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CRITICAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME

INAUGURAL ISSUE

BARACK OBAMA'S MODERATE MOMENT

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

On behalf of the Centre for American Studies at The University of Western Ontario, I am delighted to present the inaugural issue of *Critical Issues of Our Time*. This new publication series, which will be published four times a year, provides leading scholars with an opportunity to examine and comment on a wide range of political, cultural, social and economic issues that will confront the United States and its allies in the years ahead. Some of the subjects that will be explored include Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and the 2008 presidential election, politics and religion and culture and technology. It is our hope that the articles that appear in this publication will raise important questions about the challenges and opportunities confronting policymakers, as well as the various options they have at their disposal to improve the state of the union. To this end, we look to our contributors and to our readers to engage in debate and discussion about the subjects outlined in this and future issues In light of the historic election of President Barack Obama, we thought that it was fitting that the inaugural issue of this series be devoted to highlighting what the Obama presidency means to the United States and what steps the 44th president will have to take to restore America's image abroad. We are very fortunate that McGill University's Gil Troy, a leading historian of the United States, has provided us with a blueprint for what an Obama presidency will look like and what we can expect from President Obama and those who advise him in the months and years ahead. As the United States enters a new era, it is profoundly important that we think critically and methodically about the behavior of the world's remaining superpower. We have much to learn when it comes to understanding what takes place in the corridors of power in the United States. The conversation begins. Enjoy.

Donald Abelson
Director, Centre for American Studies

CRITICAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME

THE 2008 CAMPAIGN: BARACK OBAMA'S MODERATE MOMENT – AND AMERICA'S TOO?

Gil Troy

The 2008 American presidential election campaign was one of the most exciting political contests in decades.[i] For more than two years, and at a cost of an estimated $4.3 billion, the United States – and much of the world – seemed transfixed by the fight to select George W. Bush's successor. It is premature for historians to embrace the emerging conventional wisdom and declare this election a rare, realigning election, akin to the critical turning-point elections of 1840, 1860, 1896, 1932, and 1980. Still, the campaign did introduce a new, post-Reaganite, centrist vision for America that Barack Obama embodied and that became particularly compelling after the dramatic financial meltdown in the middle of the campaign. Whether or not a new centrist era has dawned remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it is important to understand just what that vision entailed – and why Americans found it so appealing.

The campaign was an extraordinary learning experience for all who watched – and produced a most unexpected result. Back in 2006, the conventional wisdom predicted that Election Day, 2008 would be the final round of the battle of the New York titans, pitting the Democratic New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton against the Republican former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani. Back then, when we thought about waking up at 3 AM, we usually associated it with an unwelcome run to the john, not the test of who was ready to lead – as depicted in Clinton's famous campaign commercial with the incessantly ringing phone. If we imagined a ceiling with

18 million cracks in it, we assumed it would shatter – especially a glass ceiling – rather than becoming a metaphor for Clinton's failure to secure the Democratic nomination despite winning nearly 18 million votes. When we feared meltdowns, it was because our kids were overprogrammed or undersupervised, not because our financial markets were overstretched and under-scrutinized. When we talked about "Joe the plumber" we grumbled about the guy who charged too much and came to our house too slowly, not some idealized version of the people's wisdom incarnate.

In those days, when we thought about the largest U.S. state, we wondered what its connection was with the dessert delicacy, Baked Alaska; we did not think about the half-baked ideas of the governor from Alaska, Sarah Palin. Moreover, the conventional wisdom in Washington described Joe Biden as a blow-dried, blowhard politician – he would barely win 11,000 votes in the 2008 primaries – rather than the ultimate democratic ideal, a working class kid from Scranton conjured into Beltway foreign policy guru. The most famous Barak in the world was Ehud, the Israeli defense minister. Dare I say it – the most famous Hussein was either Saddam or the late King of Jordan. And most Americans agreed that the most decent, nonpartisan, moderate United States Senator was John McCain.

So it was quite a ride. This election – like all its predecessors – imposed a stress test on American democracy, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. Political scientists who doubt the impact campaigns can have on votes will need to consider this roller-coaster of a campaign with its surprising outcome. Neither Barack Obama nor John McCain coasted to their respective party nominations. The lead in the general campaign switched at least three times. Most polls showed Obama leading much of the summer. McCain surged during and after the Republican National Convention. Then Obama pulled into the lead thanks to the financial meltdown and Obama's steadier debate performances. All of a sudden, Barack Obama, the 47-year-old rookie, appeared the more mature, more reliable potential president than John McCain, the grizzled 72-year-old veteran, who had been serving in Washington since 1982.

2008: The Unexpected Race for the Center

Despite all the talk since the 2000 campaign about America's division between the more traditional, provincial, Republican "red" states and the more modern, cosmopolitan, Democratic "blue" states, the two major party nominees in 2008 emerged from the center. This push for the middle repudiated Karl Rove's strategy in George W. Bush's 2004 re-election campaign, which sought to mobilize conservatives and evangelicals. This play to the right helped critics caricature President Bush as an extremist, and fed a yearning for more soothing and more centrist leadership. The unity which Bush promised to foster when he campaigned in 2000 and which Americans experienced due to the traumas of September 11, crumbled amid the dashed hopes of the Iraq War in 2003, the polarizing 2004 electoral strategy, and the charges of insensitivity and incompetence after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005. During his second term, George W. Bush watched his polls ratings drop to historically low levels, along with Americans' confidence in their country and in their future.

So it was quite a ride. This election – like all its predecessors – imposed a stress test on American democracy, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses.

The fights over the growing quagmire in Iraq became so divisive, and the relations between Republicans and Democrats in Washington so brittle, that senior leaders warned Americans not to lose perspective. By 2007, Connecticut's Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman complained: "There is something profoundly wrong when opposition to the war in Iraq seems to inspire greater passion than opposition to Islamist extremism." Defying his party's most passionate partisans, the 2000 Democratic vice presidential nominee complained of "a political climate where, for many people, when George Bush says 'yes,' their reflex reaction is to say 'no.' That is unacceptable."[ii] Launching his second term, California's Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said voters were "hungry for a new kind of politics, a politics

that looks beyond the old labels, the old ways, the old arguments." Watching this crucial state veer away from Bush and away from Ronald Reagan conservatism, Schwarzenegger vowed "to move past partisanship, past bipartisanship to post-partisanship." He defined post-partisanship instrumentally rather than ideologically, as "Republicans and Democrats actively giving birth to new ideas together."[iii] Schwarzenegger's post-partisanship was one of many national pleas for healing and one of many Republican demands for an effective, post-Bush strategy.

