

Obama Wins. Where from Here?

Peaceworks salutes the American people. The choice of Barack Obama over John McCain bodes well for our future. While Peaceworks cannot endorse candidates or work in the electoral arena, now that the election is over, we certainly can say that Obama's platform is closer to our agenda than McCain's.

This said, Peaceworks will not be an automatic cheering squad for the incoming Obama administration. But neither will we stand in consistent opposition, as was necessitated by virtually every action taken by the Bush administration. An appropriate role for an educational and advocacy group like Peaceworks is to support an administration's actions when we can and to oppose them when we must. Moreover a major component of our work is to strive to influence their policies so that they are more likely to be ones we can support.

Historic Nature of Obama's Victory

Obama's victory is something to applaud for several reasons. First of all, for the past eight years the Bush administration had taken our country down the road to ruin. They engaged in wars of aggression while ramping up already bloated military budgets to unprecedented levels. They trampled on civil liberties and spied on the citizenry. They ignored or exacerbated pressing environmental and energy crises. Their policies accelerated the skewing of wealth distribution to favor the well heeled, while they ignored the needs of the least among us. And they generally mismanaged the economy. A McCain victory would have been a vote to continue on this disastrous course. Thankfully, the American people realized this and chose a new direction.

Although it almost goes without saying, we should make it explicit: Obama's victory is indicative of the progress made by the people of the United States in overcoming a legacy of racism. While we still have work to do on this front, the American people should be saluted for having the collective maturity not to let themselves get sidetracked by fears over difference.

Finally, more than any other presidential campaign in recent memory, Obama 2008 took on the trappings of a movement. Hundreds of thousands of people were activated, many for the first time, to work for a campaign that promised meaningful change.

It will, of course, take more than electing a president to realize thoroughgoing change. It will take sustained activism linked more to a vision of a peaceful, just and sustainable future, than to the support of any candidate, no matter how eloquent or charismatic. Getting active, however, is a critical first step, so we can also celebrate the hope, optimism and positive energy that this "campaign for change" generated.

Relating to the Obama Movement & to the Obama Presidency

Barack Obama comes to office in large part due to the ability of his campaign to mobilize the mass participation of citizens from all backgrounds, ages, races and classes, with a disproportionate participation by youth, particularly the so-called millennial generation. These activists—many newly engaged—became involved both out of profound frustration with the direction that the Bush administration was taking our country and because Obama offered an optimistic, hopeful vision of a future that will work for all.

It is not, however, these cadres of volunteers who will be called upon to fill an Obama cabinet, serve as key advisors or fill critical positions in Federal agencies. Rather, Obama, whose campaign was headed up by Washington insiders, and whose platform was written by a similar group of establishment figures, will most likely draw upon the talents of familiar, inside-the-beltway hands.

The agenda of an Obama presidency will presumably come out of the platform that Barack Obama ran on, and this is a decidedly centrist agenda. One of the challenges we in Peaceworks will face in the months ahead is to positively engage those in the Obama movement who may be reflexively supportive of the actions of an Obama administration, even when that administration's agenda is in direct opposition to the political vision held by members of the movement. We must encourage them to promote their beliefs and encourage the Obama administration to move in a progressive direction, rather than backing retrograde positions simply because they are taken by Barack Obama.

For example, most in the Obama movement do not want to see an escalation of the war in Afghanistan. Most do not favor capital punishment. Most opposed retroactive immunity for the telecoms who violated the FISA law. Most do not want to see new coal or nuclear plants built. And most opposed the \$700 billion bailout of Wall St.

We will need to reach out to these activists and encourage them to identify more as members of the peace movement, the economic justice movement, and the sustainability movement. While we appreciate the many months of hard work that went into electing Obama, we need to encourage his supporters to recognize that the election is just one step in a positive direction, and once in office, the Obama administration needs to be encouraged to embrace positions that really move our nation and the world forward.

