

Geoffrey Smith on Barack Obama

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Six short weeks from the fateful November 4th vote, it is hard to imagine anyone other than Barack Obama would shortly be sworn in as America's 44th President. Wiser heads of course would not forget so quickly the challenges on the road. And on transatlantic perspectives few heads can be wiser than that of Geoffrey Smith, veteran Times correspondent and Washington watcher. A long time friend of the Gladstone Club, Geoffrey may be in his 80's but disdaining the microphone, he enthralled a 100-strong gathering with his analysis and with his measured, occasionally quizzical and slightly clipped delivery.

From primaries to president elect

He opened by reminding us that only a few months ago it was far from clear that Obama would secure the Democratic nomination let alone the Presidency. Before the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September Obama had nothing like a convincing majority. It reminds us that success in politics often turns on the demerits of an opponent and Obama's strongest asset was that he was not George W. Since polls began no president has achieved the 70% disapproval rating that Bush polled 3 times in 2008. Truman managed 67% in 1952 for the Korean war and Nixon 66% in 1974 four days before resigning over Watergate¹

Nevertheless, Barack Obama has his own merits. Americans, Smith observes, tend to think that rhetoric plays little part in their politics and the lack of verbal dexterity of some of their presidents seems to bear that out. This time America has been carried along on a wave of orations. Obama speaks with a reserved passion, fluent, self confident, apparently without notes but at key moments with the rousing cadences of a Baptist preacher. In contrast McCain started to look a little colourless. And he had other problems. He needed to emphasise distance from the incumbent to woo the middle ground and somehow at the same time reassure core Republicans. Sarah Palin as the surprise solution sparked briefly before backfiring.

Matters of race

Obama certainly had the black vote on his side winning up to 90% of black voters. Incidentally black women faced with the first female or the first black president voted with race. But Geoffrey Smith reckoned Obama's victory owed as much to white Republicans staying away as it did to blacks turning out.

This is a surprising claim that merits digression into the figures. Turnout at 57% was 2% (10m votes) higher than the previous election of 2004 and 3% over the average of the ten elections from 1968. Breakdowns are not yet available but a CNN estimate from exit polls² suggests turnout of blacks leapt from 60% to 74% while white turnout was static at 64-68%. The black jump is remarkable in terms of voter engagement but as 72% of the electorate are white and only 11% black, effects in the white population may indeed have dominated. (The balance are 13% hispanic and 4% Asian). The election was surprisingly free of race politics mainly because McCain to his credit did not play on it. One wonders whether that was merely expedient reflecting the mood and will of voters. If so that is remarkable because it signals a change of heart at the grass roots level. Interestingly the growing black propensity to vote Democrat, exaggerated this year, represents a *volte face* in the 20th century from when FDR's New Deal in the 30s started to reverse an equally strong 19th century leaning to vote Republican.

A clinch moment came on Jan 28th when Senator Edward Kennedy pronounced a series of ringing personal endorsements and with "I feel change in the air" joined the Obama campaign. The influence of the pre-eminent political family cannot be over-estimated. For Americans it is the nearest thing to royalty.

Historical references

Meanwhile, for British observers part of Obama's appeal is his sense of history. He is said to be extremely well read, a characteristic which might be thought an essential pre-requisite of political leadership but rarely is. It was certainly true of Gladstone but many democratic leaders, perhaps relying overmuch on their popular mandate, do not seem to have felt the need of full acquaintance with their political heritage. Obama, twelve years professor of law at Chicago, is certainly more in the Gladstone mould. There have been a series of moments striking not so much on their face value but for their self-conscious historical reference. Obama's single European excursion during his candidature was to Berlin where on July 24th he enthralled a crowd of 200,000. His message of global citizenship "No nation however powerful can stand alone" appealed to Europeans but at home the reference did not go unremarked to Kennedy's iconic 1963



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'*Ich bin ein Berliner*' speech in the same city.

Selecting Robert Gates as Defence Secretary and erstwhile opponent Hilary Clinton as Secretary of State sparked another historical comparison. Perhaps these were '*the strongest men of the party*' as Lincoln said of his 'team of rivals'. They do appear to provide the experience Obama lacks, but can they work as a team? And taken together with the Lincoln-theme train journey does it now start to look like a bit of a gimmick?

Chicago machine politics

Geoffrey Smith raised another note of caution. The scandal of Governor Blagojevich's 'pay to play' auction of Obama's vacated Senate seat is the latest in a catalogue of corrupt administration for which Chicago is infamous. There is happily no hint that Obama bears any marks of that Illinois tradition and we hope that none will emerge in the future.

New presidents always come in with a wave of optimism and by definition, more than half the voters will be counting their party's success. But this time it was different. The Obama effect has created widespread delight. Even Republicans are saying privately that it is good for America and foreign leaders are queuing up to share in the reflected glow. Has there been anything like it in the past? Kennedy was popular, but not so much at the outset and perhaps never so much as after his death. It is hard to think of another individual who has carried so much of world-wide expectations. But Smith left us plenty of room for optimism for the future. He praised Obama's cool and measured attitude. A desirable quality to bring to the challenges ahead.

Above all there is a sense of Justice. The States was not the pre-eminent destination for slave trades, but slavery stains her conscience more than elsewhere and continued to cast a shadow in struggles for race equality. In 1982 African-American Tom Bradley lost in the race for Governor of California even though he had been ahead in the polls. Some feared that Americans could never vote in a black candidate. They could and they did.

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/24/AR2007072402263.html>

² <http://springtime.typepad.com/springtimebloggen/2008/11/voter-turnout.html>