On the Republican side, John McCain was happy to answer that call. McCain was still smarting from the aggressive Bush tactics that he believed derailed his campaign for the Republican nomination in 2000. Since his election in 1986, the Arizona senator had established a reputation as one of the Senate's most effective bridge-builders. Most notably, he had been a key organizer of the "Gang of 14," the seven Democratic senators and seven Republican senators who in 2005 agreed to break the senatorial logjam over Bush's judicial nominations.

In the previous, 108th Congress, Democrats had blocked the confirmation of ten Bush judicial nominees using that arcane senatorial tactic, the filibuster. After George W. Bush won
re-election in 2004, the Republicans entered the 109th Congress with a 55 to 45 advantage in the Senate. Frustrated Republicans considered what Senator Trent Lott called the "nuclear" option, using their majority to prevent filibusters on confirmation votes.[iv] The deadlock represented the toxic partisanship that often threatened to stymie governance during both Bill Clinton's and George W. Bush's administrations. McCain's role in finding Democrats willing to confirm Bush's nominees and Republicans willing to forego the "nuclear option," made him one of Democrats' and reporters' favorite Republicans while annoying Republican partisans.

Surprisingly, despite McCain's experience, and his popularity with the press, he stumbled badly at the outset. Trying to run as Bush's inevitable successor, McCain failed to gain traction – or raise the amounts of money he needed. By July 2007, he was firing campaign workers as reporters speculated about an imminent campaign collapse. Desperate, McCain reverted to an identity he preferred, playing the underdog, the maverick. Ironically, as his leading opponents fizzled, especially New York's former mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Massachusetts' former governor Mitt Romney, and Arkansas' former governor Mike Huckabee, many voters turned to McCain as the inevitable, establishment candidate. McCain clinched the nomination pretty quickly and pretty easily, with primary victories on Super Tuesday in early February, after decisive wins in New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida.

Meanwhile, on the Democratic side, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton envied McCain's relatively easy waltz to the nomination and the deference his party ultimately showed him. Even more than McCain's initial campaign, the former first lady's strategy banked on her front-runner status and her supposed inevitability. In fact, her strategists so assumed she would triumph after the 24 primaries and caucuses held on Super Tuesday, February 5, that the campaign had few resources left when she failed to win decisively that day. Like McCain, Clinton also seemed energized by the opposition she never expected to face, and ran a more effective campaign into the spring. But, by then, the bad strategic choices she and her managers had made, such as neglecting caucus states in favor of primary states, made her efforts to win enough delegates futile.

In trying to build on her inevitability, Hillary Clinton had tried riding the anti-Bush backlash to the center. "I grew up in a middle-class family in the middle of America," Senator Clinton said when launching her presidential exploratory committee in January 2007, suggesting she was born to be balanced.[v] But in many ways, Clinton's identity was confused. Many veteran Clinton-watchers had long perceived her to be the more liberal of the Bill and Hillary Clinton power couple that dominated American politics for much of the 1990s. She was supposed to be the ideologue; he was supposed to be the pragmatist. As a senator, her vote supporting the Iraq War made her vulnerable to attacks from the left as a presidential candidate. During the campaign, her emphasis on her experience and her inevitability frequently made her centrism seem cynical or at least calculating, rather than lyrical or sincere.
Still, perhaps the biggest obstacle facing Hillary Clinton in her road to the White House was her agile, charismatic opponent. Barack Obama energized millions with his eloquence, his compelling campaign narrative, and his skill as a candidate. Although his roots were as leftist as Clinton's, his moderation seemed both more inspiring and more authentic.

Obama first came to national notice thanks to his powerful speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. At the time, he was not only a self-described, tall, skinny guy with a funny name, but his chances of becoming Illinois'

next U.S. senator were just becoming apparent. An Illinois state senator since 1997, the 43-year-old Obama had lost a Democratic congressional primary in 2000 and had faced a formidable Republican opponent for the Senate. Obama's rival, Jack Ryan, was a wealthy former investment banker who could afford to bankroll his own campaign. Fortunately for Obama, Ryan's confidential divorce records were unsealed. Chicago voters quickly learned that Ryan's ex-wife, the actress Jeri Ryan, charged that Ryan had pressured her to go to sex clubs during their marriage. Ryan abandoned the campaign, and was replaced by the controversial conservative carpetbagger Alan Keyes of Maryland. Obama's Convention speech – coming on the heels of Jack Ryan's abrupt withdrawal – made him a shoo-in for the Senate and launched him toward the White House.

Born in 1961, Obama brought a post-baby boomer sensibility to his campaign that helped differentiate his brand of Democratic politics from his older rivals.

In that speech, Obama articulated a new, multicultural, centrist nationalism for twenty-first century America. In his most famous passage, Obama repudiated the red-blue analysis – and polarizing demagoguery – of the Clinton-Bush era. "Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes," Obama said." Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America." And the hall rocked with applause. "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." The applause intensified. "The pundits, the pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue States: red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America."[vi] The Convention hall exploded in cheers – and, at that moment, a star was born.

Obama's campaign succeeded thanks to a powerful combination of shrewd tactics and soaring rhetoric. He and his staff ran a clever ground game that outsmarted and out-organized the supposedly formidable Clinton operation as his politics of hope inspired millions. "You ... came here because you believe in what this country can be," Obama told supporters who massed outside despite the chill of Springfield, Illinois on February 10, 2007 to help him launch his presidential quest. "In the face of war, you believe there can be peace. In the face of despair, you believe there can be hope. In the face of a politics that shut you out, that's told you to settle, that's divided us for too long, you believe that we can be one people, reaching for what's possible, building that more perfect union." This was vintage Obama, with calls for unity that could have been caricatured as mushy, anchored in his clear repudiation of the Iraq war. He peddled his centrist message with rhythms that rocked to the beat of the American gospel, and rhetoric rooted in the holiest text of America's civic cannon, all laced with a redemptive vision.

"What's stopped us is the failure of leadership," Obama said later in the speech, lamenting "the smallness – the smallness of our politics – the ease with which we're distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our preference for scoring cheap political points instead of rolling up our sleeves and building a working consensus to tackle the big problems of America."[vii] Here, Obama was targeting the Clintons as well as George W. Bush. Born in 1961, Obama brought a post-baby boomer sensibility to his campaign that helped differentiate his brand of Democratic politics from his older rivals.

