

Contemporary Issues of the Americas

The election of Barack Obama– a new era?

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Document Version

Final published version

Publication date:

2009

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Citation for published version (APA):

Bjerre-Poulsen, N. (Ed.) (2009). *Contemporary Issues of the Americas: The election of Barack Obama– a new era?* . Center for the Study of the Americas. Contemporary Issues of the Americas Vol. 1

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pamphlet 2009 contemporary issues of the americas



The election of Barack Obama – a new era?

Center for the Study of
the Americas CBS

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Contemporary Issues of the Americas

The Center for the Study of the Americas at the Copenhagen Business School was formed in April 2004 to foster interdisciplinary research and analysis of contemporary developments in both north and south America particularly those that have a relevance to business and those involved in the public policy process. As part of that mission, the Center is publishing concise surveys addressing current events. The series will also make the public lectures and presentations given by specialists at events sponsored by the Center accessible to a wider audience. Each of the pamphlets includes essays that consider a particular historical moment from multiple perspectives. The pamphlets will, the Center believes, contribute to the wider, on-going conversation about transatlantic relationships and issues in the Americas.

Pamphlet #1: The election of Barack Obama - a new era?

Presidential elections in the United States are at once commonplace events and historic occasions. Since the first peaceful transition of power from George Washington to John Adams in 1795, presidential elections, while constitutionally ordained, have often resembled nothing less than grand political dramas with heroic leading actors contesting the foundations of American democracy and the meaning of the nation itself. The election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States suggested just such a drama, as the country elected its first black president in a time of war and dire financial crisis. The following essays investigate what Obama's election represents in the light of historical trends as well as pressing contemporary problems. The authors do not attempt to offer predictions or policy advice; rather they take long-term views on how this particular U.S. election can be understood.



George W. Bush taking a walk on the last day in office. Foto: Eric Draper/Corbis

American Conservatives Trapped in the Age of Reagan

Is “the Age of Reagan” over? I think it is. Just as abortion, opposition to gay marriage and other cultural wedge issues seem to have been exhausted for the time being, the basic assumptions that for the last three decades have guided the American political parties on markets, regulation, taxation and the proper role of the federal government no longer seem to apply either. A punch-drunk Republican Party has resorted to being “the Party of ‘No’.”

The modern conservative movement was born in reaction to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and the new interventionist role of the federal government that it launched.¹ For decades, conservatives were well aware that they represented a minority view and that the majority of Americans had embraced liberal notions of regulated markets and a limited welfare state. Conservatism was thus mostly confined to the role as a reactive force that in the words of William F. Buckley, Jr. would be “standing athwart history, yelling stop.”² The “Reagan revolution” profoundly changed both this self-perception and the entire public discourse on the proper role of the government. Accordingly, the next three decades deserve to be labeled “the Age of Reagan.” In the battle of ideas, liberals were now mostly on the defensive and the federal government was once again portrayed as an obstacle to growth.

Now, the pendulum seems to have swung back. In a twist of fate, the greatest economic crisis since the 1930’s has enabled President Obama to pick up Ronald Reagan’s mantle and become America’s next transformative leader by rejecting his political philosophy and reversing his policies. Bewildered Republicans, who after the elections of 2004 claimed to see evidence of a major realignment and the emergence of a solid conservative majority in America, now ask “what would Ronald Reagan have done?”

However, the “Reagan revolution” is the wrong place for Republicans to search for solutions to their current problems. The confluence of circumstances that paved the way for it will not return.

The exhaustion of liberalism

While liberalism was at its last high during Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” in the 1960’s, two things coincided: the “rights revolution” and the view that persistent poverty amidst long-term prosperity evidenced ba-



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sic structural problems in the economy. Help from the federal government increasingly took the form of entitlements. Likewise, the fact that a rising tide evidently did not lift all boats also led social scientists, mostly from the liberal side of the political spectrum to study cultural pathologies in the nation's underclass and advocate social policies that would specifically target such problems.

