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## An Obama Realignment?

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AN OCEAN of ink, India and printer's and virtual, has been spilled in celebration of a black man's ascension to the presidency of the United States. We have read, and read again, about the historic nature of Barack Obama's triumph, the new voters he helped bring to the polls, the young people he has inspired, and the participation on November 4 of the largest number of voters in American history. We have been told that, owing to the decisive nature of Obama's victory and the enhanced power of his party in both houses of Congress, a new political era has dawned. What happened was more than an election: it was, to quote the Democratic lawyer Lanny Davis in the *Wall Street Journal*, "the Obama realignment," only the sixth such moment in American history (the others being the elections of 1800, 1828, 1860, 1932, and 1980).

That November 4 marked the emphatic end to one period in American political history and the no less emphatic beginning of another is a proposition no one seems to doubt. Obama is indeed the first Democrat to win an outright majority since Jimmy Carter in 1976, and will be working with a Democratic Congress that has only grown in strength thanks in part to the size of his victory. Given the emotions generated by election day and the understandable exhilaration of the winning side, it might

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seem churlish to doubt that a wholesale partisan and ideological shift has occurred. And yet one cannot but note that the mighty ocean of celebratory ink evaporates into a puddle when it comes to describing just what this new era might actually be.

AS A CANDIDATE over the course of two exhausting years, Obama narrowed his message to a single dramatic laser-like pinpoint: change. This proposed change had, and still has, two components, political and spiritual.

Politically, the change promised by Obama's was primarily change *from* something—from eight years of George W. Bush and the purportedly corrupt, incompetent, and aggressive misrule of the Right; from five-and-a-half grueling years of war in Iraq; from the divisive politics of Washington in which the concerns of the suffering middle class were largely forgotten; and from the social agenda of the Right that many, especially those under the age of thirty, were said to consider overbearing.

In the early months of his campaign, Obama acted specifically as an agent of change inside the Democratic party itself. Both Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, his only serious rivals for the presidential nomination, had voted in the Senate in 2002 to authorize the Iraq war. In the same year, by contrast, then-Illinois State Senator Barack Obama had given a single antiwar speech. Running five years later as the antiwar candidate, Obama was promising his fellow party members a change *from*

the idea that ambitious Democrats needed to demonstrate hawkish resolve and a willingness to use force in order to be taken seriously as national candidates.

By the middle of 2008, Obama found it useful to amend this stance by advocating a shift in military resources away from Iraq and into Afghanistan. But this change, too, was a change from something, a tactical move to shift the topic away from the astonishing success of the surge in Iraq and the consequent looming victory in a war once apparently unwinnable.

And this in turn points to a darker and more urgent element in Obama's promise of political change. That promise was a means of harnessing and channeling the powerful but scattershot negative energy generated against Bush and the Republican party over the previous years. Obama's election has ratified the soundness of this strategy. Although it appears that George W. Bush may have finally won the war in Iraq, Obama's election demonstrates decisively that Bush lost the war for the hearts and minds of the American people, and lost it in a rout.

And here an added feature must be noted. Obama's promise of change implicitly offered, as well, the prospect of an escape from the ugliness that had come to dominate our national discourse. From Monica Lewinsky and the Clinton impeachment battle to the Gore-Bush fight over Florida to the rage that erupted on the Left in the run-up to the Iraq war and has never ceased steaming and bubbling and overflowing in the following six years, American politics has been cooking at a white-hot temperature. Obama's smooth, unruffled demeanor marks him as one of the coolest customers in the annals of American politics. He needed the volcanic heat to get himself elected; but by defeating the Republicans, he has given the rhetorical aggressors what they so desperately wanted, while at the same time pouring balm on the conscience of independents who may have voted Republican in 2004 but perhaps decided to go another way this year out of an impulse to sue for peace.

**S**PIRITUALLY, THE change promised by Obama was even more sweeping, and even more remarkable. It was to be a change in the American essence, in the nature of the country's understanding of itself. As he said in his victory speech on election night:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our

founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. . . . It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. . . . It's the answer that—that led those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. . . . Change has come to America.