In his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, and in *The Audacity of Hope*, the book he published in 2006, already anticipating the campaign, Obama championed what he called the "pragmatic, nonideological attitude of the majority of Americans."[viii] Obama told of a veteran Washington insider who contrasted the 1950s' civility with the more recent enmity, explaining: "it's generational."[ix] World War II produced politicians united by shared experiences that checked their partisanship. The sixties produced politicians still nursing grudges from that divisive, decisive decade. Obama shaped his identity as the next generation's standard bearer by rejecting the previous generation's polarizing politics.

Still, despite Obama's clear success, and the general disillusionment with the Clinton-Bush approach to politics, many were skeptical about the rush to the center. In a summertime column, entitled "Put Your Right Wing In, Take Your Left Wing Out," Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* mocked McCain's "Macarena: slide to the right on judges and guns, jump to the left on climate change and foreign alliances, pivot to the right on taxes and Iraq." A few weeks later, the *New York Times* dismissed Obama's "policy pirouettes." Many Americans defended partisanship, passionately. One Texas talk show host asked about moderates: "if you hang out in the middle of the road, doncha just end up as road kill?" This comment echoed the Texas populist Jim Hightower's 1997 polemic against his fellow Democrat Bill Clinton's centrism entitled: *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadilloes.*

Moderation: A Proud American Tradition

While there is a strong, vital tradition of partisanship in American politics, there is an equally vital pull toward the center. The middle has long been a very appealing, and very American, place to be. The Great American Center has a proud history of offering a muscular moderation, not a mushy middle. This is a moderation rooted in principle, tempered by pragmatism; rooted in nationalism, tempered by civility. It is the moderation of the American Revolutionaries who refused to descend into anarchy or replace one monarchy with another. It is the ethical balance of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his essay VII on politics, 1844, said "Governments have their origin in the moral identity of men. Reason for one is seen to be reason for another, and for every other. There is a middle measure which satisfies all parties, be they never so many, or so resolute for their own."[xii] And it is the restrained partisanship of New York Mayor Ed Koch, who said: "If you agree with me on nine out of twelve issues, vote for me. If you agree with me on twelve out of twelve issues, see a psychiatrist." [xiii]

The American commitment to moderation is as old as the republic itself. The Founding Fathers were enlightened rationalists who believed that reason could lead to the temperate and correct result. Moreover, their faith in their own reason fostered a tolerance, acknowledging that others, equally committed to reason, could come to opposing conclusions.

Nevertheless, the Founding Fathers were neither wimps nor pushovers. They fought passionately even as they displayed a genius for compromise. All of this was on display in what many consider to be the most significant dinner party in American history. It took place in June 1790, at 57 Maiden Lane in New York, not far from Wall Street. Thomas Jefferson, fresh from watching the French Revolution in Paris, newly-appointed as George Washington's secretary of state, was the host. His two guests Congressman James Madison of Virginia and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton of New York, had collaborated on the majestic Federalist papers to help ratify the Constitution.

Alas, now, these two friends were clashing regarding just how to bring that Constitution to life. Congressman Madison was spearheading the growing opposition to Secretary Hamilton's ambitious plans to consolidate financial power in the new federal government, while developing American's financial and industrial capability. Jefferson, an old friend of Madison's, did not yet know Hamilton well enough to loathe him.

"In general, I think it necessary to give as well as take in a government like ours," Jefferson proclaimed. [xiv] He would explain that he hosted the dinner because he believed that "men of sound heads and honest views needed nothing more than explanation and mutual understanding to enable them to unite in some measures which might enable us to get along."[xv] As the Madeira flowed, the three negotiated an elaborate compromise that helped launch America's financial system and located America's future capital between the North and the South – what became Washington, D.C.

The person who deserves perhaps the most credit for the compromise missed the dinner. President George Washington, who was fighting a serious flu at the time, had nevertheless laid the groundwork for this kind of approach with his leadership. Washington's way entailed encouraging what he called: "Liberal Allowances, Mutual Forbearances, and Temporizing Yieldings on All Sides."[xvi] His calls for Americans – and their leaders – to remember their "common cause"[xvii] helped America's ship of state set sail safely, and with stability, guided by a spirit of compromise.

Washington's sensibility did not avoid all conflicts, and a kind of partisanship the Founders feared quickly took hold. Still, Washington helped set a standard of reason, and carved out a role for the president as the national arbiter and national conscience, at a time when the Congress dominated. In many ways, the political

history of the first half of the nineteenth century could be defined as a cycle of compromise and partisanship, with Washington's way ultimately succumbing to the passions unleashed by the fight over slavery.

Although he was a hated figure in the South and presided over what he called the "great," (as in terrible) Civil War, Abraham Lincoln preserved Washington's tradition. The simplistic, Disney version of Abraham Lincoln casts him as the North's great avenger, rhetorically smashing slavery to smithereens even before he actually had the power to eradicate it. In fact, Lincoln was a cautious pragmatist, who knew that his primary task was to preserve the union by compromising to keep the slave-holding Border States in the Union while appeasing abolitionist forces.

Lincoln's hero was the Great Compromiser himself, Henry Clay. A legendary congressman, Speaker of the House, presidential candidate, and senator, Clay helped found the Whig Party, to which Lincoln belonged before he became a Republican. Moreover, Clay hailed from Kentucky, Lincoln's home state. Lincoln learned from Clay that partisanship and pragmatism were not necessarily contradictory. In American democracy, it was best to belong to a particular political party while also seeking the greatest good. Lincoln dreamed of governing with "all appetites controlled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected.... Hail, fall of Fury! Reign of Reason, all Hail!"[xviii] But, he was a shrewd enough observer of the American political system, and at the time a loyal enough Whig, to add in his eloquent eulogy for Clay in 1852 that: "The man who is of neither party is not – cannot be, of any consequence."[xix]

As president, Lincoln understood he frequently had to be reactive rather than ideological. He famously said "my policy is to have no policy."[xx] He also admitted: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."[xxi] In that spirit, the Emancipation Proclamation was not a ringing endorsement of freedom but a cautious offer of freedom for those slaves in territories still in rebellion months after the Lincoln issued the edict. The great historian Richard Hofstadter said the document had all the passion of an accountant's ledger.

