growth of 'the international mind', the development of the League of Nations, the good works of men of peace or the enlightenment spread by their own teaching, it was in fact being transformed" (Hedley Bull, in Donald Markwell, *John Maynard Keynes and International Relations: Economic Paths to War and Peace*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 3).

## 2. From Spiritual Election to Political Idealism

This “birth certificate” is thus not without consequences for the entire ulterior political discourse of the United States. It is already in the American Constitution, the fruit of a political and conceptual revolution, that the standard values of the young State are fixed. The reverse of this “American exceptionalism”, built on a messianic expectation is the target of the most anti-American critics.

“This feeling of incarnating an undeniable political and social truth, called to be imposed everywhere, emanates in all the acts of the American nation up to this day. America simply cannot fail, because God approves her. Any hostile attitude is not understandable to her and therefore considered illegitimate. Sanctioning any deviation was, from the times of the founding, the exclusion of the guilty one from the community. Who was not ready to build the *New Sion*, had to leave. No dissidence was tolerated (...). It is in this way that was developed *the spirit of club* one can find in modern organizations such as NATO, G8 or the U.N. Council of Security”<sup>6</sup>

But the critique has its own limits : when one incarnates such ideal principles, as are those of the American constitutionalism, you are obliged to profess a political idealism, similar to that of Woodrow Wilson, that founded the League of Nations. And the *spirit of club* is not something entirely bad – Hitler didn’t profess such a spirit and he retreated from the League of Nations, exhibiting thus a dangerous isolation. Today Iran or North Korea pose as dissidents and outsiders of the global system.

Otherwise put: the political idealism, that is the idea of introducing moral principles to regulate the international sphere is not something intrinsically negative. How would then a *jus gentium* look like, without any such principles? The problem only arises with the hypocrisy toward those very principles, with the double standard policy. That is: there is a problem only when we confront a serious gap between the idealism of the discourse and the cynical realism of the imperial practices.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Bugnon-Mordant, *op.cit.*, pp. 15-17.

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Take for example the Bolshevik revolution: the United States constructed, together with the Allies a sanitary isolation, as a total embargo against the new political “infection”. Or: today the United States have unresolved tensions with China, in connection with the human rights. Would it be better to “avoid” such moral claims and display utter indifference towards the victims? The fall of the USSR stands in direct linkage with this “exaggerated moral policy” of the U.S. (with the support, of course, of an extremely powerful economic advance). Conversely, the case of Somalia cries out against all those who criticize moral policies, because, the lack of any intervention indirectly acknowledged for an infernal massacre. This is a tragic *dilemma*: intervention can prevent human casualties (Saddam Hussein’s regime is responsible for thousands of innocent victims), but there will always be “collateral damages”. And it is a tough decision in choosing who is going to be saved, and at what price. In any case, *indecision* will also unavoidably result in huge human sacrifices.

Here we have cases of idealism, contrasted to a defection of idealism. We have also circumstances in which the very institutions called to intervene are powerless, although we have unilateral action on the part of powerful states, especially the US. In any case, it is not the principles that we should blame (with the risk of encouraging amoral conduct), but the hypocrisy that camouflages a *cynical realism* behind an *extreme idealism*. This is the right (and coherent) angle of a critique against American hegemony.

### **3. American Realism: the Imperial Conversion of Idealism**

With the end of the Cold War and of its inherent dualism, enormous possibilities opened in front of the United States. They became, at least at the political and military level, the main agent of a “mono-polar” world, which assumed its responsibilities through the doctrine of the “preemptive intervention”. And, as the unlimited power grew abusive, a new pole appeared, the unified Old Europe. And due to the fact that the Iraq intervention was consumed outside of an international consensus, the mono-polarity became *effective*. Principles of international law were broken, and the intervention was carried out with no U.N. mandate, which would have contributed to legitimize this political act. All these exposed the U.S.



to severe criticisms. The most extreme idealism was now converted into the crudest realism.

“The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. The popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman’s thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and absolute evil (...) Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states (...). The individual may say for himself: "Let justice be done, even if the world must perish", but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. (...) While the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of (that moral principle) get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival “. <sup>7</sup>

Realism insists that politics is governed by objective laws with deep roots in human nature. It can however amount to a darwinian naturalism that can justify anything as long as it is « natural ».

Noam Chomsky, a constant critic of the *establishment* spoke on this occasion about the “autism of the Empire”, deaf to the critics formulated by the Paris-Berlin axis, and by the majority of all other states.

Thus, the Iraq crisis opened by the American intervention dealt a fatal blow to the credibility of the American political idealism. This was obviously no mismanagement of idealism. It was pure realism, with clear “oil” substructure.

A new voice assumed the idealistic discourse: the Old Europe, the traditional ally of the United States.

“Despite the desperate efforts of ideologues to prove that circles are square, there is no serious doubt that the NATO bombings further undermine what remains of the fragile structure of international law. The U.S. made that clear in the debates that led to the NATO decision. The more closely one approached the conflicted region, the greater in general was the opposition to Washington's insistence on force, even within NATO (Greece and Italy). Again, that is not an unusual phenomenon: another recent example is U.S. / UK bombing of Iraq, undertaken in December 1998

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson, *Politics Among Nations*, 6th edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985, pp. 165-166.

with unusually brazen gestures of contempt for the Security Council—even the timing, coinciding with an emergency session to deal with the crisis”<sup>8</sup>.

The transformation of the NATO doctrine shows that this is not innocent happening. The Alliance is not anymore purely defensive. It will permit preventive wars.

“The defensive rockets are not really destined to the United States defense. Instead, they are an instrument of planetary domination, of the hegemony”<sup>9</sup>.

That this “idealism” tastes oil, this is powerful rejection. The autism of the Empire disappointed all western allies. But, we must underline, this is rather a *procedural* debate, not an *axiological* one: this is in no way a derogatory circumstance for (e.g.) Saddam Hussein or for Iran. Erroneous procedure does not completely change the moral judgment on the victims of intervention. Thus, we must criticize the autism of the Empire, without entirely losing sight of the exigencies of a minimal idealism residual in the American “millennial investment”.

#### 4. A Dialectical America

The United States are thus *alternatively* idealist and realist, moral and immoral. The United States understood that not a single moment of the history can be eternalized, but must be treated in purely dialectical fashion. The dialectical practice is justified by the very global aspiration of the United States. According to the reflections of G.W.F. Hegel, when you envisage into becoming the center of the history, that is a historical projection of the metaphysical *Totality*, you must be able to mediate and integrate the oppositions. This is how we can explain the ambivalence of U.S. global policy. It has preferential relations with China and with Russia; with India, and with Pakistan; with the Arab countries, and with Israel.

It is interesting, with regard to such a fundamentally alternative politics, to compare the cases of two outstanding intellectual figures, a left

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<sup>8</sup> Noam Chomsky, *World Order and its Rules. U.S. contempt for the framework of world order is extreme, The New Military Humanism*, Monroe: Common Courage, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2003, p. 150.

one and a right one, who both changed their political options in a suggesting way for our analysis. This may be called duplicitary policy, but our argument is that this permanent shift of plans also derives from an objective structure of any global governance. Pure idealism and pure realism are simply impracticable, no matter who the next global power will be. Politics will always involve ideal values, the only ones that can truly mobilize nations, apart from geopolitical interest. But politics will always be a matter of ballancing power between competing forces, and idealism has many dead heroes who attest for its weaknesses. I won't go that far as to actually *justify* local use of realist "interventions". I am only describing what I argue to be an *objective geopolitical structure* in any realistically conceivable world-system.

I will provide a small analysis of two prominent opposing political positions that were compelled to adjust their ideals to a dialectic movement of the reality itself. I argue that their theoretical evolution provide further support of my description of the objective dialectic of a global leader.

