

James A. Leach

Obama's First 10 Weeks: Leadership, Governance and Ethics

The Eagleton Institute of Politics

Rutgers University

March 31, 2009

To understand the first 10 weeks of this Administration it is important to put them in the context of 12 score years of the American experience, particularly the 12 months preceding the President's swearing-in. It is, after all, the sweep of American history that established the social framework for the Obama candidacy and last year's election cycle that provided the political crucible for the making of the 44<sup>th</sup> President.

Uniquely, the United States was established with a philosophy both of revolution and of governance. The right of revolution, the case for breaking ties with Great Britain, was rooted in a universal appeal to a law higher than civil law, one of conscience involving a mutual compact to protect natural rights endowed equally to all men at birth by a Creator.

In the most powerful revolutionary document ever crafted, the founders affirmed these rights, which they defined as inalienable, and set forth the grievances that impelled them to revolt.

The American adventure into governance was thus forthrightly premised on the precept that the state is subordinate to the individual, that government can only be legitimate if it is of, by, and for the people, and that the principal obligation of public officials is to protect through civil law God-given rights.

The compelling challenge set forth in the Declaration coupled with the change-adaptive nature of the Constitution allowed the arc of our historical experience to be steadily progressive. But for African Americans, progress in finding meaning in the uncompromising affirmations of our founders was unconscionably slow. It took more than two centuries of struggle which included a civil war, a civil rights movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the election of Barack Obama as President to give political reality to the American creed.

What seemed radical political philosophy for much of the world in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century remained radical sociology for many Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. The nobility of rights and the dignity of man, which were manifest so hope-inspiringly in the Declaration of Independence, are now finally self-evident.

The struggle was never easy, nor was the result of this fall's Presidential election ever a historical certitude. It began with a caucus in Iowa where a state with fewer than 2% minorities opted for a color-blind agenda of change and ended with a victory over a candidate with a distinguished record of personal service to his country who nevertheless could not escape being a defender of status quo approaches to the issues of the day.

Barack Obama began his primary campaign focused on changing a policy about war. He then won the general election focusing on the economy.

Candidate Obama objected to the neo-con notion that international law neither applied to nor served the interests of the United States, and that a costly war could be financed by tax cuts and prosecuted against a state that neither attacked us nor stood as an imminent threat to our security.

He also objected to unfairness in Republican tax and spending priorities and concern for an emerging recession precipitated by negligently regulated financial institutions that were allowed to over-leverage their capital and over-invest in leveraged financial instruments.

Now as President, Obama has inherited a neo-con devised war, a negligent regulatory legacy, and a Treasury that failed to avert and failed to stem a financial tidal wave.

Seldom, excepting only FDR and Lincoln, has a President been presented upon taking office a portfolio of more daunting challenges.

Problems shift and inter-relate. The effects, for instance, of his predecessor's intervention in Iraq impinge on our ability to manage our affairs at home as well as lead abroad. The material cost of war has been high; in life and limb, incalculable; in loss of good will built up over a century by the sacrifices of our fathers and grandfathers, disheartening; and in the increase in animus about America and our political stewardship, tragic.

What ties together the various themes Barack Obama set forth in his quest for the Presidency is a desire to reach out to the un-empowered, to the underdog at home and abroad, to people crying out for respect. It is their hopes and aspirations, Obama has implicitly made clear, that must be listened to and addressed if there is any chance of uniting America and diminishing conflict in the world.

The nature of Obama's identification with the world was evident in his first Presidential sentence when he chose to begin his Presidency using his full name: "I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly swear..." It continued with his first public interview, given to Al Jazeera rather than ABC or NBC, when he noted that he had relatives who were Moslem, and in his more recent address to the people and leaders of Iran when he made clear that shunning is ideological posturing. Realism, our new President has determined, demands engagement, whether it be with Iran, North Korea or Cuba.

The President understands, in particular, that the national interest of the United States requires that the divide that has grown between the United States and the Moslem world must be bridged if this century is to have a peaceful future.