As a leader, Lincoln was a master of indirection. He was happy to appear ignorant when convenient. Lincoln often mentioned the temperance preacher who refused liquor when offered to him, but informed his host who was preparing lemonade: "If you could manage to put in a drop unbeknownst to me, I guess it wouldn't hurt too much."[xxii] Similarly, he told an abolitionist pastor impatient with Lincoln's slow, gradual pace toward freeing the slaves, to blast him if it advanced the antislavery cause. The wily president wanted a push from more hotheaded abolitionists. He explained that you need to get pressure from both sides to effect change, and he certainly received enough pressure from those who wanted to appease the South and preserve slavery.

> George W. Bush stood as the courageous cowboy, riding the wave of fear and outrage generated by September 11, 2001 to re-election in November, 2004.

Thus, Lincoln's centrism was pragmatic but principled. He understood the importance of having a big picture perspective and bottom lines. But he also appreciated the need to be agile.

While Lincoln is rarely remembered as a moderate because of the passions unleashed by the Civil War, Theodore Roosevelt is rarely thought of as a moderate because his personality was so flamboyant. His acerbic daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth observed: "Father had to be the bride at every wedding, the baby at every christening, and the corpse at every funeral."[xxiii] In the White House, Roosevelt was equally domineering. "Whew, after an hour with him, you just have to wring his personality out of your clothes," one visitor to the Oval Office once muttered.

Roosevelt's centrism, however, emerged from his romantic nationalism, his commitment to being "president of the plain people."[xxiv] The phrase, which Roosevelt borrowed from Lincoln, justified Roosevelt's push to make the president a powerful force for nation building. And to Roosevelt, nation building entailed forging a popular center.

Many historians remember Roosevelt today as a "Progressive president," linking him to the turn-of-the-century urban-based reform movement. But President Roosevelt was a cautious Progressive. Much of his radical reputation stems from his more bombastic calls for reform in the 1912 campaign, when sought a comeback

after having retired from the presidency. In office from 1901 to 1909, Roosevelt often disappointed reformers with his cautious, consensus-building approach.

Roosevelt's legacy ended up being more about creating precedents that his successors could follow and expanding presidential power, rather than triggering dramatic changes. In the name of the people, he plunged into the kinds of situations previous chief executives would have avoided. But operating as president, he often found himself mediating between conflicting interest groups – or in the situation which earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, warring countries such as Russia and Japan.

Playing the role of arbitrator between the labor unions and the coal bosses, trying to resolve the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, Roosevelt was stung by one critic in particular. The president later recalled: "If it wasn't for the high office I held I would have taken him by the seat of the breeches and nape of the neck and chucked him out of that window."[xxv] Here, Roosevelt himself captured the tension between his spasmodic personal instincts – and his more dignified, restrained presidential performance.

Theodore Roosevelt's distant relative, Franklin D. Roosevelt, is also rarely thought of as a moderate. Critics and fans consider him America's great liberal reformer, for better or worse. To appreciate Franklin Roosevelt's centrism, we must consult the historian's favorite text – context. Franklin Roosevelt entered the presidency at a time when Americans were not sure their experiment in democratic capitalism would survive. Following the Bolshevik revolution, the intellectuals' love affair with Marxism, and the devastating Great Depression, radical solutions were gaining credibility. "Mr. President, if your program succeeds, you'll be the greatest president in American history," an admirer told Franklin Roosevelt when he assumed the presidency. "If it fails, you will be the worst one." Roosevelt replied: "If it fails, I'll be the *last* one."[xxvi]

During his legendary First Hundred Days, and throughout most of his first term, Roosevelt understood how to balance the radical forces demanding revolutionary change and the business powers-that-be seeking to preserve the status quo. Roosevelt's famous program of Relief, Recovery and Reform preserved private property and the basics of market capitalism while creating the modern American welfare state. Again and again, Roosevelt demonstrated real centrist mastery, understanding just how far he could push the country without overstepping.

Yet after his landslide re-election victory in 1936, Roosevelt stumbled. His infamous court-packing plan – to add as many as six new justices to America's nine-member Supreme Court – failed. Even many New Dealers resented what they feared was Roosevelt's assault on America's basic separation-of-power arrangements and thus the Constitution itself.

A nimble politician, Roosevelt learned his lesson. During the excruciating period beginning September 1939, when Americans were debating whether or not to enter World War II, Roosevelt shined. Offering a model of democratic leadership, he clearly had a vision, but he refused to rush too far ahead of public opinion. His careful, step-by-step, approach laid the groundwork for Americans' acceptance of their mission – once Japan ended the debate with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Thus, overall, while Roosevelt is remembered as a liberal superhero who defeated the Depression and the Nazis, he was actually a more deliberate and moderate leader who understood the importance of repositioning the center.

Trying to steady themselves in post-modern America's increasingly choppy seas, the three two-term presidents who dominated since 1980 improvised. Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, each rode particular popular waves toward the great American center, perched on a particular fragment of the political culture. Reagan stood as a patriotic hero, restoring mainstream America's confidence. Clinton stood as the Baby Boomers' values-man, cautiously triangulating amid apparent peace and prosperity. George W. Bush stood as the courageous cowboy, riding the wave of fear and outrage generated by September 11, 2001 to re-election in November, 2004.

Each also struggled with a dilemma linked to centrism. Ronald Reagan tried to lead a revolution from the center; his ideology repudiated the Great Society status quo, but his temperament, leadership techniques and patriotism tethered him to mainstream American public opinion. There "is an *opportunity here for base-broadening*," Reagan's aide Richard Darman advised in 1982, "– if we can keep 'conservatives' from being upset while showing the President as 'balanced,' *i.e.*, principled but willing to be reasonably flexible."[xxvii] The result was a revolution through the back door, or down the center aisle. Bill Clinton's dilemma concerned the

substance of his centrism. He rarely put any meat into his moderation, failing to use his popularity and American prosperity to solve big problems. George W. Bush seemed least interested in the center. While Bush united the public after September 11, he and his aides cared more about accomplishing their mission than remaining popular. Bush's house intellectual, Peter Wehner, explained that "many of our greatest and most successful leaders were polarizing and divisive figures in their day. Indeed, transformational, consequential figures – men and women who are agents of important change – are *almost always* polarizing."[xxviii]

> While managing America's four-century-old racial mess, Obama also had to tread carefully around America's four-decade-long culture war.