Francis Fukuyama, once known as a prominent neoconservative figure moved to the center, arguing in his last book that the preemptive use of military force should cease to be dominant in international relations<sup>10</sup>. Inversely, Paul Berman, a leading left-radical figure describes how the 68' left figures progressively moved towards the acceptance of military intervention in extreme circumstances<sup>11</sup>.

Here it is obvious how different ideologies are compelled to accept the structure of the reality and the requirements of a minimal idealism. In fact, when Fukuyama speaks of "*wilsonian realism*", this is clearly a Hegelian notion for which such *extreme opposition* as that between idealism and realism is to be reconsidered. It is precisely a reasonable idealism which is most realistic, and a reasonable realism which is much more likely to enforce some idealism. It is with such new conceptual tools that we can better understand the alternative and ambiguous politics of the United States, compelled by its very hegemonic position to alternate the

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<sup>10</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Berman, Paul, *Power and the Idealists: Or, the Passion of Joschka Fischer and Its Aftermath*, Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2005.

fundamental directions of its engagement. Apparent incoherence (or pure hypocrisy) testifies thus for an entirely different logic, which is dialectical in nature. We do not imply this could be a kind of synthesis between such doctrine as realism and idealism. On the contrary, we only argue that the political factors in decision will alternatively choose one action or the other, one legitimizing factor rather than another.

In order to *realize* the idea of a planetary totality, it must alternate the complementarities, to have its fingers infiltrated in both actors of an opposition (the history of American arms sales would tell us a lot about how the U.S. is supporting regimes with incompatible values). All this clearly suggest a dialectical logic, the only one capable of unifying a global society.

This is in no way specific to the American (informal) empire: any superpower that ever aspired to a historical *totalization* of the planet need understand that oppositions must be engaged with; otherwise they would tear you apart. There is however a special ability of the United State in dealing with global hegemony. They were, historically, the only nation born as a cosmopolitan nation (composed of multiple national colonizing agents). Global society is thus no *alien*, but somehow *native*, to the United States.

And that is why, so far, the United States understood that taking and enforcing global power requires a balancing of the oppositions and alternating opposing discourses and practices. In this respect, we can speak of a *dialectical America*.

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## HOPING BECOMES A PRESIDENT. RHETORIC AND POLITICAL VISION IN BARACK H. OBAMA

Gabriel C. Gherasim\*

### Abstract

*The thesis of the present paper is that of putting forward an interpretation of the presence of the rhetoric component and of highlighting the theoretical values on politics that Barack Obama's political activity, as well as his speeches and autobiographic work, reveal. The subjacent implication of this approach is that there is an indissoluble unity among these three elements with a public character and that, at the same time, they project a unitary vision on politics. The paper is not an analysis either of the political activity or the speeches that Obama has made, but it seeks to highlight the overtones that are characteristic to his particular rhetoric and to single out some explicit axiological presuppositions of his political vision. Our assumption is that, once this vision on politics has been clarified, one can then distinguish the explicit motivations of his past, current and future political activity.*

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, presidential elections, rethoric, discourse theory.

### 1. Explanatory preamble

From a procedural point of view, the present paper operates with a theoretical transposition of the visible elements that shape the overall political activity of the current American president. In other words, our assumption is that the public appearances of Barack Obama are susceptible to analysis, on the one hand, within a theoretical framework provided by discourse theory applied to the new president's public language, and this model of analysis shapes a certain type of rhetoric; on the other hand, the very same characteristics visible in Barack Obama's public appearances

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represent instances of his commitment towards certain values that form the theoretical frame of political science.

The next section of the present paper will reveal the elements of rhetoric by circumscribing certain distinct political facts of the American president to a model of language analysis having five specific steps. Subsequently, the political values that define Barack Obama's vision will also be highlighted by means of certain occurrences of his political activity.

Let us approach them in the above-mentioned order.

## **2. Is Obama's political vision reducible to a certain rhetoric?**

The presupposition of the existence of a subjacent rhetoric both in the public discourses and the autobiographical works of Barack Obama probably deserves special attention, as it is *precisely the understanding of his rhetoric that may represent an efficient means of access towards unlocking his political vision*. Certainly, a comprehensive analytical perspective on the Obama rhetoric specificity cannot be carried out here in an exhaustive manner for reasons of brevity; nevertheless, there are a few suggestions that hint to such a possibility for analysis.

First and foremost, the explicit initiation of a debate on Obama's rhetoric implies brief considerations on the nature of the language used. *We will then assume the fact that the rhetoric is discernible in a discursive practice; therefore, regardless of whether this practice is textual or oral, the rhetoric implies a set of principles regarding its relationship to language*. Discourse theory<sup>1</sup> takes into consideration a set of five principles of language analysis according to: i) its significance for the ones using it; ii) its distinctive capacity of being operational in different environments; iii) its spatial and temporal contextuality; iv) its specific materiality and occurrence; v) its dependence on the structure and system characteristics of the world. Assessing these fundamental characteristics of language in the context of Obama's public discourse, two biographers who have documented the political career of the American president in office remark a distinction that is not in the least bit contradictory between his liberal-progressive rhetoricism and the specific conservative oratorical means by which Obama publicly expresses

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Blommaert, *Discourse. A Critical Introduction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 13-16.

his political orientation<sup>2</sup>. In consequence, the question of language in Obama's case should be placed at the intersection between his political orientation and his discursive stylistics; his language appears as a communication undistorted by the limits and characteristics of political discourse, is adapted to the listener, it is formulated according to an original repertoire and it is appropriate for the political context of the world we live in.

i) Both his written biographical works and his public speeches point to that *distinctive characteristic of his oral style, namely the verbal interaction*; in this respect, the strong feature of his writing is virtually identical to the oral discursive practice: his main books<sup>3</sup> express in a direct, non-digressional and non-descriptive way facts, impressions and feelings rather than systematic reflections. The question of Obama's oral style would seemingly point to an analysis of how *the voice becomes the referential vehicle by which he succeeded in making himself understood*; it may not be by accident that the American president makes repeated reference to empathy as the means of communication par excellence.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, his verbal strategy combines the "positive face" with the voice characteristics, pointing to the fact that Obama should be seen by his audience through the eyes of "solidarity politeness";<sup>5</sup> Dupuis and Boeckelman translate Renkema's concept by the affirmation that Obama's political discourse is characterized by self-examination, a sense of fallibility, doubt and honesty.<sup>6</sup>

A comprehensive analysis of Obama's rhetoric cannot overlook his two autobiographical books; these, apart from the oratorical style and the characteristics of his public speeches, bring forth a new element in the analysis of his overall rhetoric, namely the narrative component associated

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<sup>2</sup> Melody Rose, "Series Foreword", in Martin Dupuis and Keith Boeckelman, *Barack Obama, the New Face of American Politics*, London: Praeger, 2008, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father. A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Three Rivers Press, 1995. Idem, *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Blommaert, *op. cit.*, p. 68. The voice becomes the vehicle of this capacity "to make oneself understood... a capacity to generate an uptake of one's words as close as possible to one's desired contextualization".

