

Daring to Hope on the Washington Mall

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On Tuesday, I dared to hope. I even felt a little patriotic.

I was among the two million people who assembled on the Washington Mall to witness the moment. I was willing to come all the way from California, pay the air fare — and leave the carbon footprint — in order to join my daughter Kalila, a student at Earlham College in Indiana, in watching history being made.

I have written a series of articles raising concerns about various positions Obama had staked out during the campaign and, in particular, raising questions about some of the appointments Obama has made. I will no doubt write more such articles over the next four to eight years.

And yet I was able to shed tears of joy on a number of occasions this Tuesday. I wasn't just relieved that a Democrat had won the White House. I was actually (what's this strange feeling?) happy.

Kalila and I arrived at the Washington Mall in the pre-dawn hours to get as close to the Capitol as possible without tickets. Most of the people in our segment of the mall who had also made the effort to arrive at 4:00 am were African-Americans, many of whom had traveled great distances — not without financial and other sacrifices — in order to be there in person to watch a black man inaugurated as president of the United States, something few of them imagined they would ever see.

We entertained each other singing some of the great spirituals popularized during the civil rights struggle I had learned in my youth in the early 1960s when my father taught at Tougaloo, a black college in Mississippi, where he served as faculty advisor for the local chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). From out of the darkness in the sub-freezing temperatures came the sounds of “Woke up This Morning with Mind Set on Freedom,” “Keep Your Eyes on that Prize,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “Lift Up Your Voice and Sing.”

Growing up in the South, I have vivid memories of Jim Crow laws. Though my family and I were white, virtually all our neighbors were black, and while the violence towards us was limited to some random gunshots being fired at our house, the reality of the fear from repression by state authorities was all around me, along with the daily humiliation my young friends and their parents experienced from segregation. I could go to almost all the movie theaters, playgrounds, amusement parks, fast food outlets, and engage in as many other recreational activities a child could want, but I could not go with any of my friends.

Against all odds, people organized, faced down the attack dogs and fire hoses, and forced an end to that kind of legal discrimination in America. People of color were able to take on new positions of leadership once denied them. At the same time, however, there was no question that real power remained almost exclusively in the hands of white men.

Yet here I was, in the nation's capital, watching an African-American being sworn in as president of the United States. A man who, as a boy, would have been considered illegitimate in Mississippi and nearly two dozen other states for having a white mother and a black father. A man who is married to a descendant of slaves who grew up in the largely-segregated black neighborhoods of South Chicago. A man who for years worked as an organizer in the black community and was strongly influenced by the progressive theology of the black church.

A New Patriotism

His election was not a result of, as one African-American comedian put it, people being “so worried about whether he was a Muslim or a socialist, they forgot he was black!” People knew. Obama’s race presumably cost him far more votes than it gained. Yet he won decisively and is entering office with a 78 percent approval rating, the highest ever recorded for an incoming president.

Who would have imagined as little as five years ago, with the jingoistic militarism which then so dominated American political discourse, that the next president of the United States would be an African-American man with a Muslim father, with the middle name of Hussein, who had for years served as a community organizer with progressive grassroots organizations, and at that time had held no elected office higher than representing a predominantly black district in a state senate?

The personal significance of the day hit me when someone came through the crowd handing out American flags and I found myself eagerly reaching for one.

I have held flags when I thought it was appropriate for certain ceremonial occasions, but I don’t recall since I was very young of actually being eager to do so. This past reluctance came not out of any innate lack of patriotism, but from the fact that the flag has too often represented national chauvinism or support for U.S. militarism and imperialism, not from a genuine love of country. Yet on that day, I could actually feel a deep pride for being an American and being seen waving a flag.

I also knew that there were millions of people around the world excitedly watching the inauguration ceremony on television from modern apartments in the Netherlands to remote villages in Kenya to the urban slums of Indonesia to the rubble of Gaza who were thinking that maybe they could actually feel good about the United States again. I thought about how different it would now feel for me to show my U.S. passport going through customs in a foreign country and not feel embarrassed because of my president.

Minutes after the end of the ceremony, with viewing areas for the inaugural parade down Pennsylvania Avenue already full, I asked a secret service agent about the possibility of hanging out at the corner of the mall by the National Gallery where the parade commenced. He said that it would be a great place to view where the floats and marching bands converged to start the parade, but that President Obama would be joining the procession a block north from that point at Pennsylvania Avenue.

I paused. “President Obama.” Only minutes old, the combination of that title and that name were the most beautiful words I could possibly hear, particularly after hearing so constantly for the past eight years the words “President Bush.” I held on to my daughter and burst into tears.

Goodbye Bush

Obama has become president of the United States because rather than appealing to the worst instincts of American voters — which had made possible the disastrous eight years of the Bush administration — he appealed to our best instincts. Instead of divisiveness, he offered unity. Instead of manipulating people’s fear and prejudices, he offered a sense of hope and faith stemming from the most progressive and visionary aspects of our country’s heritage. It was a message which inspired Kalila and so many other young people to help elect him president. It was a message which made it possible for a sometime cynical leftist like me to stand for hours in the cold on the Washington Mall and wave an American flag.