At the same time, he realizes that it is critical to wind down the war he pledged to end in Iraq on a time table that is least likely to bring increased instability to the region. He has thus committed to keep a level of forces in the country for three months longer than proposed in the campaign with the maintenance of a residual, hopefully non-combatant, force for a longer period. Risks continue. It is always a conjectural question whether getting out too early or maintaining what might be viewed by adversaries as too long an occupation presents the greater danger to the national interest.

The unstated policy goal appears to be to "end" without "losing" the conflict while underscoring that the Iraq War was his predecessor's undertaking. Despite a view that initiation of the war was a mistake, the new Administration seeks to avoid an outcome in which the sacrifices of so many Americans would be

for naught. Accordingly, neither the advocates nor critics of this war are likely to find complete comfort in new policies in place that reflect a strategic vision involving an orderly down-sizing of troop levels with future adjustments in timing possible based on continuous reviews of on-going events and changing circumstances.

The Afghanistan trauma is of an analogous but different ilk. It is generally assumed by geo-strategists that the birthplace of 9/11 plotting was given too little attention relative to Iraq by the Bush Administration but that the history and geography of the country is maximally uncongenial to outside influence. There are in life personal and national catch-22s. The Afghanistan dilemma is a classic. It appears that maintaining a force for a considerable period in the country may be intolerable to its people; it also appears that leaving abruptly mis-serves the Afghan people and potentially jeopardizes international order. So the strategy put in place is a mini-surge with a commitment to focus on Al Qaeda as the principal enemy, leaving open the possibility of reaching out to elements of the Taliban in an effort to stabilize the social and economic systems of both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

North Korea is also back front and center in the news. The government of Kim Jong-il is threatening in the near future, perhaps this coming week, to launch a long-range missile which it claims is designed to put a satellite in space. Others, most particularly the Japanese, feel threatened and may attempt to destroy it upon launch with ABM capacities provided by the United States. The North Koreans in turn have issued sabre-rattling threats to any who attempt to interfere. Whether the North Koreans are simply exercising their muscles before becoming more accommodating at the six-party talks or have determined to take a more militant approach in Asia and elsewhere is unclear. What is evident, and as one who once led a delegation to Pyongyang I can vouch, is that this is the most isolated, militaristically ideological society in the world.

Kim Jong-il has not been in good health, presumably having had a stroke last summer. So, as he has for Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian differences and for Afghan-Pakistani problems, our new President has named a first class Special Envoy.

The use of envoys has precedence but the manner and scope of this President's reliance on regional emissaries could be a hallmark of his approach to foreign policy. Their use has substantive as well as process dimensions. From a substantive perspective they are designed to insure that focus is kept on the issues at hand. The model of Obama's two immediate predecessors will not, for instance, be followed in the Middle East where each put off until the end of their Presidencies concerted efforts to advance the peace process between Israel and its adversaries.

The intent of our new President is to lead actively and immediately in this birthplace of religions as well as on a variety of other international fronts, including the new kind of strategic diplomacy reflected in this week's meetings on finance in London. Because Presidents have to deal with a multiplicity of issues on a timely basis, leadership involves careful organization of decision-making and delineation of chains of command.

On the organization side, the three impressive envoys so far designated – George Mitchell, Richard Holbrooke, and Stephen Bosworth -- have been given ambassadorial rank with operating instructions analogous to ambassadors designated to foreign countries. That is, all ambassadors are the President's

personal representatives but for practical and professional reasons they coordinate with and report through the State Department. The President's special envoys will be analogously organized, with offices at home in the State Department as well as in embassies abroad. They report to the Secretary of State and the NSC and when meeting with the President can be expected to be accompanied, at her discretion, by the Secretary.

Presidents have a lot of discretion on how they institutionally orchestrate foreign policy. As one who began a public career at the State Department, I strongly believe in the professionalism of America's Foreign Service. For some reason the Republican right wing has a penchant to downgrade diplomacy and, at the risk of exaggeration, I have sometimes lamented that it seemed that the first war the neo-cons launched in the Bush years was against the State Department whose professional ranks had many doubters about their particular ideological strategems. This President, by contrast, is trying to build up the Department and in a very constructive way has chosen to follow the Lincoln model and invite his most formidable primary rival to take over its reins. He saw close-up in the campaign how competent she was.