Among the most publicized and controversial examples were Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965-report on *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.⁴ Ironically, as Michael B. Katz has pointed out, the outrage that the notion of a "culture of poverty" caused at a time, when pride in racial and ethnic identity was high on the agenda, soon made many liberals very reluctant to use it. They did not want to share Moynihan's fate and be accused of harboring an elitist "blame it on the victim"-mentality.⁵

However, as liberals abstained from using it, conservatives happily took over the concept of a "culture of poverty." During the 1970s, the "War on Poverty" was increasingly replaced by a "War on Welfare," as welfare dependency was added to a growing list of conservative resentments. Many of society's ills were now ascribed to "social engineering" imposed by an out of touch-elite. The Republican Party successfully managed to broaden its base by reinterpreting the idea of "class struggle" as the struggle between a "silent majority" of (white) tax-paying, patriotic and God-loving Americans on the one hand, and an unholy alliance of "bleeding heart-liberals" and assorted minority groups on the other.⁶

As the conservative movement was increasingly joined by new constituencies of social conservatives, "throwing money after problems" was not merely seen as fostering helplessness, passivity and dependence, but also as promoting immorality. Thus, by the early 1980s, conservative authors such as Charles Murray and George Gilder argued that federal programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) actively undermined the idea of the family as the basic unit of American society.⁷ It was the same line of reasoning that Ronald Reagan during his 1976 presidential campaign had used successfully to attack "welfare queens driving welfare Cadillacs."⁸ By the time he was sworn in as president in 1981, it had almost become uncontroversial to claim that "government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem."⁹

In most respects Reagan's attacks on welfare programs simply restated traditional views of hard work, family and faith as the proper way out of poverty, but he successfully managed to label such views as innovative policy ideas. Part of his genius was an ability to adopt liberal premises. With

Reagan in the White House, the Republican Party was no longer the Party of 'No'. His welfare measures gave the impression that they pursued the same ends as liberalism, only with different methods. "Supply-side economics" was intended to convince low-income voters that they too would benefit from conservative economic policies.¹⁰ As Reagan's biographer Lou Cannon has noted, "He undermined the New Deal in its own vernacular."¹¹

The war in Vietnam, the rights revolution, social turmoil in the nation's cities, soaring crime rates, "stagflation," energy shortages, and not least a historical transformation of Southern politics all contributed to the demise of Great Society-liberalism. So did the Republicans' successful branding of their Democratic counterparts as "soft on national security" amidst the Soviet threat. All of these factors, combined with Reagan's cheerful image helped broaden the appeal of the Republican Party way beyond what fiscal conservatism on its own could offer. Now, a quarter of a century later, in a time of severe economic recession, Republicans, ironically, seem to believe that fiscal conservatism can restore the Reagan-coalition for them.

Not only is there no new Reagan waiting on the sidelines of the Republican Party: there is every reason to doubt that fiscal conservatism and anti-statist posturing will lead to victory in the coming years. First of all, a significantly higher percentage of Americans seem to have a more positive view of government intervention and less fear that it will lead down a slippery slope to socialism (even that term seems less frightening to new generation raised after the end of the Cold War).¹² Some have pointed to "Hurricane Katrina" and the flooding of New Orleans in 2005 as a turning point. Likewise, the recent exposure of rampant and unregulated greed in the financial sector has prompted demands for more government regulation. Yet, most American conservatives seem to be stuck with the slogans of the Reagan era.

Some leading conservatives are indeed talking about the imperative of fresh ideas and new policies before the movement can make a comeback. Former House Majority Leader Newt Gingrich and Utah Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Jr. are among them and both possible presidential contenders in 2012.¹³ However, other parts of the movement have no intention of moving out of the Reagan-era. To them, the essential question to all political problems is still "what would Ronald Reagan do?" and they usually reach a conclusion that is strangely at odds with the actual historical record of the Reagan years: the party needs to move further to the right in order to win back the presidency and seats in Congress.

Ironically, this perception is probably reinforced by Republican losses in the last two elections. There are 50 Republican members fewer after the

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2008 election and most of those who have survived the onslaught tend to come from secure conservative districts. Accordingly, they are less likely to turn into “me-too Republicans” in search of bipartisan compromises with the Democratic majorities. They might also find support for their impressions of a hidden conservative vote from watching Sarah Palin-rallies.