<sup>5</sup> Jan Renkema, *Introduction to Discourse Studies*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Dupuis, Boeckelman, *op. cit.*, p. 112.



to writing in general. *Beyond the informal and self-reflexive element, Obama's narrative meaningfully articulates the various moments of his life, simultaneously building his identity and ascribing significance to his deeds*; according to the narrative theorists, we are now living in "storytelling society" in which the role of narrative discourse transcends the subjective dimension of the recounting towards a broader understanding of life and social relations in general.<sup>7</sup> *Owing to its form, the narrative bestows coherence upon the deeds of the past against the background of present and future actions*: Obama primarily insists on the fact that his story would have only been possible within the American society, or, as Dupuis and Boeckelman put it, "an American narrative of rising above challenges".<sup>8</sup>

ii) *Obama's rhetoric implies the adoption of a centrist tone, although it occurs in various circumstances, under different ideological commitments*; in fact, these ideological commitments operate "in and through polycentric and stratified systems, in which different ideologies are at play at different levels and in different ways, but operating in the kind of layered simultaneity ... the various layers of ideology can be collapsed into one, synchronic layer, in which all kinds of differences can be found".<sup>9</sup> This political attitude is the mark of endorsing the common engagement towards promoting and revisiting the basic assumptions of the American creed; specifically, Obama's strategy in this respect was highly praised by the press.

iii) Although an uncanny appearance in the context of American and world politics, Barack Obama is undoubtedly the product of the contemporary American positivist culture and, certainly, an individual who is preoccupied with the issues of his time. In this respect, his rhetoric is profoundly marked by specific issues belonging to domestic and international politics that circumscribe the current world geopolitics; beyond the ideological nature of his discourse, there still remain a number of short, medium and long-term political projects that illustrate his explicit political commitment in relation to specific contextual issue. *The fact that Obama could not have won the recent elections by using anachronistic discursive*

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<sup>7</sup> Bethan Benwell, Elizabeth Stockoe, *Discourse and Identity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Dupuis, Boeckelman, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Blommaert, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

*practices or by reiterating political plans of action per se which are specific to distinct spatial relationships among various political actors is quite evident, so that it is not necessary that we should insist further on this question here. Nevertheless, the form and the content of Obama's rhetoric derive from the acceptance of certain specific spatial and temporal challenges of contemporary politics.*

iv) Especially after February 2007, when Obama publicly announced his intention to run for the White House, his rhetoric should be reconsidered in a more comprehensive manner; according to Fred Greenstein, the qualities of a president are focused around his "aptitude for public communication, organizational capacity, political skill, vision, intellectual ability and emotional intelligence".<sup>10</sup> This perspective on the ideal skills of a president goes beyond the view of social psychology on the contents and motivations of rhetoric which argues that *rhetoric is reducible to argumentative or persuasive communication*. An ample analysis of the post-modern rhetoric is not carried out here; in the present context we would like to emphasise two possible peculiarities of Obama's rhetoric, viewing it first as *defensive rhetoric*, namely a capacity to successfully withstand denigration and adversity (thus contrasting it with offensive rhetoric) and second as *reifying rhetoric*, namely as an effective possibility of objectifying the abstract discursive components or of materializing certain ideatic constructs (this materialization is to be understood in a broad sense).<sup>11</sup> The fact that Obama's defensive rhetoric was so effective, especially during the elections for the US Senate in 2004, is remarkable, while his capacity for reifying symbols bestowed upon Obama a significant political individuality. Summing up, Obama's rhetoric is correspondent to a vision which "transcends individualism and economic success, implying that each of us has an obligation to keep the dream alive for everyone".<sup>12</sup>

v) We can accept the fact that Obama's rhetoric covers the linguistic principles of public discourse; for example, Obama was able to address himself in specific ways both to African-American communities in the

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<sup>10</sup> Fred E. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton*, New York: Free Press, 2000, pp. 194-200.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality. Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*, London: Sage Publications, 1996, pp. 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> Dupuis, Boeckelman, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

suburbs of Chicago, providing sermon-like speeches in Black churches in Martin Luther King jr. style and to the academic elites. His repertoire was often constructed around such slogans as 'Yes, we can!' and 'Change we can believe in'. Dupuis observes that the language and the stylistic of Obama's speeches present the essential characteristics of honesty and adaptability.<sup>13</sup> These two features highlighted above clarify, in alternative terms, the possibility of a correspondence between Obama's rhetoric and those who are the external receptors of his political messages, in the sense that *honesty and adaptability are spontaneous features that enable the relationship between the discourse of the American president and the political world.*

### 3. A vision beyond politics?

Our previous observations on Obama's rhetoric should be completed with an overview of his political vision in order for us to have the full picture of a pattern of action and understanding that, in the opinion of some commentators, transgresses the framework of politics as such. This latter observation would seem justified if we take into consideration a few essential instances of public speeches given by the current American president; Obama himself has reiterated on numerous occasions the fact that political action situated within its traditional limits becomes insufficient when it comes to the full scope of issues confronting contemporary society. *Therefore, the characteristics of empathy, self-reliance and communication are essential for the understanding of Obama's optimistic rhetoric; his overall political vision is, if we were to anticipate, in agreement with his rhetoric so that his public position becomes coherent and integrating.*

In the present section, we shall try to discuss Obama's political vision, which is made of a series of characteristic overtones pointing to a profoundly *humanistic and highly moralized conception*, going thus beyond the current understanding of the various means of political action. *In our vision, the return to moralized politics, the focus on emancipation, education, justice and diversity do not necessarily lead to an idealist vision of politics beyond any pragmatic component that it might have.* At the beginning of his political career, Obama's orientation was a highly pragmatic one in the sense that pragmatic politics was responsible, in his view, for the conflict between the various perspectives on common goods and values, thus raising the issue

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

of the degree of certainty that each alternative conflicting vision might have: in Obama's view, a sensitive issue in contemporary politics is the one of deciding on the verisimilitude of a problematic political reality under the circumstances in which there are diverging and conflicting visions on the same issue.<sup>14</sup>

Obama's essentially pragmatic debut in politics is probably also connected to the expectations of the public in relation to a politician's appropriate behavior. In effect, Dupuis and Boeckelman notice the fact that, although the political participation of the citizens of the state of Illinois was strong in relation to issues having a pragmatic and professional character and the problems of the various communities in this region had a marked regional characteristic, there was a peculiar tendency of the voters to give credit to certain political figures with an idealist and liberal program, such as Paul Douglas (1949-1967) or Paul Simon (1985-1997).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the voters in the state of Illinois, despite manifesting specific political expectations, were always responsive to ideals and principles susceptible of generating an appropriate political behavior; moreover, the statistics show that the citizens of Illinois have tended to favor the Democrat candidates over the Republican ones for the past fifty years.

*The beginnings of Obama's political career interplay the characteristic regional problems with idealist and humanist public standings:* for instance, in 2004, during the US Senate elections, Obama received strong support from the Afro-American clergy especially due to his pacifist views (the 2002 and 2003 positions against the war in Iraq); furthermore, he also counted on the political support of the liberal suburban whites, trying to attract the moderate whites, the public service unions and the environmental organizations on his side.<sup>16</sup> During the presidential elections, Obama's integrating perspective and the adaptability of his political message resulted in an unprecedented mobilization of the youth: the electoral statistics in the state of Iowa are illustrative in this respect, where the voting turnout of the young people under 25 reached record numbers. Moreover, Carolyn Kennedy, the daughter of the former president John F.

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<sup>14</sup> Dupuis, Boeckelman, op. cit., p. 4 and Bob Sexter and John McCormick, "Portrait of a Pragmatist" in *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

Kennedy, declared that her belief according to which Obama should be the next president was reinforced by her children, which gave her the sense of possibility of this reality to happen.<sup>17</sup>

The voters were exposed to Obama's personal charisma even back then, being influenced by his public appearance; one has recently spoken about his capacity to electrify his audience through his speeches. Following a televised debate that Obama took part in October 2003, the *Chicago Sun-Times* published a piece in which it drew attention to his appearance in terms of presence and command.<sup>18</sup> In the publications that showed support for Obama during 2002-2004 (*Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *State Journal-Register*), the praises addressed to the politician were often bordering on adulation, promoting the image of a providential hero: in 2004, David Mendell wrote an article about Obama in the *Chicago Tribune* where he was described in "near Messianic" terms.<sup>19</sup>

However, Obama's political vision is not reducible to the identity built by the mass media; the latter is probably the result of his public appearances and performance. Beyond these, *what remains is an idealist-liberal vision on politics whose defining features are worth mentioning*. Even his belonging to the African-American minority does not define his political orientation; for some communities, he was not black enough while for others his identity as a colored man was too conspicuous. At any rate, the defining note of his public speeches is that he is among the few black people who does not insist upon political protest, Obama's performance being primarily constructive and progressive. The fundamental observation that has been made with regard to Obama's political options is related to the fact he has always put forward a *post-racial ideology*, thus winning an important base of support from the white communities in comparison to his black predecessors. In this respect, he has insisted that the racial element is obsolete within contemporary society. Obama has equally highlighted that the type of political thinking emerging from contemporary realities should be an essentially *post-partisan* one.

