

Global Media Celebrate Obama Victory -- But Cautious Too

A Changed View of American Democracy

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November 13, 2008

The morning after George W. Bush's 2004 re-election, Britain's *Daily Mirror* famously asked: "How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?" The morning after Barack Obama's election, a far more upbeat *Daily Mirror* gushed "GOBAMA!" on its front page.

Other British papers from across the political spectrum shared the triumphant mood after Barack Obama's decisive win. "Today is for celebration, for happiness and for reflected human glory," proclaimed the left-of-center Guardian. Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* echoed the moon landing with a "One Giant Leap For Mankind" headline beneath a photo of a determined Barack Obama jogging toward the camera.

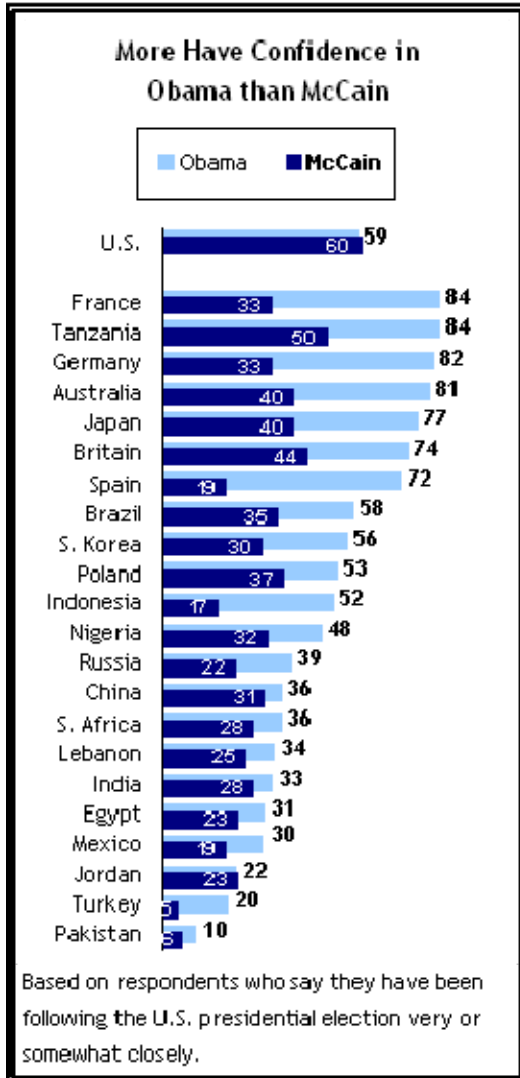
The enthusiasm was hardly limited to Britain -- across much of the world, newspapers welcomed Obama's victory. To many, the election showcased what they like about the United States -- the vitality of its democracy and the notion of America as a land of opportunity. And just as importantly, President-elect Obama represents a significant change from an administration widely disliked around the globe.

Still, buried in the positive international press coverage of the election were some caveats, concerns, and notes of discord. "He's Just A President. Not the Messiah," read an opinion piece headline in Italy's *Il Giornale*¹. While Obama now enjoys considerable goodwill in many nations, journalists, policymakers, and others are starting to focus on pressing concerns -- the world economic crisis, the Middle East conflict, ongoing and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to name just a few -- and their nations will look to President Obama with high expectations.

Two Americas Abroad

Surely, some of the international excitement surrounding Obama's victory reflects a sense of relief that the Bush era is ending. Surveys have consistently found that President Bush receives negative ratings in most countries. In a 24-nation Spring 2008 poll by the Pew Research Center's Pew Global Attitude Project, majorities in only three nations -- Tanzania, India, and Nigeria -- said they had confidence in Bush to do the right thing in world affairs. More than eight in ten in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain said they lacked confidence in the U.S. president.

And just as in the United States, John McCain's Republican label and association with Bush hurt his image abroad. Noting his "track record of legislative and military service," the *Arab News* nonetheless dismissed McCain as someone who "still belonged to a party that gave birth to someone like Bush."



In the Pew Global Attitudes Project poll, Obama consistently received more positive reviews than either Bush or McCain. In nearly all of the countries surveyed, there was more confidence in Obama than in McCain, and in many countries the gap between the Democratic and Republican nominees was striking. While 84% of the French who were following the race voiced confidence in Obama, only one-in-three said the same about McCain. Similar gaps were found throughout Europe and in a diverse group of countries.

To some international commentators, Obama and Bush represented two very different ideas of America. "There are two contrasting images of America abroad," wrote *The Times of India*. "One is that of a bullying superpower that undertakes bellicose military adventures abroad, epitomized by Iraq. The other is that of a land of hope and opportunity, an open society that welcomes migrants and where merit and talent matter for much more than ethnic background or kinship ties."

"The Bush Administration," the editorial continues, "seemed to stand for the former America," while Obama represented the "more benign image" of the "classic melting-pot story."

France's *Le Monde* characterized Obama as a new type of American leader well-suited to a shifting geopolitical environment. "Through his personality, Barack Hussein Obama will be in harmony with a world where the economic and political center is no longer the West."² Under the headline "Messiah Obama," the German tabloid *Bild* wrote: "Everyone has now fallen freshly in love with the new America, the other America, the good America, Obamerica, even."³

Our surveys have found publics across the globe simultaneously expressing fears about the way the U.S. acts on the world stage and admiration for the achievements of American society. Internationally, there is a widespread perception that the U.S. acts unilaterally in world affairs, and many key features of the Bush Administration's foreign policies are unpopular, including the U.S.-led war on terrorism and the military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, around the world, many admire American scientific and technological achievements, embrace American popular culture, and respect American ways of doing business. And the U.S. receives relatively high marks in our 2008 poll for the way it treats its own people.