Yet, there is very little support to be found in opinion polls. Actually, the Bush policies that conservatives decry as political treason, such as the vastly expensive prescription drug benefits, are among the very few of his domestic initiatives that were popular with a large majority of Americans.¹⁴ Likewise, the poll-numbers for the Republican Party declined even further (to 26 percent) after their almost unified resistance to the Obama administration’s stimulus plan in February 2009.¹⁵

Furthermore, there are new areas of major public concern, where the Reagan-formula will no longer work either. Among them are the issues of global warming and the dependency on fossil fuels. President Carter’s concern for the environment in the 1970s was dismissed by conservatives as unwarranted doom and gloom. While Carter had talked about the struggle for energy conservation and against pollution, global warming and dependence on foreign oil as “the moral equivalent of war,” Reagan scored points by assuring the American public that there was no need to worry. In his brand of “conservatism without tears,” there were no limits to what Americans could achieve and no limits to what they could consume.

In public memory, Reagan became the president who ended the gas lines and lowered the price of oil (none of which, of course, he had much influence on). During his presidency, he successfully rolled back government standards for fuel efficiency in American cars. In 1983, he dismissed warnings about global warming issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Symbolically, he even took down the solar panels that Carter had installed at the roof of the White House.¹⁶ The Reaganites were convinced that the market or technological solutions to such problems would show up in due time. Today most Americans know otherwise. That hasn’t prevented Republican leaders such as House Minority Leader John Boehner from trying the Reagan approach. In April 2009, he described “the idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen that is harmful to our environment” as “almost comical.”¹⁷

Are there any viable roads to a conservative comeback?

So what will conservatives rely on in the immediate future, absent any new political ideas? Populist rage? More tax cuts? Making a showcase of fiscal re-

straint? Conservatives might attempt to tap into populist rage by connecting the dots between Wall Street, liberal media and a liberal intelligentsia, and strengthen the image of the Republican Party as the fiscally conservative party of Main Street and the nation's "Joe the Plumbers." However, even that will be difficult to pull off after eight years, where a large part of the middle class feels that it has been "plundered from above." It might also prove difficult to sell the idea that President Obama has launched "class warfare" by making the tax system somewhat less biased in favor of the richest 5 percent of Americans.¹⁸ Too many Americans might still recall that George W. Bush's 2001 tax cuts gave the richest 1 percent of the taxpayers some 45 percent of the benefits.¹⁹

Many voters might furthermore be offended by the sheer hypocrisy of fiscal restraint now, after the Bush administration, helped by Republican majorities in both houses, has created the largest federal deficit in American history. Just a few years ago, leading conservatives characterized the president's fiscal irresponsibility as Hamiltonian "big-government conservatism."²⁰

Even if conservatives could manage to distance themselves from George W. Bush and hold on to Reagan as the movement's standard bearer, they would still be throwing stones from glass houses. The Reagan administration had many virtues, but fiscal conservatism was not one of them. As a matter of fact, Reagan created what was then the largest deficit in American history and added a couple of trillion dollars to the national debt.²¹ Until recently, leading conservatives had no problem with that. Vice President Dick Cheney famously told Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill that the lesson of the Reagan-years was that "deficits don't matter," and the conservative Heritage Foundation in 2004 defended Reagan's deficits by arguing that they "ignited the largest economic boom in American history."²²

Given the record of the Bush years, perhaps the most realistic hope for a Republican resurgence right now is the one that only talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh and a few other prominent conservative figures dare say in public: the failure of President Obama and his "big bang theory" of saving the economy and enacting his entire political program all at once.²³ If he succeeds, Republicans are of course likely to spend years more in the political wilderness, but it might give them time to move beyond Reagan. If President Obama and the Democratic majorities in Congress fail, the GOP might make a comeback as early as the mid-term elections in November 2010. However, absent any new ideas – particularly ideas that might make it possible for the party to reach out to new constituencies – that would be a

pyrrhic victory. Ronald Reagan would have understood that.