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<sup>17</sup> Joann F. Price, *Barack Obama. A Biography*, London: Greenwood Press, 2008, p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Neal, "Each Did a Good Job of Outlining Their Legislative Agenda" in *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 17, 2003, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> David Mendell, "Political Phenomenon Obama Vaults into National Spotlight" in *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 2004, p. 1.

Connecting the two components of his political thinking, one can discern his option in favor of the affirmation of commonalities to the detriment of differences<sup>20</sup>: the problems confronting today's man are not so much those of underlying a specific identity but problems derived from man's understanding as a "zoon politikon" in Aristotle's sense. Obama's popularity is perhaps derived from *his choice to dissolve traditional dichotomies*; that is why, in the voters' eyes, he is less perceived as a politician proper and more as a leader.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in 2005, Obama was ranked the most popular senator in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

The commentators of his public performance have emphasized on what could be deemed the element of fairness: for instance, in 2004, during the elections for the US Senate, Obama chose not to insist on the delicate personal issues confronting his main contenders (the scandal surrounding Hull's divorce and Hynes's drug abuse); when confronted with the Republican Jack Ryan, Obama highlighted the anti-Bush policies rather than the sex scandal leading to the failure of his opponent's marriage. A *strong sense of fairness* often pervaded his speeches: for example, Obama criticized the propagandistic side of political advertising, arguing that the practice of advertising as such represents a serious breach of civility; he also denounced the negative role that money plays in political campaigns and in politics in general, thus proving his moral integrity.

His emergence as a national political figure took place on July 28, 2004, on the occasion of the Democratic National Convention, *his essentially progressive speech focusing on issues such as education, social justice and political engagement*. Although a supporter of neo-liberalism, Obama's doctrinary overtones are paradoxically less liberal: Dupuis and Boeckelman observe that the primary political values he mentions in his speeches are those of *community and equality*. Obama's communitarian ideals are not only a response to the individualistic policies of the former Bush administration,<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his Inaugural Speech, delivered on January, 20, 2009, he claimed that "On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord".

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "The Great Black Hope" in *Washington Monthly*, November 2004, pp. 30-36.

<sup>22</sup> Scott Fornek, "Obama Is No. 1 Most Popular Senator" in *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 17, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Former president G. W. Bush put forward the markedly individualistic concept of "ownership society", to which Obama responded with a communitarian concept of politics.

but they also include a constructive reality emphasizing the concept of citizenship, the role of the church, of religious life and of civic responsibility. His egalitarian vision of politics is focused upon such ideas as “healthcare for all”, “extended public education”, “voters’ rights” and “social justice”. The two fundamental components that form the axis of his political vision (community and equality) are essential parts of his progressive program presented in August 2006 on the occasion of his visit to Africa. The agenda of the visit included the end of tribal divisions, women’s rights, education, the end of political corruption, efficient government services and scientific healthcare.<sup>24</sup> *One may argue that Obama’s political vision is situated at the intersection of his assuming of liberal doctrine and his emancipating and progressive conception; in an adequate way, Nathaniel Zimmer qualified his political option as being “thoughtful progressive”.*<sup>25</sup> Obama’s doctrinary progressivism appears as defining for his foreign policy options as well: one would expect him to constructively rethink the question of the relations with Russia and China and to reach non-belligerent solutions to the Iraq problem. For this latter issue, Obama has always pleaded in favor of soft power to the detriment of military action.

Criticism has certainly emerged with regard to Obama’s political personality; with the exception of the more or less favorable press that the current American president has received, some radical voices (David Icke, Webster Griffin Tarpley) have denounced his behavior as typically propagandistic and phony. According to Tarpley, the construction of Obama’s identity is nothing but “messianic and utopian platitudes” and “the personality, cult, the narcissism, the megalomania, the fake polling, the media and intelligence agency manipulation” are the real coordinates of his political rise.<sup>26</sup> In Tarpley’s view, three types of critiques can be brought against the construction of Obama’s political identity: the first of them criticizes the vision of liberal communities that build up Obama’s image as a savior; the second is a neo-conservative critique according to which Obama is accused of being a communist precisely because of the essential

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<sup>24</sup> Dupuis, Boeckelman, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> Nathaniel Zimmer, “Election 2004: Obama Catching Breaks, Avoiding Liberal Label” in *Naperville Sun*, October 6, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Webster Griffin Tarpley, *Obama. The Postmodern Coup*, California: Progressive Press, 2008, p. 4.

characteristics of his political vision mentioned above while the third bears the mark of the centre-left wing of the Democrat Party, blaming Obama of partisanship in favor of specific political interests.<sup>27</sup>

*The present study did not attempt a reconstruction of Obama's political identity; rather, it has tried to highlight those features of the public behavior by means of which Barack Obama has defined his political objectives within a specific theoretical and ideatic framework.* Naturally, one would expect his political vision thus circumscribed to yield results. Beyond his rhetoric and political options, the effective results of his administration will be the ones to confirm or disprove the electoral overtones. At any rate, Obama's political rise has been marked by hope; those who have hoped with him, those who have foreseen that the accomplishment of his political vision is possible are now anticipating his programs to take shape according to their hopes. Whether these hopes shall be fulfilled in the not so distant future remains to be seen.

#### **4. Epilogue. Possible answers to the questions in the titles of the previous two sections.**

In the beginning of his book on *Rhetoric*, Aristotle separates the art of persuasion as an object of study of rhetoric from the science of syllogism which pertains to the study of dialectics. Starting from this Aristotelian conception, we might very well wonder who else would have a better need to master this art but the politician, in the professionalizing sense of the word? Obama has, perhaps more convincing than any of his White House predecessors, made substantial use of the indisputable advantages of this craft: I have heard someone mention that, in comparison to the former president Bush, Obama possesses the immediately visible superiority of an educated man with a very persuasive language, which is evocative of that way in which the new American president has conceived his public discourses; this being the case, a more detailed study of the role of rhetoric in Obama's political accession would probably be an interesting undertaking. *As far as I am concerned, I consider that the strongest impact that the current American president has had on the general public has been a psychological one: in a profoundly ecumenical sense, his indisputable connection*

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5-7.



*with the masses is primarily explainable as a means of valorizing the resources of discursive language so that a real communion, undistorted and direct with all the categories of voters could be attained.* Orally, his public speeches have played a decisive role in the precise shaping of his political vision together with the impact of his personality or with the revival of the average American's trust in the traditional values that structure the content of the American creed. Textually, his autobiographical books bear witness to his manifest intention to elicit sympathy, to induce affective communions or to create affinities: the direct style, the impression of re-enacting past events or the avoidance of a markedly reflexive narrative through pretentious language are all carefully orchestrated in his books so that they could be persuasive. All these considerations, together with the analytic model developed in the first section of the present paper represent certain premises for elucidating an explicit rhetoric which has probably been assumed by Barack Obama. It goes without saying that all these observations do not exhaustively explain the matter at hand.