Of the three presidents, Reagan's luck held out longest. The surprise thaw in Soviet-American relations overshadowed the 1987 stock market crash and, the Iran-contra scandal. Reagan's happy ending vindicated the bipartisan consensus Harry Truman choreographed and his successors followed. Bill Clinton's triangulating values crusade foundered due to his own sins, as well as his limited approach – although, his popularity ratings soared with the stock market. Finally, George W. Bush found the elusive American center after 9/11 and during the short, initially successful, Afghan war, but his presidency became increasingly contentious and the nation dangerously polarized as the war in Iraq lengthened.

While, at their strongest, all three articulated an overarching, welcoming national narrative that transcended party identity, Reagan, Clinton, and Bush each had distinctive leadership styles. Reagan most succeeded in defining a meaningful and muscular middle. Although he frustrated conservatives by being too compromising, he pushed through some substantive changes. Tax cuts, deregulation, a retreat from assuming government could solve every problem, and a more assertive foreign policy reoriented America. That Reagan gussied up the package in his patriotic, Rooseveltian, dulcet tones, makes his achievement all the more impressive.

Modern America's most successful politicians, especially Presidents Reagan, Clinton and Bush, understood that Americans still spoke a common language – and wanted to hear a unifying voice. At their best, these leaders continued George Washington's quest for that broad middle, inviting citizens from both sides of the aisle, from all corners of this vast land, to open their hearts, minds, and eyes, to see, salute, and embrace a grand American vision that is neither solely red or blue, but red, white and blue.

This overview of presidential history shows that this approach of minimizing clashes, of seeking the public good, depends on a vigorous, romantic faith in American nationalism. Nationalism is a dirty word among most academics and too many liberals these days, tarred by the cruelty which aberrant forms of nationalism unleashed in the twentieth century. But nationalism has also fueled many modern miracles, with American's liberal democratic experiment perhaps the greatest success story. Without appeals to the national conscience, without a strong sense of a national purpose, Americans might not have healed the sectional divide, settled the West, won world wars, explored outer space, formed successful businesses or created the Internet. Americans need a creative leader to tap into that spirit of American nationalism at its best, and to renew a sense of collective mission even while retaining individual freedoms and prerogatives.

Obama's Vision of Twenty-First Century Centrism

In that spirit, while running his campaign, and trying to sing this song of centrism, Obama and the country faced serious challenges. Beyond the usual politics, Obama had to navigate around delicate racial issues, still–festering cultural tensions, the unexpected financial meltdown – the largest domestic cataclysm ever to occur in the final months of a presidential race – and the unrealistic hopes his candidacy fed as he progressed. While meeting these challenges, Obama not only beat Hillary Clinton, and then John McCain, he laid the ideological foundation for his presidency.

It was not surprising that racial questions shadowed a campaign that resulted in electing the first African-American president of the United States. The ambiguities surrounding Obama's racial identity are, of course, part of his legend. When he first announced his candidacy, some African-Americans doubted his authenticity as an

"African-American," although he, more than most, was quite literally African-American – the son of a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother. But Obama's story – told so famously in his first book, *Dreams from My Father* – was not the typical African-American tale. Unlike the message of John Howard Griffin's 1961 classic *Black Like Me*[xxix], Obama confronted his racial identity as a choice – he had to decide how much of his black heritage to embrace. Moreover, his birth in Hawaii, sojourn to Indonesia as a young boy, and years in an elite prep school, top colleges, and Harvard Law School, even his years as a community organizer, emphasized just how atypical his story was. In one rare ugly moment in the campaign, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, one of the iconic Baby Boom black leaders, was heard in an unguarded moment before a Fox News TV appearance criticizing "Barack" for "talking down to black people." Further, as the Fox News anchor Brit Hume delicately put it, the veteran civil rights leader, "threatened to cut off a certain part of Obama's anatomy."[xxx]

At the start of the campaign, I, for one, thought the central challenge to Obama's success was not that he might be too black but too green – inexperienced. Still, there was a great deal of speculation about white racism and the "Bradley effect," named after Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, who lost the 1982 California gubernatorial campaign. Some pollsters attributed the discrepancy between Bradley's pre-election polls and his vote totals to many white's unwillingness, in the privacy of the voting booth, to vote for a black candidate. More crudely, one internet image superimposed a George Washington-style wig, on a picture of John McCain with the caption: "He's white! He's Christian! He's male! He's got a powdered Whig! McCain: THE TOTAL PACKAGE."[xxxi]

Racial issues – and the specter of black anger – threatened Obama's campaign in mid-March, 2008, when the seesaw in vote counts and delegate totals between him and Clinton was intensifying. Reporters uncovered incendiary videotapes of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's preacher and spiritual mentor, denouncing America. "We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York, and we never batted an eye," Wright said in a sermon after September 11, suggesting "America's chickens" had come "home to roost" that day. "We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is brought right back in our own front yards."[xxxii] In a 2003 sermon, Wright mocked the phrase "God Bless America," proclaiming: "No, no, no, God damn America…."[xxxiii]

Had Clinton's opposition-research team uncovered these tapes before Obama won the Iowa caucuses in January 2008, Hillary Clinton probably would have won the nomination. But by March, Obama had amassed considerable momentum – and cemented the loyalty of millions of Democrats. Still, the Wright controversy endangered Obama's candidacy and his message of patriotic centrism, especially because just weeks before, Michelle Obama had misspoken. In a line used to feed a stereotype of Mrs. Obama as an angry black woman, she was heard saying: "People in this country are ready for change and hungry for a different kind of politics and ... for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback."[xxxiv] The fact that Michelle Obama, born in 1964, had lived through and benefitted from the civil rights movement, but suggested she had never before been proud of her country, rankled. Her remarks, together with the Reverend Wright's vitriol, fed fears that Obama was in fact a radical black separatist masquerading as a mild-mannered moderate.

Confronting the challenge directly, Obama delivered an address in Philadelphia denouncing Wright's words, while placing them in the context of America's tortured racial past. Cleverly using the controversy to restate his life story, Obama described himself as a glorious hybrid, carrying America's past and future in his mixed blood. He declared: "I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible." He acknowledged that his past "hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one."[xxxv]

In another powerful passage, Obama described the Reverend Wright's Trinity Church as a typical black church, which "embodies the black community in its entirety – the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias, that make up the black experience in America." [xxxvi]

Saying, "Not this time" to efforts to derail his quest, Obama challenged Americans to move beyond racism, beyond recriminations, and beyond the campaign's petty distractions. Remember the issues that count, he insisted. Restating one of his central themes, he invited Americans to reject the sideshows and focus on what matters.