NOTES

- 1 See Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face; Organizing the American Conservative Movement 1945-65* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002).
- 2 William F. Buckley, Jr. "Publisher's Statement," *National Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 19, 1955), p. 5.
- 3 President Bill Clinton, "State of the Union Address," January 23, 1996 (clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/other/sotu.html).
- 4 <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=primary/moynihan-report-1965>
- 5 Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor; From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), pp. 24-35.
- 6 See Sam Tanenhaus, "Conservatism is Dead; An Intellectual Autopsy of the Movement," *The New Republic*, February 18, 2009, pp. 12-17, and Kevin Matson, *Rebels All! A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).
- 7 Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1994 [1984]), and George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982 [1981]).
- 8 Reagan's theme of "welfare queens" emerged in his 1976 presidential campaign. See, "Welfare Queen Becomes Issue in Reagan's Campaign," *The New York Times*, February 29, 1976, p. 51.
- 9 The quote on government as the problem is from Reagan's First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981 (www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/first.asp)
- 10 See Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*; op. cit. p. 302 ff.
- 11 Quoted from William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 225.
- 12 "Just 53% Say Capitalism Better than Socialism," Rasmussen Reports, April 9, 2009 (http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/just_53_say_capitalism_better_than_socialism).
- 13 Eleanor Clift, "Gingrich: It's Not About The Base," *Newsweek*, March 7, 2009 (www.newsweek.com/id/188303).
- 14 Fareed Zakaria, "The End of Conservatism," *Newsweek*, February 25, 2008 (www.newsweek.com/id/112770)
- 15 Mark Murray, "Poll: Obama's ratings at all-time high," March 3, 2009 (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29493021/>).
- 16 Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth; How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (New York: Free Press, 2009), p. 219.
- 17 John Boehner, interview on "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," April 19, 2009. (<http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/story?id=7373578&page=1>)
- 18 See Matt Miller, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas* (New York: Times Books, 2009), p. 84 ff.
- 19 Quoted from Iwan Morgan, "Reaganomics and its Legacy," in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s; Perceptions, Policies, Legacies* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 113.
- 20 Fred Barnes, "Big-Government Conservatism," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15. August 2003 (<http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110003895>).
- 21 Benjamin M. Friedman, "The Deficit Danger," *The Harvard Magazine*, Jan-Feb. 2004 (<http://harvardmagazine.com/2004/01/the-deficit-danger.html>).
- 22 Jonathan Weisman, "Reagan Policies Gave Green Light to Red Ink.," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2004, p. A1. Brian M. Riedl, "Defending the Reagan Deficits," The Heritage Foundation, June 16, 2004 (<http://www.heritage.org/press/commentary/ed061604b.cfm>).
- 23 Rush Limbaugh, "I Hope Obama Fails," January 19, 2009, The Rush Limbaugh Show (www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_01609/content/0125113.guest.html)

The Obama Offer

On January 20, 2009, well over a million people attended the inauguration of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States. By almost any standard, it was a remarkable outpouring of goodwill and enthusiasm that echoed an equally enthusiastic sentiment around the world. But does the enthusiasm generated by Obama's election mean something? Can he do something with the goodwill and, so far, high approval ratings?

Yes he can, because like every other new president he has an opportunity to define a moment. At the same time, of course, Obama also understands that goodwill will not end the crises that rack the United States. So how will Obama turn goodwill into success? He will need to contend with a formula that makes such opportunities successful. He will need to recognize how defining moments become defining movements.

A defining moment is only as successful as the offer a president makes to the people. And the success such an offer depends on a president's ability to resolve the natural tension between how history is made and how history is understood. In other words, when a president reacts to a contemporary crisis – and surely there will be a crisis – any solution he or she offers must reflect the kind of abiding American tradition that resonates with the public's collective memory. Put simply, a president has to deliver guns, butter, and ideals.

In being reflective as well as reactive, a president combines the wisdom of Karl Marx as well as the American founders. One must keep in mind, as Marx famously counseled, that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” But it is equally important to remember that in the United States, Americans interpret contemporary crises – those already existing circumstances – through a romanticized understanding of their nation's history. Solutions to crises must transcend the immediate moment and connect to popular notions of the nation's founding and purpose.

The Presidential Test

Every president must submit to this test, but let's review those presidents relevant to Barack Obama's moment. Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal are often used as models for what Obama must do today. What



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President-Elect Barack Obama is sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts, January 20, 2009. Foto: Chad J. McNeeley/Corbis

did FDR offer and how did he turn his moment into a movement? FDR offered the New Deal as a way to save capitalism. By doing this he responded to a desperate economic imperative by saving banks, creating jobs, and providing hope of better days ahead. But he also reflected a fundamental American faith in capitalism; he didn't merely support an abstract notion of the market but created the feeling that the government would rescue the American economy because it remained the best system to reward hard work. Contrast FDR with a president who most avidly claimed his mantle, Lyndon Baines Johnson. LBJ offered the Great Society as the logical fruition of the New Deal. But Johnson failed to understand his contemporary moment – so intent was he on waging a war on poverty as well as a war against communism that his Great Society collapsed under its own weight. By all accounts, LBJ was a masterful politician, but even he had to abide by the simple political maxim of calibrating what is possible with what is likely.