As far as his overall political vision is concerned, both the new president's rhetoric and his political activity per se seem to point out to an attempt to overcome a current understanding of politics in general. His public actions highlight a preoccupation for transcending politics in the sense that a true political commitment nowadays can no longer be assumed in the ideological terms of a founding antagonism that defines its essence, as Carl Schmitt, for example, was inclined to believe. By contrast, Obama's political vision departs from the premise of the integrating, consensual and converging features of politics; in other words, the responsible political decision can no longer be founded upon the segregation of conceptions that fuel strong dichotomies or upon promoting preferential interests. Obama seems to have articulated his political vision through a set of theoretical values that have significantly molded the political mentality of the Americans, being aware of the fact that those options that have withstood the test of time are susceptible of founding a solid political project, of gathering real support and to enable a general consensus. *The current understanding of politics would thus be possible as a reformation and reconsideration of politics itself or as thinking against politics as such: this assumption would turn any coherent political vision into a feasible model of a new political rationality.*

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## SHIFTS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY ON THE EVE OF THE NEW PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION

BOGDAN LUCIAN\*

### Abstract

*The recently-inaugurated U.S. President was, undoubtedly, elected on a ticket of change. We shall try, in the following, investigate the doctrinaire sources standing at the groundwork of Barack Obama's foreign policy design and attempt a brief analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of his approach towards international relations, with the main focus on the shifts the newly-inaugurated Administration has to operate on the nation's foreign policy agenda.*

**Keywords:** *foreign policy, Barack Obama, U.S., multilateralism, dialogue, shifts, geopolitics*

### Introduction

Undoubtedly, the U.S. political scene of 2008 was marked by a long and tortuous electoral race, in which a series of unexpected and, hence, spectacular turns have occurred and which led to a by no means less spectacular outcome, victory being claimed by a candidate who, no more than half a year before the November 4<sup>th</sup> elections, would not have been credited with significantly high chances and who, back in 2007, was seen as an ambitious, highly gifted young politician, but still lacking in the field of leadership<sup>1</sup>.

However, given the fact that the campaign went on longer than usual – for, George W. Bush being on the second term, the Republicans had to pick up a sufficiently prominent candidate to be able to campaign even without the notoriety provided by incumbency, which, this time, given his

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, it is revealing to look back at “Barack Obama. The campaign's brightest star”, in *The Economist* (June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007), London: The Economist Group, which came forth with the rhetorical question “But can the charismatic youngster lead?”

severe drop in popularity, would not have proven as an advantage for his designated successor - chance would prove on Barack Hussein Obama's side, the latter being thus able to prove his worthiness and emerge as a noteworthy contender.

Moreover, given the fact that the 2008 campaign was one which was dominated, to what could be deemed as an unprecedented extent<sup>2</sup>, by foreign policy issues, a domain in which the incumbent Republican administration had fared rather poorly in the eyes of most constituents, the Democrats' campaign, built around the ideas of bringing forth change not only on domestic issues<sup>3</sup>, but, even more importantly, consisting in offering a new course for the superpower's foreign policy.

One should not lose sight of the fact that the wars waged by the Bush Administration, even though conducted for more benign purposes than those denounced by pacifists and the New Left, proved significantly unpopular. And, while at first, the Administration had ridden on a wave of sympathy spurred by the 9/11 tragedy, being thus able to carry out its undertakings virtually unchecked, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq proved to be rather inescapable quagmires than the places where the perpetrators of the murderous acts of 9/11 could be found and deferred to justice, things would irremediably deteriorate in the public's eyes, as well.

Thus, by 2005, the level of worry regarding the negative perception the world might have upon the United States' conduct in the Muslim world

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<sup>2</sup> Or, at least, to an unprecedented extent during the latest decades, for, if we take into account the years of World War II, F.D.R. was facing a stiff opposition from behalf of the G.O.P. precisely on issues regarding foreign policy. However, unlike in 2008, back in 1940, the U.S. was not yet entangled in war and the public cast their ballot in favor of Roosevelt, in spite of being portrayed by his Republican challenger, Wendell Willkie and, even more vituperatively, by isolationist and peace activist Charles Lindbergh as a would-be warmonger. Vid. MacGregor Burns, James, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1984), San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., pp. 431-455

<sup>3</sup> Amongst which one may mention the reformation of the political class, a new approach to social issues, centered on the idea of equal opportunity and the advancement of racial minorities, in order for them to be able to fully express their potential. For details, vid. Obama, Barack, *Îndrăzneala de a spera. Gânduri despre realizarea visului american* (2008), București: RAO, pp. 109 sqq. and pp. 235 sqq.

reached 75%<sup>4</sup>, while, a couple of years later, “the public's disenchantment [was] leading to increased skepticism about the use of military force” in the Middle East and was, more or less metaphorically speaking, shouting “enough already”<sup>5</sup>.

Under these circumstances, one should not be surprised that Republican Senator John McCain’s presidential campaign, which, centered on the idea of “courageous service” to the fatherland, endorsed the pursuit of nothing short of victory in the war against terror, and asking for an increase of the effectiveness of deployed troops<sup>6</sup>, would end up by being the second in the preferences of the public, as compared to the policies supported by Barack Obama, who favored a wise, tactical withdrawal from the theatres of operation of the Middle East.

Thus, while, at a first glance, Obama’s rhetoric may have appeared as meant for courting inveterate pacifists – for he had pleaded, as early as September, 2007, for the immediate commencement of the removal of combat troops, which he deemed as “[T]he best way to protect our security and to pressure Iraq’s leaders to resolve their civil war”<sup>7</sup>, in fact, a more attentive look at his campaign-time assertions will give us the image of a cautious politician, supporting a gradual withdrawal – for it was only its commencement that had to be immediate, not its actual completion.

Moreover, given the financial turmoil having gripped the country during the early fall of 2008, and the association in the public’s eyes of John McCain – who had always admitted he was not an expert in the economy<sup>8</sup> - with the economical unaccomplishments of President Bush, Barack Obama’s victory became certitude.

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<sup>4</sup> Arumi, Ana Maria, Bittle, Scott, Farkas, Steve, Johnson, Jean, “Public Agenda Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index (August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005)”, in *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 2005), New York: Council on Foreign Relations

<sup>5</sup> Yankelovich, Daniel, “Public to Bush: Enough Already (April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2007)”, in *Foreign Affairs* (March/April, 2007), New York: Council on Foreign Relations

<sup>6</sup> Which constituted, in the Senator’s view, the only successful path to victory and which, he argued, he had supported since as early as 2003. Cf. “The McCain Surge”, in *John McCain for President* (February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008), [www.johnmccain.com](http://www.johnmccain.com)

<sup>7</sup> Lott, Joshua, “Obama Offers Most Extensive Plan Yet for Winding Down War”, in *The New York Times* (September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007), New York: NY Times Co.

<sup>8</sup> Vid. John McCain, apud Mooney, Mark, “McCain Dogged by Economy Comment”, in *ABC News* (July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008), <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Vote2008/story?id=5292190&page=1>

Highly sympathized by his constituents – Obama would hold a “stratospheric”<sup>9</sup> 83% approval rating at his inauguration, figure that had not been matched since Franklin D. Roosevelt – and, at the same time, appreciated by the public worldwide, as shows the Global Electoral College poll conducted by *The Economist*, in which he claimed some 44,000 of the 52,000 votes cast, with a majority of 90% or more in 56 countries<sup>10</sup>, the newly-elected president is, therefore, the man in whom have been vested the highest hopes of (literally speaking) billions of people around the world.

Under these circumstances, while his popularity constitutes an essential asset, especially given the fact he can pursue his projects with a relatively high ease and without severe mediatic harassment, at least for the first months, one should not overlook the fact that, the very same fact, his staggering level of sympathy, can easily backfire in the event of failure. And, as John Winthrop had once put it, when the eyes of the world are upon you, you *must* act in an exemplary manner, as there is no room for error.

Let us, thus, in the following, take a look at several of the opportunities and threats faced by the new American presidential administration in the devisal of its foreign policy in the post-inaugural period. In this respect, we must mention the allegations from behalf of former supporters, who criticized him for not sticking to what they perceived as his campaign agenda: a widespread promotion of pacifism, corroborated with a public condemnation of all the undertakings of the Bush Administration and of the interventionist line favored by the “neocons”.