While managing America's four-century-old racial mess, Obama also had to tread carefully around America's four-decade-long culture war. In one of many bewildering campaign moments during the Obama-Clinton slugfest, somehow Hillary Clinton ended up bonding with the lower-class white males she had so often alienated during her years as first lady. Particularly in the Pennsylvania primary, the Wellesley undergraduate who turned down Harvard Law to attend Yale Law – where she met her husband – emerged as the candidate of the beer-bellied bowlers. In an ironic tribute to the fluidity of America he so often celebrated, Barack Obama, on his way to becoming the first African-American president, was tagged as a Harvard elitist.

Obama's awkwardness in some working-class campaign settings – and his embarrassing performance bowling – laid the groundwork. But controversy flared in mid-April when a remark Obama made at a San Francisco fundraiser became public. Talking about the people in the small towns in Pennsylvania and the Midwest who had lost jobs "through the Clinton Administration, and the Bush Administration," Obama said: "it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." [xxxvii]

These remarks represented a rare gaffe on Obama's part – while meeting the definition of a gaffe being a politician caught in the act of saying what he believes. Still, Obama did not need to mount the kind of defense on the cultural issues that he did on the race issues. Also, by mid-April, Obama's delegate count was inching ever higher, as the strategic mistakes of the Clinton campaign and Clinton's initial difficulty in crafting a message sank her campaign.

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When the Obama-Clinton slugfest finally finished in early June, it was hard to tell whether the bitter clash had weakened or strengthened Obama. The Wright and "bitter" controversies had highlighted potential weaknesses Republicans could exploit in the fall. But having overcome those challenges, defeated the legendary Clintons, and uncorked the great hopes of so many, Obama entered the fall campaign as the front runner.

According to the polls, the lead switched after the Republican National Convention. Initially, John McCain's selection of Alaska's Governor Sarah Palin as a running mate appeared to be a masterstroke. It saved the convention from a revolt of conservatives and Evangelical Protestants. It appealed to women disappointed by Hillary Clinton's narrow, still-surprising, heartbreaking loss. And Sarah Palin's acceptance speech impressed many fence-sitters while momentarily stunning Democrats, including Obama. "Before I became governor of the great state of Alaska, I was mayor of my hometown," Palin said. "And since our opponents in this presidential election seem to look down on that experience, let me explain to them what the job involves. I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a 'community organizer,' except that you have actual responsibilities," she beamed, to enthusiastic applause. [xxxviii]

The Obama campaign was relatively quiet following the Republican convention, as the McCain campaign rallied. But eleven days after the convention ended, on September 15, 2008, the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted 4.4 percent, by 504 points. Within a week,

the Dow Jones had dropped by 800 points. The financial meltdown had begun – dooming the McCain campaign. It was not only that this disaster seemed to the final debacle in the George W. Bush presidency, the crash seemed to offer a negative verdict on the entire Reagan Revolution. McCain, who had admitted during the primaries that he was no economics whiz, appeared to be particularly hapless. When he abruptly suspended his campaign because of the emergency, for no real reason, then appeared jumpy and erratic during the debates, his fate was sealed. Obama's coolness and calm, particularly during the debates, made him appear the mature veteran in the race, catapulting him to the presidency.

The scope of the financial crisis made the campaign feel more portentous, more of a political, cultural, ideological turning point. With predictions that the crisis would linger, it was hard to know how Americans would react in this new age of limits. The boom had fed a bipartisan age of excess. The supposedly left-leaning media was as responsible for feeding the frenzy as the country's supposedly right-leaning policies – which Clinton Democrats not only accepted but championed. The collective fascination with the lifestyles of the rich and famous had distorted Americans' perspective on money and material possessions. Few took responsibility for the warped outlook, and few connected the dots between the indulgent consumer culture and the toxic political culture of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush years. But it was hard to expect moderation from leaders when Americans had lost much of their sense of temperance as shoppers and as a body politic.

All these challenges, combined with the deep sense of hope Obama generated, raised the stakes in what had already become an historic presidential race. For all his coolness, Barack Obama stirred great passions. Before he announced his candidacy, one cartoonist had pictured Obama saying, "The 2008 presidential race? I'm testing the waters" – while walking on water.[xxxix] Throughout his campaign, wags joked about Obama's aspirations to greatness, his soaring rhetoric, his occasional grandiosity. The iconic multicolored poster picturing Obama looking into the distance and promising "HOPE" was transformed into a poster with the same color scheme of Obama draped in robes, crowned with a halo and, raising his right hand celestially, with the caption: "OBAMA 08 FOR MESSIAH – HEALS THE LAME AND PROMISES HEALTH CARE."[xl] Americans began approaching Obama's election with unrealistically high expectations, especially given the problems.

Amid this dramatic background, this rollercoaster campaign culminated in a momentous, magical, redemptive night. Late Tuesday night November 4, and early Wednesday morning, Senators Barack Obama and John McCain both spoke beautifully. Both offered a magnificent display of the grace, civility, and patriotism that could heal America, even during such painful times.

While rituals help us all navigate life's highs and lows, often elevating our actions, they also risk imprisoning us in rote behaviors. Concession speeches and victory speeches are usually mechanical, more formulaic than transcendent, because everyone knows the speech-maker is play-acting. Few losers or winners are as gracious as their election night speeches suggest.

Happily, both Barack Obama and John McCain ended the drawn-out, often bitter 2008 campaign on a high note. McCain conceded with the grace and non-partisanship for which he had been famous – and which often seemed MIA – Missing in Action – during his campaign. For his part, Obama's speech was masterful. Although it started a tad grandiose, as he associated his personal triumph with America's redemption, the rest sparkled. Understanding the daunting challenges ahead, he called, F.D.R.-style, for a spirit of community and self-sacrifice. Acknowledging the more than 48 million voters who voted against him, he reached out to his opponents. And, distancing himself from the Bush Administration, Obama also appealed to the good people around the world listening in – while warning America's foes not to underestimate him.

As an added bonus for historians, Obama's story about Ann Nixon Cooper, the 106-year-old African-American woman who voted for him, offered a wonderful trip-tych of twentieth century history, with a special emphasis on the historic nature of his achievement. Obama noted that Mrs. Cooper was born "just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons – because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin." Characteristically, Obama punctuated this ode to his predecessors, his own achievement and his country with the supposedly "timeless" but actually quite contemporary and Obamian credo "Yes We Can."