In effect, then, Obama was casting himself, and is still casting himself, not as an agent of change but as the change itself—as its embodiment, its personification. In this sense, the Obama era has *already* succeeded. It is already complete. In the terms he himself has set, he can do nothing more important as President than what he has already done by being elected President.

So far, from the point of view of his supporters, that certainly seems to be more than enough. Indeed, the spiritual change promised and embodied by Obama gave his race the quality all great campaigns offer to their supporters—the idea that the grueling volunteer work they will be doing and the vote they will have to stand in line for hours to cast are merely preludes to a positive, even joyous, result.

And not just his supporters. Nationally, too, it is undeniably pleasing to note how the 2008 election reflects the growing social and racial capaciousness of the American body politic. A man who, had he been an adult in the year of his birth, would have had insuperable difficulty casting a ballot in North Carolina or Virginia won both of these states as a presidential candidate 47 years later. America's most lasting and most morally challenging barrier has been broken down, transcended.

But even in Obama's description, his election only reflects this change. It is not the motive cause of it. Nor does it tell us anything about what we might be changing *to*. For that, we need to return to politics.

**O**NE CAN see the brilliance of Obama's political strategy, the strategy of "change from something," in contemplating what the election has revealed about the condition of the Republican party. It appears that Obama won nationwide by a margin of 53 to 46—which, as it happens, is almost exactly the same collective margin as in the midterm elections of 2006, when Democrats retook the House and Senate from Republican control.

The repudiation of the GOP is unambiguous. John McCain led a party whose hold on the nation shrank dramatically during George W. Bush's second term. In 2004, 37 percent of voters said they were Republicans; in 2008, that number declined to 32 percent, a vertiginous drop in so-called "party identification" on a scale not seen since the post-Watergate election of 1974.

McCain failed to win eight states that Bush had won in 2004—including Indiana, a Republican stronghold in the last ten presidential elections. McCain also failed to take a single state in the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, or the Pacific West. Barack Obama won states in every region of the country.

After Ronald Reagan solidified the Republican hold on the formerly Democratic South, it was universally proclaimed that the GOP had created an "electoral lock" so impregnable that even Bill Clinton, who emerged victorious in 1992, was said by his campaign consultant James Carville to have succeeded only in picking it. That success, moreover, was largely due to the presence in the 1992 race of the third-party candidate Ross Perot, who took crucial votes away from George H.W. Bush in southern states the Republican candidate would otherwise have won without breaking a sweat.

The absence of such a third-party candidate in 2000 restored the Republican lock on the South, and the 2004 election results seemed to double-bolt it. McCain misplaced the key to the lock. In Virginia, a state Bush had carried by ten points, McCain was defeated by five, a nearly unprecedented fifteen-point turnaround in just four years. Bush won North Carolina by nearly thirteen points; McCain lost it by a quarter of a point.

In the House, the Republican minority declined in number by 25 seats to 177, almost exactly where the GOP had found itself before it took control of Congress in 1994. In the Senate, the number of Republicans appears to have fallen from 49 to 42. This brings Democrats tantalizingly close to achieving a "cloture-proof" 60-seat majority that would allow them to shut off debate on any bill of their choosing and bring it to a certain vote. It is possible they will achieve that majority in the midterm election of 2010. At that point, Democrats will be able to move legislation through the Senate at will for the first time in more than three decades.

AND YET, there is surprisingly little indication, from the results of either the 2006 election or this one, that the low repute in which the GOP is

held translates into broad support for the Democratic party. According to the website Pollster.com, the approval rating of the Democrat-controlled Congress fell from 27 percent on election day 2006 to 15 percent just before election day 2008, a drop of 44 percent. And while, as we have seen, the GOP's partisan identification numbers tumbled by five points, or 13 percent, between 2004 and 2008, Democratic partisan identification rose by only two points, or 5 percent.\* In other words, voters who ceased being Republicans outnumbered voters who became Democrats by two-and-a-half to one.