Thus, his campaign motto even got to be paraphrased in an ironic form, as “continuity we can believe in”<sup>11</sup>, meaning that what the newly-elected President would promote as his foreign policy line was utterly

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<sup>9</sup> Gardner, David, “After less than a week in office, Barack Obama's approval rating plunges 15 points” (January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009), in *The Daily Mail Online*, London: Associated Newspapers Ltd., <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1127427/After-week-office-Barack-Obamas-approval-rating-plunges-shocking-15-points.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Global Electoral College: Obama sweeps the board”, in *The Economist* (October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008), London: The Economist Group

<sup>11</sup> Kristol, William, “Continuity We Can Believe In”, in *The New York Times*, (January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009), New York: NY Times Co.

different from what he had stated during the electoral campaign: not only would he forgo, or, at least, postpone and mitigate the implementing of the radical shifts he had championed for – i.e. a swift withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, closing down the terrorist detention facilities and reversing the hard line against the countries on the Axis of Evil - but would also appoint for serving in the Administration a far more conservative team than previously expected.

It is relevant, in this respect, that not only did he commission many high-ranking officials from the Clinton Administration, but he appointed as Secretary of State none other than former First Lady Hillary Clinton, his former contender from the primary elections and as Secretary of Defense he chose to maintain Robert Michael Gates, a Republican who had held the same tenure since 2006.

While this latter measure, a premiere in itself, was intended to express “a show of bipartisan continuity in a time of war”<sup>12</sup> and, thus, to create the necessary environment for ending the war against terror in an honorable manner – or, even better, to win it - it also represents, to a certain extent, a deception of his constituents’ whims. For, let us not forget, amongst his constituents, some of the most active groups were both pacifists<sup>13</sup> (as people opposing foreign wars) and (utopian) leftists (who oppose violence in any form and, therefore, are also for harsher gun controls in the domestic environment).

Consequently, undertaking a bolder line on the international arena, or appointing for key tenures in the administration people notorious for their, if not hawkish, at least utterly non-pacifistic record, is certain to disappoint those who had voted in the hope the new administration’s plea for change would also include taking into account their desires. Nevertheless, as long as Obama’s foreign policy decisions prove the right ones, even his most pacifist supporters have nothing to worry about.

In this respect, one must not lose sight of the framework then-Senator Obama had devised back in the summer of 2007, when writing for

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<sup>12</sup> Baker, Peter, Shanker, Thom, “Obama Plans to Retain Gates at Defense Department”, in *The New York Times*, (November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008), New York: NY Times Co.

<sup>13</sup> Vid. “Obama Vows to Disarm America”, in *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site\\_053008/content/01125107.guest.html](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_053008/content/01125107.guest.html) , May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008



the *Foreign Affairs* magazine<sup>14</sup>: he pleaded for “bring[ing] the war to a responsible end”, not for a hasty withdrawal, arguing at the same time for the U.S. to “confront new threats and capitalize on new opportunities” on the international arena, and by no means for a withdrawal into isolationism, which, tempting as it may sound at a first glance, would be, in Obama’s own words, “a mistake”.

We may compare nowadays’ situation in Iraq with the one President Clinton had to face in the aftermath of the October, 1993 debacle in Somalia: while the public opinion and an increasing number of congressmen was voicing ever louder for a withdrawal of all the American forces deployed on the field of operations, he would go for a gradual and well-planned withdrawal instead, in order, on one hand, not to endanger the lives of those servicemen still remaining on the field, and, on the other, not to show signs of weakness which might embolden the enemies of the U.S.A. – which would have equaled, in Clinton’s words, with declaring “open season for Americans everywhere”<sup>15</sup>.

Moreover, we also have to remark that this approach is perfectly consistent with the view Barack Obama had expressed in his autobiographical book, *The Audacity of Hope*. There, he expressed his endorsement for the unilateralist, hard line of interventionism of President Bush, arguing that “if we have to act alone, then the American people is ready to pay any price and bear any burden in order to defend our country”, the anti-terrorist campaign led by the Republican Administration being “completely justified”<sup>16</sup>.

Nevertheless, he also expressed concern at the interrogation techniques used to obtain information from the prisoners taken in the “long war against terror” (to be using its neoconservative-inspired denomination), severely criticizing interrogation techniques that were overtly offensive to practitioners of the Muslim faith.

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<sup>14</sup> Obama, Barack, “Renewing American Leadership”, in *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 2007), New York: Council on Foreign Relations

<sup>15</sup> Clinton, William J., quoted in Broder, John M. „Clinton Orders 5,300 Troops to Somalia; Vows End in 6 Months”, in *The Los Angeles Times*, [www-tech.mit.edu/V113/N48/somalia.48w.html](http://www-tech.mit.edu/V113/N48/somalia.48w.html), October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1993

<sup>16</sup> Obama, B., *op. cit.*, p. 317

Thus, he argued, the Guantanamo guards' desecration of the Coran, meant to erode the psychological resistance of the detainees and, thus, force them into submission, not only was by no means an effective measure of coercing the Muslim suspects, but, on the contrary, just strengthened their resolve, making them believe they would thus become religious martyrs.

And not only was this inquiry practice ineffective, but it also constituted a severe drawback for the Administration, eroding its international legitimacy – for how could a country champion overseas intervention in the name of defending democracy and liberty<sup>17</sup> blatantly trample upon those very principles it claimed it stood for? Consequently, argued Senator Obama, it must have been highly embarrassing for the Bush Administration - and severely damaging for its credibility - to present a public denial of compromising facts that had already become common knowledge<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, while, indeed, pleading for maintaining a responsible level of firmness in dealing with international threats, Barack Obama would also make his stand for the closest possible ending of the Middle Eastern wars and of all their associated undertakings inconsistent with the respecting of human rights and international law, all these policies being directed at attaining a double purpose: creating the appropriate framework for the appeasement of moderate factions within the Islamic world – which may, otherwise, be prodded to take the terrorists' side – and restoring the international legitimacy of the U.S., which had been severely eroded by the practices of the Bush Administration.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For, let us remember, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush made extensive use of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, stating his country had to act in consistence with her position of the "brightest beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world", defending in a resolute manner the noble causes his nation stood for, especially since the terror strikes had not been solely intended at destroying life and property, but were targeting the very way of life of the American people. Or, in more resounding a manner, "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended" – vid. McCaleb, Ian Christopher, "Bush: U.S. feels 'quiet, unyielding anger'", in CNN - U.S. Edition (September 12<sup>th</sup>) 2001 <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/white.house/>

<sup>18</sup> Obama, B., *op. cit.*, p. 135

<sup>19</sup> For, as we have seen, in spite of him being against the Iraqi war, by no means should Obama be perceived as an inveterate pacifist. Vid. also Gerson, Michael, "The Irony of Obama", in *Real Clear Politics* (October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2008), [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/10/the\\_irony\\_of\\_obama.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/10/the_irony_of_obama.html)

While, apparently, these two lines of action – gradually withdrawing from the main fields of operation and shunning the mischievous practices of the past Administration, while, at the same time, pleading for resolve and a renewal of global American leadership, an element probably even more important than firepower in achieving victory in the war against terror – are divergent ones and may be perceived as a sign of political duplicity, in fact they prove the consistency of thought of the newly-elected president.

Thus, even though he was against a war that, according to his own opinion, should not have been commenced in the first place, by no means would Barack Obama allow all the accumulated results shatter to pieces, just in order to see the pacifists pleased; moreover, contrary to what had been the initial public impression, but, as we have seen, consistent to the view expressed in his *Foreign Affairs* essay, under the Obama presidency, the U.S. is not meant to withdraw onto itself, but, instead, is “ready to lead once more”<sup>20</sup>.

This latter expression does not only mean that the U.S. intends to maintain and increase its world power status, but, even more importantly, that all the elements having caused an undermining of its leadership’s legitimacy are to be corrected, so that the “Great Nation” (to be using an appellative dating back to the 1830’s) may retake its place at the helm of the democratic world and to serve as beacon for all the oppressed, yet freedom-loving peoples of the globe.