Many students of the presidency are suckers for charismatic leaders singing a compelling, optimistic song. The office's unique mix of king and prime minister makes generating hope part of the skill set for a successful presidency. During the Great Depression of

the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt showed how an upbeat leader could boost the American people's sense of well-being along with his own popular and historical standing. Half-a-century later, Ronald Reagan duplicated Roosevelt's achievement, reassuring inflation-weary, Vietnam-traumatized Americans. The United States needs an arm-twister-in-chief to get things done, and a cheerleader-in-chief to make Americans feel good about their country and themselves.

You needed a heart of stone not to be moved by watching the joy that swept America – but you needed a head of straw not to worry about just how Obama would succeed.

The outpouring of emotion when Obama clinched his victory was thrilling. Little more than a decade earlier, when O.J. Simpson was found innocent of two murders, cameras recorded cheering blacks and morose whites, emphasizing a split-screen America. On this magical night of overcoming, the cameras showed blacks and whites crying together, laughing together, celebrating together, hoping together, in a tableau of healing.

You needed a heart of stone not to be moved by watching the joy that swept America – but you needed a head of straw not to worry about just how Obama would succeed. His calls for unity could only last if he could govern in the same expansive and moderate spirit his speech that night evoked. Hope is like a balloon, able to captivate and elevate, but also easily over-inflated or easily destroyed by just the right pin prick. Politics itself is an odd mix of noble aspirations with ruthless ambition, high-minded ideals with thuggish tactics. Investing so much emotion in any mortal invites disappointment. Sixteen years earlier, a young, charismatic candidate had come, quite literally, from a place called Hope. Within weeks of his election, Bill Clinton had frittered away much of the positive emotion surrounding his candidacy, primarily by backpedaling on the gays in the military issue, which stemmed from an off-the-cuff question Andrea Mitchell of NBC asked that he should have dodged. In fairness to Clinton, he answered the question sincerely, hoping to end discrimination in the military. But the politics proved too volatile for a sixties-radical who had manipulated the draft rules, and Clinton settled on the "Don't ask don't tell policy." Amid the other great challenges Barack Obama faced was the danger of disappointing the millions who placed so much faith in him.

Ultimately, then, in addition to asking the perennial question "who will lead America," the campaign raised at least four other questions:

- Can We Enter A New Era for Race Relations?
- Can We End the Culture Wars?
- Can Americans Embrace a New Age of Austerity?
- Can This Superhero Save America?

Regarding race relations, ironically, Obama's identity as a black candidate solidified as he came closer and closer to getting elected. After some initial hesitation, and some grousing by Jesse Jackson and his peers, the African American community mobilized by the millions to elect Obama. Much of the Election Night emotion had to do with the pride and joy Americans felt in overcoming their ugliest prejudices – and doubters – by putting a black man in the White House. The television cameras zeroed in on Jesse Jackson shedding a tear, and Oprah Winfrey looking delirious, to emphasize this as a moment of racial redemption. But after Obama worked so hard to be accepted as a politician, there was something jarring in this celebration of him as a black politician.

In his Inaugural Address, President Obama returned to the healing celebration of diversity that helped launch his meteoric rise, asserting a modern, multicultural patriotism for the twenty-first century. "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness," he declared. "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth." Significantly, in this passage he emphasized religious differences rather than racial ones, although he followed by referring to the racial past, saying: "And because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." Obama used that four letter word – race – toward the very end of his speech, when he made the only reference to the unprecedented nature of his ascension. "This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed," he said, "why men and women and children of

every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall. And why a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath."[xli]

Obama, then, was continuing to walk the fine line he had followed throughout his career. Without ignoring the racial issue, he wanted to downplay it. He preferred to use the powerful symbolism of the first black man in the White House as a bankshot to celebrate America's "patchwork heritage,"[xlii] or, as he had said when he officially launched his candidacy in Springfield, America's search for a "more perfect union," obviously well aware of the phrase's historic resonance.[xliii]

Rather than fighting the culture wars, Barack Obama was displaying his generational sensibility by trying to transcend the Baby Boomer's cultural tensions. More conciliator than crusader, a thinker and a doer but not an ideologue, he represented an unnamed, often overlooked but now significant demographic cohort. Too young to have rebelled during the sixties, too old to be Generation X slackers, post-Boomers were, typically, defined in contrast to the loud, self-referential, preceding generation that dominated public consciousness since 1946 – and whose combative legacy Obama vowed to overcome. Sandwiched between pioneering older siblings and the younger "Generation X" slackers, Obama and others of his peers, this author included, rejected the assumption that everything comes down to politics and appreciated the power of culture.

Although many demographers treat those, like Obama, born in 1961, as Boomers, the children of the generation know the difference. Post-Boomers were more defined by the Technicolor goofiness of the Brady Bunch, one of Michelle Obama's favorite TV shows, rather than the black and white staidness of Ozzie and Harriet. They watched the anti-war protests on television rather than participating in them – or claiming to have done so years later. Children of Vietnam and Watergate, gas lines and stagflation, busing crises and crime waves, post-Boomers imbibed the 1970s' pessimism and cynicism – the first decade since the Great Depression wherein Americans' standard of living dropped – rather than the 1960s' affluence and exuberance. Over the last forty years, they watched dejectedly as the toxic partisan battles between the Goldwaterites and the McGoverniks escalated into the toxic partisan battles between the Bushies and the Clintonites. In response, many, most especially Barack Obama, sought to move beyond the artificial, polarizing divides of red versus blue America.

Obama has admitted to feeling "a curious relationship to the sixties."[xliv] Although during the late 1970s and early 1980s, he dipped into the waters of rebellion and "self-indulgence," he ultimately recoiled from this "self-destructiveness."[xlv] He built his career rejecting the Baby Boomers' slice-and-dice polarizing politics. Obama attacked Boomers more pointedly earlier on; by the 2008 campaign he pulled his punches, needing votes from that cohort too.

Just as Ronald Reagan modeled his leadership style on the dominant president of his youth, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Barack Obama shaped his assumptions about the presidency in response to the two presidents he scrutinized while maturing: Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

During the primary campaign, when Obama confessed to a Nevada newspaper that he admired Ronald Reagan's transformational leadership, Hillary Clinton tried caricaturing Obama as a Reaganite. Obama stopped invoking Reagan, but the interview was revealing. Like many of his peers, Obama admired Reagan's leadership style and accomplishments – especially after the string of presidential failures that culminated with Carter. Just as Reagan revitalized a sense of American nationalism with a conservative, small town tinge, Obama hoped to revitalize American nationalism with a progressive, multicultural twist.