Moving Forward, Concrete Examples

There are a number of fronts on which real change is critically needed, but there are strong reasons to question whether the incoming Obama administration will, of their own accord, bring about these changes. This is where Peaceworks and other progressive groups will need to apply the rule of supporting where we can, opposing where we must and working to move those in the seats of power in our direction. Here are a few examples to illustrate this:

Energy & Climate Change

One of our top priorities is the transformation of our energy economy. This is necessary to address the dual imperatives of global climate change and finite supply. The Obama platform calls for a greener energy future—and his platform is definitely greener than McCain's or Bush's—but, as so often is the case, the devil is in the details.

Renewables: The President-elect calls for a significant increase in spending on renewable energy, but his goals are actually quite modest. Today, renewable sources supply approximately 10 percent of our electricity. Obama calls for bringing this up to 25 percent by 2025. (See: http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/factsheet_energy_speech_080308.pdf) Moreover, the amount Obama proposes to spend on clean energy (\$150 billion over 10 years, or \$15 billion per year) is not nearly sufficient (and annually is the equivalent of just one month's expenditure on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars).

Al Gore, on the other hand, calls for a national commitment to clean energy that will allow us to achieve zero fossil fuel use for electricity by 2018. This would mean 80 percent of our electricity coming from renewables in 10 years, as opposed to 25 percent in 17 years. Moreover, considering that 10 percent already comes from renewable sources, Obama is calling for adding 15 percent in 17 years, while Gore believes we can add 70 percent in 10 years.

Gore is not alone. The Google Clean Energy 2030 Plan (see: <http://knol.google.com/k/-/-/15x31uzlqeo5n/1#>) calls for reducing electric demand by one-third through efficiency improvements, and then replacing fossil fuels with green renewable sources. The Google energy team lays out the basis for "replacing all coal and oil electricity generation, and about half of that from natural gas, with

renewable electricity” by 2030. Their plan calls for 380 gigawatts (GW) wind (300 GW onshore + 80 GW offshore), 250 GW solar (170 GW photovoltaic + 80 GW concentrating solar power), and 80 GW geothermal (15 GW conventional + 65 GW enhanced geothermal systems). We have yet to see anything like this from the Obama campaign.

Coal & Nuclear: Obama talks a lot about green jobs and renewables, but his platform calls for more coal plants and more nuclear plants. Repeatedly in the campaign he called for “clean coal” and his platform states that “It is unlikely that we can meet our aggressive climate goals if we eliminate nuclear power as an option.”

But, in fact, he has this backwards. Both coal and nuclear are diversions, misdirecting our attention and our money away from the quick and cost-effective energy solutions: efficiency and renewables.

So-called “clean coal” with carbon sequestration technology is unproven and may be unattainable. A best case scenario offers the potential for deployment in the 2020s—too long to wait, given the imperative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions now—and there is no assurance that sequestration would work. Likewise, nuclear power is so expensive that, even if it had no other drawbacks, investing in nukes is counterproductive. Far more net energy can be attained more quickly via efficiency and renewables.

Both Al Gore’s 10-Year Challenge and the Google 2030 Plan are based upon efficiency and renewables. Neither call for building any new coal or nuclear plants. Obama shouldn’t either.

Sustainable energy advocates with long memories find ourselves hoping we’re not about to see a rerun of the Carter years, a period when renewables and conservation got considerable lip service, but energy policy and most of the money tilted to the politically powerful fossil fuel and nuclear industries.

War & Peace

Another key area of Peaceworks concern is U.S. foreign policy. Here, again, we are deeply concerned about the Obama platform and Obama’s team of foreign policy advisors.

Militarism and the U.S. Role in the World: There has been a bipartisan consensus for the past six decades that the United States should maintain its role as the world’s dominant military power. We are a nation with 4.5 percent of the world’s population spending half the world’s military expenditures each year, while maintaining more than 750 bases in 151 foreign countries. The national leadership of both the major parties has consistently supported this vision of the American place in the world order.