Even worse for Republicans is a bit of data that once again seems to rain a little on Obama's parade as well. A report by Curtis Gans of the Center for the Study of the American Electorate notes that while the percentage of eligible voters who voted Democratic rose a few points this year, as it has in every quadrennial election since 1980, the number of eligible voters who voted Republican fell by 1.3 percent. All in all, the national GOP lost every tenth vote it had received in 2004. On the other hand, and despite the presumption that Obama was hurtled toward the White House by an unprecedented turnout featuring millions upon millions of new voters, the electorate of 2008 looks to have been proportionately almost exactly the same size as the electorate of 2004.†

What we are seeing, in other words, is a wholesale flight from the Republican party but *not* an epoch-making reversal of partisan or ideological direction. Or, at least, not yet. As Gans writes, "While this election did not in itself realign American politics after 28 years of Republican dominance, it presented the opportunity for such a realignment to take place."

AND THAT, of course, has interesting policy implications. Democrats in Congress, flush with new power and a President of their own party, will wish to enact all sorts of laws representing a decisive break from the policies that have dominated Washington since George Bush came into office. In doing so, they will be armed with the knowledge that Americans say they trust Democrats more than Republicans on every issue before the nation save terrorism.

\* Or, to look at it another way, self-identified Democrats made up 39 percent of the electorate this year—exactly the same number as in the 2000 election, which ended in a tie.

† The overall vote tally in 2004 was 123 million; when all the counting is done this year, it will top out at around 127 million. Taking into account the seven million additional eligible voters in 2008, turnout will have risen at most from 60.6 percent to 61.2 percent.

It is not necessary to list the items that will be taken up by the next Congress; they are too numerous. They are also, many of them, politically provocative. And there's the rub. For just as, throughout the twelve years (1994-2006) in which the GOP held the reins of power on Capitol Hill, the leadership of the Republican party in Congress stood farther to the Right than did the nation as a whole, so today the leadership of the Democratic party stands considerably farther to the Left on nearly every issue, from abortion (where some restrictions are overwhelmingly supported by voters) to guns (where ownership is overwhelmingly supported) to domestic surveillance (where efforts to prevent a future terrorist attack are overwhelmingly supported).

The national exit poll on November 4, whose raw data skewed wildly in favor of Obama voters,\* still showed self-described conservatives outnumbering self-described liberals by 12 percentage points. To be sure, these numbers do not offer much comfort to those who place themselves to the right of center, because all indications are that the views of self-described "moderates," who made up the plurality in the exit poll, tend to shade in a more liberal direction today than they did fifteen years ago. Still, taken together with the terrible congressional-approval ratings, the numbers do suggest that a wholesale shift in an unabashedly liberal direction would pose a significant threat to the Democratic party's efforts to achieve a durable alteration in the political dynamic of the sort that followed the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Moreover, although it is tempting to declare any given point in political time a "hinge moment," in which what comes after will be radically different from what has come before, the truth is that these supposed realignments are peculiar creatures.

The Republican realignment that began in 1980 hardly followed a straight line. In that year, Ronald Reagan beat Jimmy Carter by ten points and swept in ten Senators. The following year, he signed the biggest tax cut in American history. Then, in 1982, he signed the biggest tax increase in American history, and his party lost 26 seats in the House of Representatives. In 1984 Reagan won 49 states, in the largest electoral landslide in American history; two years later his party lost control of the Senate.

George H.W. Bush won by eight points in 1988 and was defeated in 1992 with a smaller percentage of the vote than Barry Goldwater had received in 1964. In 1994, Republicans won 52 seats in the House and eight seats in the Senate and ushered in the age of the "Gingrich Revolution." That age

lasted all of nine months, brought to a screeching halt by the government shutdown of 1995 and the restoration of Bill Clinton's political fortunes. By the time George W. Bush became President in 2000, Republicans held only a three-seat majority in the House of Representatives.

The election of 2000 offers a particularly instructive example of the way in which this supposed 28-year realignment was politically a highly ambiguous business. While George Bush ended up prevailing by a few hundred hanging chads in Florida, he lost nationally to Al Gore by a half-million votes. More important, Ralph Nader, the Green-party candidate, received three million votes, meaning that the Left vote in 2000 was nearly three percentage points larger than the Republican vote. In that same election, Democrats took four Senate seats away from the Republicans.