Much of the foreign press coverage suggests that journalists believe their countries could learn important lessons from the American election. Many writers questioned whether a minority candidate could have similar success in their countries. For instance, *The Australian* asked: "Which other big, rich, predominantly white society has elected a member of a racial minority to be its head of government? Not Australia."

"We also need to change our preconceptions about American prejudice," wrote France's *Liberation*. "For the first time, an African-American and a woman were candidates for the highest office in the land. It seems like America could teach us a thing or two about democracy."⁴

Other observers point not only to Obama's win, but to McCain's gracious concession speech and the peaceful transfer of power. South Africa's *Business Day* sees "lessons for SA (South Africa) in Obama's victory, not least in the grace with which Republican candidate John McCain conceded defeat and wished Obama well. Would SA's ruling party hand over power with as little fuss with only a few percentage points separating the contenders after such a grueling campaign?"

Notes of Caution

While people in many lands celebrated the results of the election and the media provided much laudatory coverage, some also offered words of caution.

In a piece entitled "He's Just a President. Not the Messiah," Michele Brambilla wrote in the Italian newspaper, *Il Giornale*, that people should be careful not to expect too much from politicians, even ones who have broken through great barriers and show great promise.

Brambilla too was caught up in the emotion of Obama's historic victory, but the realities of governing require decisions that will anger many -- at home and abroad. "What will the enthusiasts say after Obama pragmatically makes his first prosaic decision?" Brambilla asks in a translated version of the article. "Let us remember, politics means first of all, pragmatism."⁵

In Germany, *Der Spiegel* writes on its English-language website that Germans and their elected leaders were rooting for Obama. "Now Germany has the U.S. president it wanted," the writers say. "Germany will soon notice, however, that Obama has his own agenda. As the President of the United States of America, he primarily represents the interests of his country, which will not always match Germany's priorities."

One example could be Obama's strategy for Afghanistan. The left-leaning German daily, *Die Tageszeitung* says, "For months, it's been publicly debated how we would react, if a President Obama, God protect him, should request a stronger German troop commitment in Afghanistan. The result: no one knows, and we hope he doesn't ask."

Indeed, our 2008 survey highlighted the extent to which the German public is out of step with Obama's call for more troops on the ground in Afghanistan -- 54% of Germans said they wanted to remove U.S. and NATO forces as soon as possible, while 43% said troops should stay until the situation stabilized.

The worldwide economic crisis could prove another source of tension as Obama attempts to address the problems at home. The 2008 global survey found that across the world's regions, most people see a connection between the American economy and their country's economic situation. And in many cases -- including in Britain, Germany, France, Japan and Australia -- the impact is seen as negative.

In an editorial, the *Japan Times* praises Obama and his campaign -- the newspaper called Obama's win a reminder that all things are possible in the U.S. -- but then it offers words of caution. "[T]he greatest challenge Mr. Obama now faces is reconciling the expectations of his supporters with the constraints he will inherit."

Der Spiegel also argues that more forceful leadership will be needed from European governments to complement Obama's approach to foreign affairs. With Bush "there were eight years of stubborn gridlock and nasty surprises. He did what he thought was right, often without consideration for the Germans or the French. It is said that Obama is a man who knows how to listen. But that is only an advantage when the others have something to say."

Obama Seen Through Local Prism

Across the globe, the media also examined the impact of Obama's victory on regional concerns, such as the long-standing conflicts in the Middle East. Not surprisingly, the various sides bring different perspectives and suggest conflicting strategies to the president-elect.

In an editorial entitled "Obama's Agenda", the *Jerusalem Post* says the key to any peace initiative involving Israel and its neighbors will be steps to contain Iran. The newspaper says that the inclination could be to fast-track Israel-Syria peace negotiations. "But we think Obama can be smarter than his predecessors by homing in on this harsh Middle East peacemaking reality. As long as the Islamic Republic of Iran remains on the ascendant, there will be no peace between Israel and the Palestinians, no way to bolster Palestinian moderates by chipping away at rejectionists, no treaty with Syria and no prospect of saving Lebanon," the paper's editorial page says.

But the *Khaleej Times* in Dubai says Obama must tackle the Palestinian issue if he hopes to make progress in the Middle East. In an editorial entitled, "Things to do for President Obama," the newspaper says that during the campaign "Obama went to great lengths to express his support for Israel, often angering Palestinians and Arabs. We believe those were the electoral compulsions of candidate Obama. Now that he has received a resounding mandate, we should hope he would be more reasonable and just in his dealings with the Palestinians and Israelis."

Meanwhile, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, quotes a Hamas leader, Mahmoud Zahar, saying he expects no quick changes in U.S. policy. Citing "what he believes to be undue Israeli influence on U.S. policy, he said he doesn't expect Obama to talk to Hamas, at least at the start of his presidency."

Meanwhile, economic and political powers also are taking the measure of the incoming president. On its website, the *China Daily* asks whether Obama's election would bring major change in the relationship between the two superpowers. The article cites Obama's criticism of China's currency practices and his pledge to step up the fight against unfair trade practices.

But analysts -- both Chinese and American -- tell the paper that the new administration will need to work with China to help get the economy on a better track: "Analysts say Obama owes a large part of his victory to the perception that he has a better grip on the economic crisis, but he has yet to prove this in reality. And how the U.S. cooperates with other nations, especially less-affected economies such as China, will prove important to him to turn these perceptions into reality."

Notes

¹ Translated from the original Italian. Translation by WatchingAmerica.com.

² Translated from the original French. Translation by Deutsche Welle.

³ Translated from the original German. Translation by SpiegelOnline.

⁴ Translated from the original French. Translation by Deutsche Welle.

⁵ Translated from the original Italian. Translation by WatchingAmerica.com.