The Cabinet, by the way, like a good athletic team, is loaded with balance and includes a few super-stars. Symbolized by a Cabinet Secretary with a Nobel Prize in physics, this Administration is taking governance seriously.

New approaches include: de-ideologizing scientific research, where on subjects as diverse as global warming and stem cells the Bush Administration left an embarrassing legacy; increasing transparency of public decision-making, where the prior Administration had prided itself in secrecy, over-classifying documents and blocking access to historical records; improving treatment of adversaries, where human decency and law itself require that torture be ruled out and that incarceration processes be made consistent with Constitutional precedents.

The galvanizing challenge, though, is the economy. A recession has commenced and the prospect of a full-blown depression cannot be ruled out. That is why over the past 12 months the Federal government, led by the Federal Reserve more than Congress, has pumped an extra \$5 trillion into the economy. Some of this represents traditional fiscal stimulus; some, indirect bail-out gifts to private sector companies; some, the purchase of financial assets with real but indeterminate value.

There is an old saying in banking that if a borrower gets in a little difficulty, the lending institution is in a controlling position, but if the borrower gets in a truly deep hole, it develops enormous leverage with the bank.

In the crisis of the moment the U.S. government is the final backstop of commerce, particularly the financial community. It began last year making decisions as if it were a lender-of-last-resort – i.e., a public bank -- under the assumption that funds could be infused into the financial system with subsequent pay-backs expected as the economy recovered. But as the economic contraction deepened and financial traumas extended world-wide, new dimensions to problems developed from Wall Street to Detroit, magnified by further job losses and housing devaluations in California.

Instead of the government bank being in the controlling position, it has developed a kind of Stockholm syndrome, taken hostage by and forced to identify with the interests of those institutions it has sought to stabilize, from G.M. to Citigroup to AIG to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Alternative approaches in the face of the possibility of a depression can, of course, be far worse as the cascading effects of allowing Lehman Brothers to fail revealed, and as a spending freeze, which 152 House Republicans recently voted for, politically symbolizes.

“Do nothing” spending may be “know-nothing” economics but it could be shrewd politics. In these turbulent times the seemingly solid position of the Democratic Party is jeopardized by events and circumstances. Electoral ramifications are possible sooner than the political feel of the moment might indicate.

While the best politics, especially for a majority party, is the advancement of good policy, there are times when advocacy of bad policy, especially by a minority party that doesn’t prevail in its efforts, ends up being popular politics. Such are the vagaries of democracy.

There are, after all, many uncertainties about the economy. The one certitude is that public debt – federal, state, and local – is likely to skyrocket. Thus fiscal hard-headedness which may today appear imprudent, lacking in compassion, or simply irrelevant, may eventually pay off with political gains at a later point, especially if the economy doesn’t turn around quickly, or if it stabilizes at lower rates of growth than was experienced in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Senator Ev Dirksen was known for a quip he uttered in the Kennedy era: “a billion here and a billion there and pretty soon it adds up to real money.” A billion seemed an incomprehensible sum to ordinary citizens half a century ago. Today the “b” word has been replaced by the “t” measurement. Numbers are so large that ramifications are difficult to fathom.

Aware that the magnitude of the deficits could become politically challenging and jeopardize the standing of our currency, our new President has begun to send signals that spending restraint, including the possibility of entitlement reform, will have to follow the aggressive interventions currently underway in the economy. I wouldn’t be surprised if at some point in the next several years he doesn’t embrace a commission approach in which the Congress is asked to vote up or down on a fiscal restraint package developed by a respected outside body, perhaps chaired by someone of the stature of Paul Volcker. But, for the moment, the President fully accepts the assumption of his impressive team of economic advisers, from Larry Summers to Austin Goolsbee, that there are times when the government, as the steward of national resources, must fill in the slack of an underperforming economy and run deficits, acting in a manner contrary to prudential decision-making of a family household.

Amidst all the critical short-term decision-making is concern for the most disturbing unknown related to the nature of our times: whether the most important economic phenomena of the post-World War II era will be a guide for the future. World War II indebtedness and Marshall Plan foreign assistance were accommodated by subsequent economic growth. If, however, a slow or no-growth future lies ahead, politically unpopular choice-making and disruptive re-assessments of priorities will be inevitable.