While portrayed in the media as a “peace candidate,” Obama has done nothing to question the role the United States plays on the world stage. In fact, he’s been calling for increasing the size of the American military. Moreover, he has surrounded himself with advisors who have a track record of support for vision of U.S. global domination. Obama has a Senior Working Group on Foreign Policy. It includes the likes of former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Warren Christopher, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and hawkish former House and Senate committee chairs Lee Hamilton and Sam Nunn.

Then there’s Obama’s choice of Joe Biden for VP. Biden has for many years been a proponent of what are called “humanitarian interventions,” like those that got the U.S. involved in making war on the former Yugoslavia back in the 1990s. He also was a strong backer of the Iraq invasion.

It is no surprise, therefore, to hear that Colin Powell endorsed Obama, or that Obama has chosen Rahm Emanuel as his Chief of Staff, or that he is considering 2004 pro-war nominee John Kerry for either Secretary of State or Defense.

Iraq: Barack Obama arguably became a leading contender for the Democratic nomination on the basis of his early and outspoken opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He is to be commended for his 2002 opposition to initiating what has proven to be a disastrous war.

This said, his current policy on Iraq does not repudiate the key objectives of Bush's Iraq policy—the establishment of a pliant client state in Iraq that will further the longstanding U.S. goal of geopolitical domination of the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. Rather, Obama aims to withdraw U.S. combat troops while maintaining tens of thousands of troops in Iraq to train and back up the Iraqi military. Other troops would be redeployed in the Persian Gulf region.

Further, his criticisms of the Iraq War focus on it being a strategic mistake, rather than it being wrong. We never hear Obama invoke the Nuremberg Principles or the UN Charter, calling attention to the fact that unprovoked aggression is illegal. Nor does he question the morality of a war that has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands—if not more than a million—Iraqis.

Rather, his stump speeches consistently focus on what the Iraq War is costing U.S. taxpayers. While this is a legitimate concern—one that we raise as well—when presented by itself, without any reference to the war being illegal or wrong, and without any reference to the plight of the Iraqi victims of U.S. aggression, it presents a perspective that is very dangerous.

In short, the U.S. War on Iraq is an imperial war of aggression, but Obama, despite his initial opposition and his promises to “end” the war, now portrays the U.S. occupation as something that serves our national security and interests. For example, in his victory speech Tuesday night he stated: “Even as we stand here tonight, we know there are brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan to risk their lives for us.” While we in Peaceworks are sympathetic to the plight of the military personnel assigned to these wars, we certainly don't view them as taking actions in our interests.

All this said, if Obama takes actions to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, we will applaud this and encourage further steps to end the neo-colonial apparatus the Bush administration has set up there.

Afghanistan: Obama regards Afghanistan as the “central front in the war on terror” and proposes major increases in U.S. troop levels there. Peaceworks rejects the concept of a “war on terror,” and views the invasion, occupation and counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan as unjustifiable in both its 2001 initiation and its continuation and escalation. This will likely be a key area of difference between the peace movement and the Obama administration in the months ahead.

Conclusions

These examples are illustrative, by no means inclusive. There are dozens of others that could be cited. What they illustrate is that, as good as it is to see Bush leaving office and as positive as we might feel over a new beginning, after January 20 there will still be a wide gulf separating the progressive movement and the administration in the White House. This said, we are both likely to find instances where we can support administration policies, as well as greater opportunities to influence those policies.

While we will be negotiating new ground in terms of our relations with the incoming administration, the greater set of challenges and opportunities will come from the fact that Obama's election involved mobilizing a mass movement. How we, non-partisan, social change movement activists relate to and with this newly mobilized constituency will profoundly influence our effectiveness over the months ahead. In this period of rising expectations, we need to build alliances with all who share progressive ideals and work to move forward together for the sort of change we can really believe in.