America's election

Great expectations

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Barack Obama has won a famous victory. Now he must use it wisely

Reuters 

NO ONE should doubt the magnitude of what Barack Obama achieved this week. When the president-elect was born, in 1961, many states, and not just in the South, had laws on their books that enforced segregation, banned mixed-race unions like that of his parents and restricted voting rights. This week America can claim more credibly that any other western country to have at last become politically colour-blind. Other milestones along the road to civil rights have been passed amid bitterness and bloodshed. This one was marked by joy, white as well as black (see article).

Mr Obama lost the white vote, it is true, by 43-55%; but he won almost exactly same share of it as the last three (white) Democratic candidates; Bill Clinton, Al Gore and John Kerry. And he won heavily among younger white voters. America will now have a president with half-brothers in Kenya, old schoolmates in Indonesia and a view of the world that seems to be based on respect rather than confrontation.

That matters. Under George Bush America's international standing has sunk to awful lows. This week Americans voted in record-smashing numbers for many reasons, but one of them was an abhorrence of how their shining city's reputation has been tarnished. Their country will now be easier for its friends to like and harder for its foes to hate.

In its own way the election illustrates this redeeming effect. For the past eight years the debacle in Florida in 2000 has been cited (not always fairly) as an example of shabby American politics. Yet here was a clear victory delivered by millions of volunteers—and by the intelligent use of technology to ride a wave of excitement that is all too rare in most democracies. Mr Obama showed that, with the right message, a candidate with no money or machine behind him can build his own.

Hard times and a bleak House

With such a great victory come unreasonably great expectations. Many of Mr Obama's more ardent supporters will be let down—and in some cases they deserve to be. For those who voted for him with their eyes wide open to his limitations, everything now depends on how he governs. Abroad, this 21st-century president will have to grapple with the sort of great-power rivalries last seen in the 19th century (see article). At home, he must try to unite his country, tackling its economic ills while avoiding the pitfalls of one-party rule. Rhetoric and symbolism will still be useful in this; but now is the turn of detail and dedication.

Mr Obama begins with several advantages. At 47, he is too young to have been involved in the bitter cultural wars about Vietnam. And by winning support from a big majority of independents, and even from a fair few Republicans, he makes it possible to imagine a return to a more reflective time when political opponents were not regarded as traitors and collaboration was something to be admired.

Oddly, he may be helped by the fact that, in the end, his victory was slightly disappointing. He won around 52% of the popular vote, more than Mr Bush in 2000 and 2004, but not a remarkable number; this was no Roosevelt or Reagan landslide. And though Mr Obama helped his party cement its grip on Congress, gaining around 20 seats in the House of Representatives and five in the Senate, the haul in the latter chamber falls four short of the 60 needed to break filibusters and pass controversial legislation without Republican support (though recounts may add another seat, or even two). Given how much more money Mr Obama raised, the destruction of the Republican brand under Mr Bush and the effects of the worst financial crisis for 70 years, the fact that 46% of people voted against the Democrat is a reminder of just what a conservative place America still is. Mr Obama is the first northern liberal to be elected president since John Kennedy; he must not forget how far from the political centre of the country that puts him.

Mr Obama's victory, in fact, is almost identical in scope to that of Bill Clinton in 1992; and it took just two years for the Republicans to sweep back to power in the 1994 Gingrich revolution. Should President Obama give in to some of the wilder partisans in Congress, it is easy to imagine an ugly time ahead—and not just for the Democrats in the 2010 mid-term elections. America could fatally lapse into protectionism, or re-regulate business and finance to the point at which innovation is stifled, or "spread the wealth" (to quote the next president) to the extent that capital is prudently shifted overseas.

Our mutual friends

Mr Obama will not take office until January 20th, but he can use the next ten weeks well. A good start would be to announce that he will offer jobs to a few Republicans. Robert Gates, Mr Bush's excellent defence secretary who has helped transform the position in Iraq, ought to be kept in the post for at least a while. Sadly, Richard Lugar has ruled himself out as secretary of state; but Chuck Hagel, senator for Nebraska, is another possibility for a defence or foreign-policy job. Mr Obama might even find a non-executive role for John McCain, with whom he agrees on many things, especially the need to tackle global warming and close Guantánamo. Another pragmatic move would be to announce that his new treasury secretary (ideally an experienced centrist such as Larry Summers or Tim Geithner) will start working closely with Hank Paulson, the current one, immediately.

Whoever he appoints, Mr Obama will be constrained by the failing economy. He should not hold back from stimulus packages to help America out of recession. But he has huge promises to keep as well. He has pledged tax cuts to 95% of families. He has proposed near-universal health care—an urgent reform, as America's population ages and companies restrict the health insurance they offer. He proposes more spending on infrastructure, both physical and human. But if he is to tackle all or any of this, he must balance his plans with other savings or new revenues if his legacy is not to be one of profligacy and debt. He has to start deciding whom to disappoint.

Non-Americans must also brace for disappointment. America will certainly change under Mr Obama; the world of extraordinary rendition and licensed torture should thankfully soon be gone. But America will, as it must, continue to put its own interests, and those of its allies, first. Withdrawing from Iraq will be harder than Mr Obama's supporters hope; the war in Afghanistan will demand more sacrifices from Americans and Europeans than he has yet prepared them for. The problems of the Middle East will hardly be solved overnight. Getting a climate-change bill through Congress will be hard.

The next ten weeks give Mr Obama a chance to recalibrate the rest of the world's hopes. He could use part of his transition to tour the world, certainly listening to friends and rivals alike but also gently making clear the limits of his presidency. He needs to explain that, although his America will respect human rights and pay more heed to the advice of others, it will not be a pushover: he must avoid the fate of Jimmy Carter, a moralising president who made the superpower look weak.

Like most politicians, Mr Obama will surely fail more than he succeeds. But he is a man of great dignity, superior talents and high ideals. In choosing him, America has shown once again its unrivalled capacity to renew itself, and to surprise.