Basically, Obama is interested in his country’s consolidating of what had been termed as “soft power”<sup>21</sup>, namely securing global leadership not inasmuch by the force of the nation’s arsenal, as by the strength of example, stemming from the values and principles it stands for and from its irreproachable conduct on the international arena. Should the U.S. be able to fulfill these goals, her global leadership could go virtually unchallengeable.

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<sup>20</sup> To be quoting an expression from Obama’s inaugural speech – as reproduced in *The Washington Monthly* (January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009),

[http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2009\\_01/016524.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2009_01/016524.php) ,

<sup>21</sup> Term coined by Joseph S Nye, Jr., in his book, *The Paradox of American Power. Why America Must Join the World in Order to Lead It* (2001), Oxford: Oxford University Press

However, in order for these rather idealistic purposes to be achieved, several key, punctual issues have to be dealt first with swiftness, in order for the most pressing problems of the contemporary international arena be offered a viable solution. Let us, in the following, provide the reader with a brief evocation of the problems existing in several hot spots around the globe and of the (potential) solutions envisioned by the Obama team for each of them, as well as with a brief account of their foreseeable strengths and weaknesses.

Thus, the first and foremost opportunity Barack Obama has at the outset of his term consists in the very fact that he is the successor of a highly unpopular President, who has been widely criticized throughout his both terms, especially for the unaccomplishments of his foreign policy which have, contrary to what they had been intended to, led to the erosion of America's global leadership.

But, to be using Samuel Johnson's metaphor, the unilateral undertakings of President Bush, though benignly intended, were nothing more than bricks paving the road to hell. And, even though militarily speaking, the interventions carried out in the Middle East proved successful, the Taliban being routed out of Kabul and Saddam Hussein being delivered to an Iraqi court, which sentenced him to hanging for genocide, they also represented nails in the coffin of G.W. Bush's international approval rating and, implicitly, led to a swift erosion of his nation's global standing.

Therefore, after spending so long a time of decline for the United States' soft power, Obama's inauguration does undoubtedly constitute an excellent opportunity for a relaunch of the country's international standing. Or, in the words of Serge Halimi, he has the opportunity to "rehabilitate the brand America"<sup>22</sup>, in order for the U.S. to reclaim its position as harbinger of freedom, and, conversely, to shed the image of "dictatress of the world"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Halimi, Serge, "Barack Obama", in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August, 2008), <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2008/08/HALIMI/16160>

<sup>23</sup> To be using the expression coined by President John Quincy Adams, one of the first who feared that an expansion of the pursuit of overseas interests may lead to an erosion both of the domestic democratic mechanism and of the country's worldwide perception as a benevolent ascending power

it had, unfortunately, embraced lately, and, by undertaking the aforementioned steps, to renew America's global leadership.

Or, to be using the words given utterance by Barack Obama in his inaugural address, the U.S. must prove before the world its capability "to lead once more"<sup>24</sup>. Note that this means not only setting out an example for everybody else to follow, or maintaining the nation's status as a military superpower, but also regaining primacy in practically all the domains of every day's life that have been neglected lately, including the economy, hi-tech, health care and education. For it is only then that literally everybody would appreciate the U.S. as developed at its fullest potential.

However, regarding his approach towards foreign policy, it is noteworthy that Barack Obama, a staunch adept of reaching out to all decisional entities on the political "home front", in order to act on bases of bipartisan consensus, has admitted not having devised a brand-new guiding line for the conduct of foreign affairs, but relying on the models of George Bush, Sr., John F. Kennedy, and, "to a certain extent", Ronald Reagan<sup>25</sup>.

This way, taking as inspiring models figures from both sides of the political checkerboard, Obama succeeds both in the aforementioned goal of rallying bipartisan consensus, but also in maintaining support from behalf not only of his backers and grass-roots constituents from the times of the electoral race (of whom he may, actually, alienate the most inveterate anti-G.O.P. ones, by showing his availability of reaching out to the former adversary), but to his former opponents, as well, which we could deem as an essential element for having the so much needed support from behalf of all political forces for implementing his audacious policies.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to remark that Barack Obama, though, for political reasons, has not infrequently criticized the policies of George W. Bush, does not divert inasmuch as expected from his line of unilateralism, but rather adopts a milder form, that of "assertive

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<sup>24</sup> A full transcript of his address is available at "President Barack Obama Delivers Inaugural Address at US Capitol in Washington, D.C." (January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009), in *ABC News*, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Inauguration/Story?id=6689022&page=1>

<sup>25</sup> Vid. "Les présidents changent, l'empire américain demeure", in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September, 2008), <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2008/09/MAYER/16251>

multilateralism", coined by Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright<sup>26</sup>.

Basically, consultations with more or less like-minded allies are to take place before adopting any defined course of action, and, as stated by N.A.T.O. procedures, the use of force is always to be preceded by dialogue and, even while interventions are carried out, they are to be fully backed by the diplomatic establishment, whose involvement will tackle not only the maintaining of international support, but also, even more importantly, the imposition of the envisioned decisions towards the targeted party in a way that force be necessary to no more than the minimum extent.

Thus, we could say that the "force backed by diplomacy" approach – which constitutes the third installment in the escalation of allied operations against a commonly-targeted threat<sup>27</sup> - constitutes the best way of administering coercions on the international arena, thus achieving the envisioned objectives while preserving legitimacy and containing the inherent destructions to a relatively bearable level.

### Conclusion

Not only does Barack Obama try to better reach to his nation's allies, but he also shows an unprecedented degree of openness towards his country's former foes. In this respect, Barack Obama's origins – his father, a Kenyan who had come to study in the U.S., was a Sunni Muslim - constitute an extremely valuable asset, not infrequent being the cases when, traveling abroad – from Bosnia to Iraq - he was asked whether he prays five times a day, in accordance to the Islamic tradition<sup>28</sup>, thus being able to reach out to people from regions in which anti-Americanism had become increasingly common a practice during G.W. Bush's tenure.

And not only does he communicate easier to believers of Muslim faith, but he is also seen in an extremely favorable light from behalf of a broad range of leaders from the Muslim world, who are confident that

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<sup>26</sup> Walt, Stephen M., "Two cheers for Clinton's foreign policy", in *Foreign Affairs* (March/April, 2000), New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>27</sup> For details, vid. Clarke, Wesley C.,

<sup>28</sup> Bilefsky, Dan, "Islamic Revival Tests Bosnia's Secular Cast" in *The New York Times*, (December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008), New York: NY Times Co.

engaging dialogue with someone sharing their culture<sup>29</sup> would be easier than dealing with the neoconservatives having dominated the past Administration.

In this respect, we may appreciate that Obama's inauguration represents an excellent moment of opportunity, which the U.S. can capitalize by restoring and/or strengthening ties with the peoples of the Muslim world. Besides, it is noteworthy that he did capitalize on his assets in an excellent manner: he gave his first formal television interview as President to the Dubai-based TV station Al-Arabiya<sup>30</sup>, thus showing Muslims worldwide that he is, basically, their friend and he is willing to coax his country on the path towards mutual dialogue and reconciliation.

Were this latter aspect to materialize itself beyond the level of high expectations, it would certainly represent a step forward from the deadlock of the latter years, which have been characterized by permanent frictions, given the fact the U.S. was relying solely on its military might, but was incapable of fructifying its edge, precisely because of the religious and ideological rift: while the neoconservative ideologists responsible for devising President Bush's foreign policy agenda were determined to promote democracy and human rights into the Middle East, it was their very ideology that set them on a conflictive path not only with radical Islamists, but, unfortunately, not infrequently with moderate Muslims, as well.

Nevertheless, we may also appreciate that, Obama's high popularity in the Middle East, which, implicitly, determines a high level of expectations he will have to live up to, has the potential to turn into his nemesis, in the event he does not fulfill them. And it usually happens that when expectations are great, any slight unfulfilment may cause severe disappointment and a swift crumbling of the previously high level of confidence.