President Obama, in short, could pursue the most constructive and creative economic policies possible and yet find his reward in kudos from economists and historians rather than in the Electoral College.

Here, a discussion of the broad state of American politics is in order, but first let me digress for a moment and comment about Rutgers and another leader of American culture, one of the greatest pedagogues in the history of sport, Vivian Stringer.

In so doing, I must confess to bias on Vivian's behalf because many years ago when she was leading the Iowa Hawkeyes she asked me to be an honorary assistant coach for a game. I will never forget her half-time talk. In a low-key, academic manner she analyzed what had occurred in the first half and then just before concluding, addressed one of her guards who had a ball stolen when receiving an in-bound pass. Vivian quietly suggested that if the player was closely guarded in this situation again, which she predicted would be the case because of the earlier successful steal, she should turn her hips 12 degrees counter-clockwise. Such positioning, Vivian noted, would make it harder for the opposing player to steal an in-bound pass and quite possibly cause her to commit a reach-in foul.

Unlike the fledgling assistant coach who couldn't comprehend just how much 12 degrees might be in relationship to a hip rotation and which direction counter-clockwise meant, the young wide-eyed guard murmured that she understood. Almost immediately as the second half began she found herself at the foul line after the opponent, as predicted, futilely attempted another steal.

I have been in a lot of locker rooms in my life but I have never seen a coach more completely in command.

The interesting thing about life is not only the discipline that goes into preparing for the expected but the judgments that apply to the unexpected. This is true for Presidents just as it is at a family level for fathers and mothers. As everyone in this room knows, several years ago a team Vivian coached was bizarrely slandered by a talk-show host named Don Imus. What did the coach do? She didn't file a law suit. She called a press conference and let the young women on her team speak for themselves. Never has "gentility" more overwhelmed "macho." Vivian's team didn't win the national championship. They did something far more challenging. They won universal respect. In the process they brought great credit to this university and sport itself.

There is relevance in this anecdote to this evening's discussion of the Obama Presidency because there are such profound analogies between politics and sport.

Grantland Rice, a once prominent sports writer, got it right three quarters of a century ago when he observed that winning and losing is less important than how the game is played. Likewise in politics. The temper and integrity of campaigns are more important for the cohesiveness of society than the outcome of any election.

The problem in politics is that there are so few rules and no referees. The public must be on perpetual guard and prepared to throw flags when candidates overstep the bounds of fairness and decency.

Let me cite some examples where the fabric of American decency was stretched thin during the last campaign.

In my home state, the challenging candidate for the Senate in the last election called the incumbent Senator the “Tokyo Rose of Al Aqaeda.”

In Minnesota, a Congresswoman suggested that Members of Congress should be investigated to determine whether they held “un-American” views, and in Florida, a United States Senator said he thought the program of Barack Obama had “communist” elements. In the background, a vice-presidential candidate suggested Barack Obama’s tax policies were “socialist.”

And just last week prominent Republicans on Capitol Hill charged the President with “fascist” proposals.

What are citizens to make of these comments? First, we should be clear about history and philosophy.

“Tokyo Rose” was the name given by American GIs to nearly a dozen women of American descent who broadcast propaganda for the Japanese during World War II. To equate a U.S. Senator who wore the uniform of the United States during the Vietnam War to “Tokyo Rose” is to impugn his patriotism.

A half century ago, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin captured the national stage by charging he had a secret list, never revealed, of communists in the State Department. The kind of paranoia he reflected led to the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which precipitated one of the most dispiriting witch-hunts in American history. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the recent comments of a Minnesota politician were tantamount to Congress turning on itself, but if Members lack fundamental respect for the patriotism of their colleagues, how can legislation for the common good be developed?

Senator McCarthy was repudiated by his party’s leader, President Dwight David Eisenhower. A month before this last election, the Eisenhower of our era, Colin Powell, rightly said in his endorsement of Barack Obama that “we have to stop polarizing ourselves.”