The attacks of September 11 jolted the United States to the Right, and Republicans dominated in the two successive elections of 2002 and 2004. But the failure to secure a quick victory in Iraq, coupled with a general sense that the President was incompetent and the GOP corrupt, jolted the electorate back. One might even say that the results of 2006 and 2008 restored the leftward ideological direction that was evident in 2000 and that might well have resurfaced to capsize George W. Bush had it not been for his galvanizing response to the terrorist assault on the United States.

**S**TILL, THERE is no question that Ronald Reagan did alter the political course of the United States. He did so by pursuing a practical, specific, and extremely ambitious agenda for change that was laid out in detail in his successful bid for the presidency. In office, he worked to rebuild the American military and reestablish the American strategic advantage against the Soviet Union in a series of moves that hastened a collapse of an empire he, almost alone, believed could be defeated. He oversaw a radical overhaul of the federal income-tax system, first by lowering marginal rates and then by simplifying the tax code. And, in a precursor to Obama's promise to elevate the American spirit, he sought to restore national self-confidence and a sense of pride in country with a promise to invigorate the key American institutions of "family, work, and neighborhood."

Reagan was also fortunate in his enemies, who assumed he was popular and his legacy enduring because of his oratorical gifts, personal charm, and

\* According to the raw exit poll, Obama should have won nationally by 18 percentage points; in fact he won by 7.

sunny disposition. They helped, and helped enormously. But they would have meant little without the overarching vision, the determination to enact it, and the results that demonstrated the wisdom of his course.

**B**ARACK OBAMA, it need hardly be said, comes to the presidency with no comparable agenda, or much of an agenda at all. True, he has had position papers galore, but in the course of his run he contradicted several of their core assumptions or promises. He proposed significant spending increases, but in light of the credit crisis has said they may have to be postponed. He has said something similar about his tax plan, which features certain cuts for the middle class and a substantial increase for Americans making over \$250,000 a year. He supported gay marriage, then opposed it. He opposed welfare reform, then said he would not question Bill Clinton's decision to sign it into law. He has spent more than a year backing away from his statement that he would meet with America's enemies without preconditions.

All this change—shall we call it that?—may be seen as a sign of Obama's "growth": that is, as it became clearer to him that he might in fact occupy the White House, he began to understand he was burdening himself with a laundry list of promises it would be impossible to keep. It may also be seen simply as the maneuvering of a candidate aiming to make himself as palatable as possible in a general election after having spent a year running to the Left in a Democratic party process dominated by the Left.

Or Obama may hold the gut assumptions one would assume of a man with his adult biography: a man who has lived in and around elite left-wing

universities since he was eighteen years old, a community organizer working from a demonstrably radical playbook, a parishioner of a church with a radical anti-American pastor who officiated at his wedding and baptized his children and from whom he took the phrase "the audacity of hope" as the title of his second book, a state senator from one of the most left-wing districts in the United States, and so forth.

We know *what* Barack Obama is. He is a path-breaking political figure, a human watershed, an orator of surpassing skill, a politician of genius. We do not know *who* he is. We will find out only when he becomes President. If he aims to be a leader guiding a realignment that will restore the Democratic party to a position of political and ideological dominance, he will have to take the measure of a country that has lost confidence in his rivals but has not yet shown its fealty to his fellow partisans.

America may not be a "center-Right" country, but it is not a "center-Left" country, either. Perhaps Obama thinks he can make it so. But the memory of the shortcomings of American Left-liberalism that still resides somewhere in the nervous system of the American body politic offers reason to believe that a lurch to the Left is not the change America voted for.

On election night, with his two enchanting girls flashing their million-watt smiles in anticipation of that "new puppy that's coming with us to the White House," Barack Obama told the worshipful throng before him and the tens of millions who voted for him that they had chosen to "put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day." The day is now upon us, and hope, however audacious, will no longer be enough.

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