But Obama also learned from Reagan's successes – and the sixties radicals' failures – that culture counts. Obama understood that it was not just politically self-destructive for the left to reject faith, family and the flag, but that those fundamentals provide essential social glues. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama recognized "the power of culture to determine both individual success and social cohesion." [xlvi] This seemingly innocuous remark rejected decades of most left-wing theorizing that put the onus on politics, particularly on racism and capitalism's economic disparities, to explain both individual failure and social dysfunction. Obama's conclusion that "our government can play a role in shaping that culture for the better," rejected Reagan's anti-government assumptions. At the same time, Obama's formulation cleverly accepted Reagan's assumption that tradition and culture count. Obama learned from the conservative critique that too many sixties liberals forgot to affirm core American values amid their cultural rebellion. Again and again,

Obama proved that, intellectually he was a child of the 1980s as well as the 1960s. [xlvii]

During the campaign, and especially during the general election, Obama simply tried to avoid issues that would spark new battles in the culture wars. Republicans tried stereotyping him as a geeky, Harvardian, elitist snob with far-out radical views and friends. But invoking Obama's cordial but not exceptionally close friendship with a relatively obscure radical, Bill Ayers, to mobilize the "values voters" who supposedly swayed the election in 2004, was a stretch – and it failed. Obama's election, therefore, suggested that Americans might be ready to move beyond the culture wars that had proved so useful to some politicians and so destructive to the body politic since the 1960s.

Although the financial meltdown helped elect Barack Obama, it also posed his first major headache upon election. Beyond the tremendously complex issue of how to manage the recession, the question of how Americans would handle the new age of austerity actually gave Obama an opportunity to try reshaping American values. Although Obama was closer to Jimmy Carter than Ronald Reagan ideologically, the Carter presidency mostly showed Obama what mistakes to avoid. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama mocked Carter for responding to monumental crises by feebly offering to lower the thermostat. Carter's sourpuss response offered a doctrine of defeatism, suggesting Americans should get used to living within limits.

Remembering the ensuing backlash propelled Obama toward a different strategy. Echoing Franklin D. Roosevelt, Obama chose to characterize this new age of austerity as temporary but able to yield some lasting benefits. If Americans could use the fleeting limits on indulging in so many goodies to reorient back towards building a community committed to the greater good, America would weather the bad times more easily. Moreover, Americans would all prosper economically, spiritually, socially, and nationally when the good times returned.

Obama articulated his post-partisan new American nationalism in his inauguration, saying: "So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other. Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers – in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people." Obama reminded Americans of their ancestors, of their earlier leaders, who "saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction."[xlviii] Here, Obama was applying another Reaganite lesson, making sure to be positive and inspirational, rather than Carteresque and dour.

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At his inauguration, facing two million freezing but ecstatic people huddled together on Washington's majestic mall – and addressing hundreds of millions watching worldwide – Barack Obama seemed sobered by what he had unleashed. The messianic hopes his election triggered and the devastating economic crisis made his inaugural tone far more subdued than his poetic election night address. Still, while not trying to be a superhero, Obama did want to restore Americans' self-confidence. "Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions, who suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans. Their memories are short, for they have forgotten what this country has already done, what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose and necessity to courage."

Moreover, Obama made it clear that he believed the Reagan era was over – and he was going to use Reagan-style leadership to loosen the grip of Reaganite anti-government ideology on the country. Ronald Reagan in his 1981 inaugural address said: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."[xlix] Fifteen years later, positioning himself for a centrist re-election run, Bill Clinton declared in his 1996 State of the Union Address: "The era of big government is over."[l] Now, in 2009, facing a financial crisis many were quick to compare to the Great Depression, Barack Obama gave his variation on the theme. He said: "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works, whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified."[li]

Barack Obama's election, thus, represented more than just a personnel change. Obama hoped to change America's direction, and to offer new, moderate answers to some of the questions bewitching the country. To answer the question "can we enter a new era in race relations?", Obama offered his modern, multicultural patriotism. To answer the question "can we end the Culture Wars?", Obama developed his post-baby-boomer cultural conservatism. To cope with this new age of austerity, Obama articulated a new, post-partisan, American nationalism. And faced with sobering news and soaring expectations, trying to answer questions about whether this superhero can save America, Obama offered his post-Reaganite liberalism. He would not go back to the days of the Great Society where every problem seemed to invite a big governmental solution, but neither would he revert to the Reaganites' instinctive suspicion regarding government in general. And to the broader question of whether he could pull off his ambitious plans, this 47-year-old superstar gave his campaign's answer – and slogan – "yes we can."

Of course, as George Washington himself emphasized, the spirit of enlightened moderation, a culture of reasonableness, cannot only be generated by the Commander-in-Chief. Americans must take more responsibility for what they are collectively doing to their politics, their culture, their country, and themselves. The escapist combination of partisanship, cynicism, and frivolity which defines too much contemporary culture invites flights from responsibility; the privileges of citizenship, the needs for our time, invite – and demand – the opposite.

All Americans should begin finding their inner moderate. They should reward muscular moderates who lead from the center. They should repudiate those who through vitriol, demagoguery or mockery divide, polarize, or distract from important issues at hand to attract entertainment dollars or score some cheap political points. Americans need to learn the lessons of George Washington's enlightenment, Abraham Lincoln's flexibility, Theodore Roosevelt's nationalism, Franklin Roosevelt's experimentation, Harry Truman's bipartisanship, Dwight Eisenhower's consensus-building, John Kennedy's principled malleability, and Ronald Reagan's muscular moderation.

Citizens in a democracy get the leadership they deserve, for better or worse. If Americans collectively revitalize the center, presidents will become center-seekers; if they demand the best of their leaders, they just might get the best leaders. Barack Obama's candidacy frequently appealed to Americans at their best. How this will translate into actual governance remains to be seen.

End Notes

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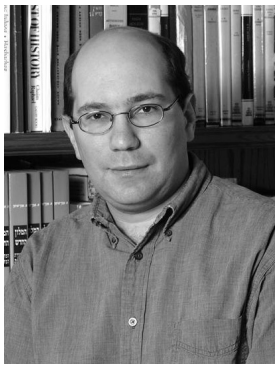

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