Indeed, the only emotion that came close to the excitement of seeing Obama come to office was seeing George W. Bush leaving office.

Soon after the end of the swearing-in ceremony, as the now ex-president lifted off in his helicopter from the Capitol grounds for Andrews Air Force Base to take the jet that would bring him back home to Texas, hundreds

of thousands of people on the mall started waving at the helicopter and joyously singing, “Na-na na-na, na-na na-na, hey hey-ey, good-bye!”

While Bush’s departure alone is cause for celebration, Obama appears committed to not just ending some of the worst policies of the previous administration, but to forge ahead with new and better policies.

A couple hours after the inauguration ceremony, I got a call on my cell phone from my eldest child Shanti from Bellingham, Washington, where she is a student in Western Washington University’s community health program and serves as the assistant coordinator of the university’s Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Alliance. As someone who had been rather skeptical of Obama (and had voted for Green Party nominee Cynthia McKinney in November), she was shedding tears of relief and amazement reading the new White House web site’s section on “Support for the LGBT Community.” This often-critical observer of the political process was sharing her excitement as to how the United States now has an administration committed to supporting full civil unions, opposing bans on same-sex marriages, expanding adoption rights, promoting sex education and HIV prevention efforts beyond the failed abstinence-only policies of the current administration, as well as ending workplace discrimination for both sexual preference and gender identity.

This dramatic policy shift serves to illustrate the fact that, while many of Obama’s policies will disappoint, frustrate and anger many of us in the progressive movement, we should not fail to recognize that there will be some fundamental differences in the policies of the federal government on many levels; that, given the power of the American presidency, even minor differences in policies can have a positive impact on millions of lives and that, while there are certain institutional imperatives which will inevitably limit the degree to which even the most enlightened administration can bring about a shift in priorities, this does not obscure the fact that, in terms of public policy, we are witnessing the most dramatic change in American leadership since Franklin Roosevelt succeeded Herbert Hoover in 1933.

Our Foot in the Door

Tuesday evening, I joined hundreds of veteran activists gathered in the Smithsonian Postal Museum for the Inaugural Peace Ball. Hanging out in gowns and tuxedos with such progressive luminaries as Amy Goodman, Holly Near, Michael Lerner, Medea Benjamin, Harry Belafonte, Kevin Danaher, John Cavanaugh, and others, there was a clear sense that it was a time to celebrate a historic achievement. It was remarkable to be among so many people well to the left of the Democratic Party — and, in many cases, to the left of me — who were nevertheless incredibly excited at what has transpired.

Obama’s centrist proclivities notwithstanding, his message has been clear from the beginning: “Is not about me,” he said again and again, “it’s about you.” As someone whose political rise in Chicago came not from the slimy politics of that city’s political machine but from his grass roots constituency who got to know him as a community organizer, he recognizes where real power comes from. And there is no question that his political base nationally is to his left — at least as articulated in many of the positions he took as a presidential candidate — and that he will therefore need to be responsive to that base.

Amy Goodman recalled the story from a small fundraising event in New Jersey for Obama about a year ago, at which a supporter expressed her concern with the longstanding U.S. support for Israel’s occupation policies, an issue in which even the majority of liberal Democrats have tended to align themselves with the Republican right. Given the unwillingness of successive administrations of either party to push for a viable peace settlement, the activist asked if she could expect anything better under an Obama administration. Obama responded with a story about A. Philip Randolph, the civil rights activist and union organizer who founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. At a meeting with Franklin Roosevelt early in his administration about the

possibility of adopting a policy that would grant the largely African-American porters rights under federal law, the president replied that he had been convinced by Randolph of the legitimacy of pushing for such legislation, but that he needed a constituency that would make him do it. A constituency was indeed mobilized and the Railway Labor Act came into law in 1934.

This is the challenge Obama is putting before us. From Palestine to the environment to almost every other issue, we must not simply wait and hope for Obama to do the right thing and then complain bitterly if he does not, but organize massively and effectively enough to give him no other choice but to adopt a progressive agenda. History has shown us that, with a few conscientious exceptions, Democratic leaders will rarely actually lead, but they are far more willing than Republicans to respond to grass roots demand for change. No one recognizes this more than Barack Obama, now the president of the United States.

Perhaps the most important power the president possesses in American politics is the power to set the agenda. No president, even Ronald Reagan, has had as much power of persuasion as does President Obama. No president in the past four decades has come to office with such a sizable majority in Congress. No president since Franklin Roosevelt has been faced with so many serious crises that he could get away with launching ambitious new programs and dramatic shifts in policies. No president has come to office with so much popular support and with such a large, passionate and well-organized base of supporters.

In short, Obama has the ability to do a lot of good as long as we reject the temptation of feeling hopeless and cynical and as long as we recommit ourselves to organize and work for change.

So, let's dare to hope. Let's work to make change possible. We have never had a better opportunity.

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