As for the terms, “socialism,” “communism,” and “fascism,” we should be cognizant of their meanings. Socialism means “government ownership of the means of production.” How did Barack Obama’s tax proposals fit this definition? While Senator McCain advocated a larger tax cut for American business than Senator Obama, including an extra \$4 billion break for the oil industry, Senator Obama proposed a substantially larger tax cut for the middle class, an approach just made reality with his signature on a law.

True, Obama in the campaign suggested that the top 5% of income earners be returned to the tax levels of the Clinton years and argued to eliminate certain provisions imbedded in the tax codes which incentivize American business to invest abroad. But the totality of the proposals he has advocated would cause America to be taxed at a lower rate relative to the size of the overall economy, our GDP, than existed during the Reagan years. If he is a socialist, couldn’t the same be said of Clinton and Reagan, and even more so, Eisenhower, under whose administration the top brackets were taxed at significantly higher rates than Obama has proposed?

As for the more coercive appellatives: communism is totalitarian socialism involving a dictatorship of the proletariat. Fascism, on the other hand, is totalitarianism from the right, which under the Nazi aegis was responsible not only for a massive war of aggression but the mass murder of European Jews. The

implication that a former Constitutional law professor would as President want to create gulags and concentration camps in America is preposterous.

Little is more dangerous than playing on the fears of citizens.

Stirring anger too easily inflames hate. When coupled with character assassination, it can exacerbate intolerance and may even impel violence.

In Western civilization's most prophetic poem, "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats suggested the center could not hold "when the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Apocalypse may not be a field of study, but the chaos of modernity seems to have produced a crisis of perspective and of values. Much of the problem may flow from society's fast-changing nature. But part falls at the feet of politician's who use ill-chosen rhetoric and campaign techniques to divide voters rather than appeal to what Lincoln described as "the better angels of our nature."

What is to be done?

First, we must recognize that bitterness and negativity dispirit the soul of society. Candidates may prevail in elections by tearing down rather than uplifting, but they cannot then unite an angry, divided citizenry.

Secondly, we must realize that the drug of ambition that ever tempts politicians is money, mainstreamed into advertising to assign candidate virtues and attack opponent failings. Dependency on this narcotic must be broken.

America has less corruption than most societies but because of massive interest group giving in campaigns, we have a fundamental problem with legalized conflicts of interest.

Campaign reform is in order. In my view it should include government matching small contributions with public funds, with a limit placed on what candidates can put in their own campaigns. Fair competition in sports, as in commerce, is a value Americans respect. Why should it not also apply to politics? Process, after all, is our most important product.

In this context, I want to conclude with the issue of values and what they mean. When all is said and done, how one leads in public life affects whether an individual can galvanize a nation and effectuate policy. Accordingly, as citizens we instinctively ask what kind of President we have. Hints exist about what policies will unfold but what is to come for us as a country and a people has great unknown elements.

Campaigns touch on the issues of the moment; those of the future involve the unexpected. In dealing with the new, especially the unprecedented, leadership qualities and abstract notions like trust count for a great deal.

What we know about this President is that he has personally climbed a very steep mountain. History was made with his election. History will now be molded by how he leads. The confidence the American



people put in Barack Obama reflects both on him and on the kind of people we have become. What is important is not only that a color-blind verdict was given, but that a campaign of decency and hope was rewarded.

Worthy of replication is the model provided by the Obama campaign. The President raised record campaign funds but he did so without PAC contributions, relying on smaller individual donors. Despite the campaign risk his self-imposed rules caused in the primary process when his principal opponent was initially far better financed, Obama became the first serious modern day candidate for President to run conflict-free.

Of all candidates I have ever observed, he conducted his campaign with the least intra-staff discord and the least debilitating commentary about adversaries. Of all the fledgling Presidents, he appears to have an instinct to surround himself with enormously able and decent people.

Like an athletic team, the country may falter at times despite concerted effort. But there are grounds for optimism. While the worst in American politics steam passionate intensity, the best, led by the newest occupant of the White House, have remarkable conviction.

With inner calm, Barack Obama was elected President. Seeming to relish challenges, he has accepted the mantle of responsibility that goes with the office. The public, as in all elections, takes a risk in making a choice for President. In a short ten weeks, Barack Obama has made clear that the risk has paid off. He is Presidential timber.

Thank you.