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<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that, until the age of 24, Barack Obama had been a non-practitioner Muslim, in order, afterwards, to become a highly open-minded Christian, showing respect and deference towards all religious denominations – cf. "Barack Obama", in *Personalități care au marcat istoria lumii* (2008), Bucharest: Foreign Policy Romania and The Biography Channel

<sup>30</sup> "Obama reaches out to Muslim world on TV" (January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009), in *MSNBC World News / Mideast & N. Africa*, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28869185/>

It will take great political and diplomatic skills in order to tackle all the thorny issues arising in the conduct of a superpower's foreign policy, especially when it is entangled in two difficult wars, in a complex area as nowadays' Middle East is. And while the latter remains the hottest spot on the map, the Obama team will also have to face challenges on other parts of the great checkerboard of the world. But, to remain in the paradigm set out by the works of Zbigniew Brzezinski, we may say the air of novelty brought forth by Obama's inauguration constitutes an essential prerequisite for the U.S. to show the world it is poised for leadership, and not domination.





## BOOK REVIEW

**Barack Obama**, *Îndrăzneala de a spera. Gânduri despre realizarea visului american*, RAO, București, 2009, original version: *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Crown Publishers, New York, 2006

**Ovidiu Vaida\***

Usually, the political domain is covered by three type of books: those dealing with political campaigns, read by campaign makers or consultants and politicians, those displaying some political views or memoirs, read by politicians and political analysts or scholars, and finally, books that present political theories or that explain some political facts, studied by scholars and campaign makers. It is hard to know whom Barack Obama wrote his book for, but it is obvious that what he achieved is a mixture of political views, memoirs, campaign advice and political theories.

Yet, his open objective is to offer a personal political program based on his talks he had during the campaign, which eventually lead to his election as a US Senator in 2004. As a matter of fact, even the title of the book is inspired from the same year's presidential campaign, namely from Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address, when he used the phrase "audacity of hope" towards the end of his speech.<sup>1</sup> Although he stresses the fact that he is, after all, a Democrat, Obama tries to offer a undogmatic point of view, which could, he states, could bring back in the American politics the common sense and responsibility.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each one being a description of the author's view in different political or social areas. The first chapter

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gwu.edu/~action/2004/demconv04/obama072704spt.html>, retrieved

describes what Obama sees as one of the evils of the American politics: the republican/democrat divide. Not a simple political battle, but a deep cleavage that completely breaks the political system and inputs ideology in each area of the government and push the citizens far away. The second chapter is about values. Interestingly, Obama argues that culture should be used, alongside governmental action in order to transform the society. For instance, the increase of the managers' income earlier than those of the workers in the last decades can be explained by cultural aspects.

The next two chapters discuss political issues: the Constitution and politics itself, namely many details from the last two of Obama's electoral campaigns. While the one named "Our Constitution" deals more with the (short) career of Barack Obama in the US Senate, the one called "Politics" describes the authors several electoral campaigns.

The fifth chapter deals with economic issues. From the Google founders to trade union members and then back to Warren Buffet, Obama seems to meet every kind of people and economic difficulties. Once again, after he lists some thoughts about the American capitalist system, the (then) US Senator makes a few suggestions that could bring more money into economy and prosperity for the American employers and employee. What American needs, think Obama, is a new (symbolical) social contract, a new healthcare system and heavy investments. Yet not in the economy, says Obama, but rather in other areas: education, science and technology and new energy sources.

An interesting chapter is the one dealing with the issue of race. Although Barack Obama defines himself as being an African-American, he grew up in a family of white people, even his mother being white. Therefore, he is in a very good position of talking about these issues, since he is connected to two races. Thus, the author offers examples showing the disparities between wages or opportunities, altogether with statistics showing that African-Americans watch television more than other North-Americans (approximately 11 hours per day) or eat more at fast-foods (p. 252). The solution, argues Obama, is not to implement more affirmative action programs, but to increase the life standards for all Americans, through, for instance, universal healthcare. Yet, he stresses, some governmental programs are necessary in order to tackle the problem of the "black lumpenproletariat": programs to keep more teenagers in school

until they graduate or programs that could help more citizens to look for a job instead of being socially assisted. In the same chapter, Obama tackles the problem of immigration and of the increasing number of Latinos. Yet, as opposed to the first part, where he describes the problems and suggests some concrete solution, in the latter part all he does is speak about a future America, a diverse and polyglot one, large enough for everyone.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter for a non-American is the eighth one, the one dealing with foreign policy. It is interesting for several reasons. First of all, Obama studied International Relations, so he knows what the theory or history says in this field. Secondly, he spent four years of his childhood abroad, namely in the largest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia. Therefore, he has some knowledge of how other cultural spaces work, based on his own experience. Not to mention that Indonesia was at least at one point an ally of the US, becoming in the recent years, if not an enemy, at least an opponent of the US interest in the area. Thirdly, Obama became US president two years after the book was published, so the chapter could provide some valuable information about the US foreign policy in the next years. First and foremost, he acknowledges that the US foreign policy, the export of democracy and capitalism ("Big Mac and internet", p. 287) could not always work, at least not in way of a unique solution. As he states, in many cases, the US foreign policy was visionary. Yet, in other cases, it was based on false assumptions, which led to actions that affected the credibility of the US and generated problems at a global level. At least after 2001, the US foreign policy was, Obama claims, a mix of Reagan-ism, Monroe doctrine revised and Cold war approaches, all doubled, by a very effective, at least for a few years, PR strategy.

What he criticizes, after all, is not the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, but the lack of a coherent strategy in international relations. Thus, what America needs is a new foreign policy, based on the 21<sup>st</sup> century's threat, not on the Cold war approaches (a new strategy designed as Truman, Acheson and Marshall did 60 years earlier). The USA has the right to protect itself, but it must do so by having a broad international support. It must avoid strategies which lead to the imposing of democracy with weapons or to subsidise corrupt and illegitimate governments just because they are close allies. US must and has the power to substantially influence the international system, but it must do so by being sure that this will lead

to a greater fairness, justice and prosperity. Last but not least, it must be emphasised that, although not clearly expressed, Obama has some critiques regarding the UN, the WB and the IMF.

Two other chapters deal with rather personal topics, faith and family. Both are rather memoir type of texts, with fewer proposals for a political agenda. Their role is to make the book complete, being thus the most un-political text in the book.

Beside all the stories or thoughts Obama has presented, the book offers, although in an unstructured manner, several examples of how a campaign should be managed. Besides other details, what seems to be one of his most powerful weapons was his meeting with regular voters or citizens. At one point, he mentions a meeting with some of his supporters, meeting that actually took place at a barbecue. There were no discourses, no speeches, only cheatchats with the participants. Although time consuming, this type of campaign is still the most effective one and politicians and campaign makers should learn from this.

A mixture of political theory, political anthropology and sociology, international relations and political campaigning and memoirs, the books has, in fact, in this mixture, both its strong and its weak point. By changing its approach every few pages, Obama offers an enjoyable book. Yet, at the same time, the reader may miss the point, when reading on one page about a discussion with a citizen, and on the next one, some remarks about the Constitution. Finally, it should be pointed out that, even though it speaks about the political divide that must be ended, Obama cannot fulfil this requirement: the best solutions that were once offered were the one of the Democrat presidents, Roosevelt, Clinton or Johnson, among others. George Bush or Reagan are mentioned mainly for their foreign policies, while George W. Bush is, for obvious reasons, the most criticised American president.

Obama's book could have gone unnoticed: one more text produced by an elected official somewhere in the world. Yet, two years after the book was published, its author was elected as the most important head of state. At least from this point of view, political consultants and politicians, as well as scholars must read the book.

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The Editorial Staff is looking forward to receiving your papers for times per year: before the **1<sup>st</sup> of February**, before the **1<sup>st</sup> of May**, before the **1<sup>st</sup> of July** and before the **1<sup>st</sup> of October**. *Studia Europaea* is thankful for the interest you show in this *Call for Papers* and hopes for a future collaboration.

