

Obama's Convergence of Hopes

"What does the election of Barack Obama as president say about America? What does it say to the world?"

At 2:20 this morning, Barack Obama emailed this to me: "Willis....All of this happened because of you. Thanks, - Barack." Campaign HDQ knows how many millions of us Americans got first-named, with the promise that "Barack" will get back to us soon. It's all so techno-intimate, virtual-personal, but believable. Believable because America's president elect, author of "The Audacity of Hope," communicates sincere caring about me, us, America, the American dream and duty in the world.

Obama's election says:

1.....That America's "cantus firmus" - the steady song underneath all our separations, anxieties, and fears - *is hope*. Converging our hopes by his trans-racial and trans-cultural life-story and vision, Obama has been helping us hear the song that unites us, and to recall that hope was the wind in the sails of all the immigrants who came here by sea and the wind on the backs of all who walked here when there was a land-bridge between Asia and the Americas.

2.....That in the world's eyes, America is still the land of *possibilities*. "Yes, we can," was the theme both of Obama's campaign and of his victory speech.

3.....That a *new America*, beyond the majority/minorities distinction, has emerged. "We, the people" are now "we" more than we ever were in the past. Simply put in Obama's hope-energized victory speech, "We, as a people, will get there."

4.....That the populist-versus-intellectual prejudice has been transcended in American politics. Our president elect is an intellectual who taught in a preeminent law school, but who worked the dangerous streets of South Chicago as a community organizer. His favorite modern public-intellectual author - whose pragmatism combined idealism and realism - was Reinhold Niebuhr, who had pastored a church among Detroit's working-poor. The *realism* in the victory speech: "The road ahead will be long, our climb will be steep." / The voters were not distracted by anti-"elitist" appeals to "Joe Six-pack" and "Joe the Plumber."

5.....That America must overcome the domestic and foreign disconnects that have been exacerbated in the past eight years. A hearing-aid ad says, "Let us help you *reconnect* to life and the world." America and the world believe Obama when he says he'll talk with and listen to "anybody."

6.....That hope for America must be grounded in a *faith deeper* than belief in America. Obama's cool thoughtfulness is grounded in the faith expressed in chapters 11 and 12 of the New Testament's Letter to the Hebrews. "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen," and it is grounded in "what cannot be shaken," what remains after all else is shaken. (The first verse is familiar in the King James Version as "faith is the substance of things hoped for.") The section ends with an appeal to be thankful for "a kingdom that cannot be shaken," God's reign. In late 2008, so much - at home and abroad - that was considered unshakable has been shaken. But (as Obama likes to put it), for people of faith and hope, "difficulties are opportunities."

While I am wary of the imperialist distortion of American "exceptionalism" (as Senator McCain has often put it), America as a nation of immigrants is, in its being and doing, a letter back home to the old world, the old other world. The global celebrations of Obama's victory were an opening of the letter. That is why, in responding to the "On Faith" questions, I did not distinguish between "about America" and "to the world." What Obama's election says about us it says to the world.

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