Consider another pair of contrasts, two presidents who have direct relevance to the world Obama has inherited, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. These two presidents are often posed as opposites, with Carter viewed as a failure and Reagan as a success, even though many of Carter's warnings and policy initiatives seem prophetic to us today. So why has history judged Carter so harshly? Consider what Carter offered. He believed the nation needed a period of national healing, something that seemed reasonable given the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate. Yet, he failed to understand that while the nation was in a way damaged, it craved more than therapy. His promise to be honest and better than his predecessors fell short of a tradition that he had to reflect: Americans wanted priests not prophets. Ronald Reagan ministered to the public by providing a gospel of optimism. He offered to relieve Americans of the burden government had become, to welcome a "new morning" of sunny individualism. In this way he reacted to stagflation and the general displeasure many people felt toward their government, while reflecting the American impulse of individuality. Not surprisingly, Reagan was an admirer of FDR and Obama has recorded his admiration for Reagan. Obama might understand and perhaps learn from LBJ and Carter, but he would be smart to model himself after Reagan.

This might sound counter-intuitive. After all, didn't Obama's election mark the end of the conservative era Reagan inaugurated? And how can Obama claim Reagan's legacy when his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush, has already done so? The answer lies, of course, in Obama's offer.

Obama's Offer

During the campaign, Obama positioned himself as the “change” candidate. We might dismiss such a claim as mere electoral rhetoric. Yet, for Obama it works on two levels. First, to win the election, Obama had to make himself the most convincing “not-Bush” candidate. After all, many Americans linked the outgoing president to the two biggest problems facing the nation – the economy and the war in Iraq. Thus on one level, Obama employed a common electoral strategy by clearly distinguishing himself from the widely unpopular president. Similarly, FDR was not Hoover; Reagan was not Carter.

But it is on a second level that Obama's idea of change has the potential to turn his moment into a movement. Obama has promised in his inaugural address to make government work for the people. By doing so, he has reacted to crises – both foreign and domestic – that created the conditions of his time. Furthermore, his offer reflects an abiding hope, as his favorite president said, that “this government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” His offer then, just like those of FDR and Reagan, has not so much ended an era in American history as changed the conversation among Americans.¹ What joins all three of these presidents is the fact that as one national conversation languished, they offered a new one to take its place. For FDR that meant creating new terms in which to understand the presidency and the benefits of executive power. From 1932 to 1980, this conversation dominated American politics. With his election, Reagan did not so much end the institutions of the New Deal – in fact, the conservative revolutionaries that acted in his name also left it largely unchanged – but redirected the public conversation away from the failings of the federal government and toward the dynamic potential of the individual in American society. Like FDR, Reagan didn't so much contend with the old conversation as simply replace with one he could sell because he believed in it. Along these lines, Obama does not represent the end of conservatism in America. If anything he has inherited a nation that is so far away from conservative principles of small government, balanced budgets, and free market capitalism that all Obama would need to do is declare the ascendancy of the new liberal era and call it a day.

Rather, Obama has declared an end to a particular era of revanchist politics.² Recently, the charge of placing party loyalty above civic responsibility has been leveled at the Republicans and conservatives. However, Obama made clear in his inaugural address that he finds the problem not with one party but with an entire era – the 1960s. As he is happy to point out, he was

not even a teenager when the sixties ended and therefore cannot be blamed for nor does he need to fight the battles of that era. In the first few minutes of his address, he declared: “On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.” While this statement undoubtedly applies to the eight years that immediately preceded his administration, Obama directed his public’s attention to a new question: “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.” Obama has offered a new conversation to replace the one that Reagan had offered to replace the one FDR had begun. Of course, the question now is whether Obama’s offer will succeed.

From Moment to Movement

So does this mean that Obama’s movement will be bi-partisan and non-ideological? No, but of course neither were the successful movements created by FDR and Reagan. Like them, Obama will ask people to move beyond their present points of reference. He will need to explain that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not Vietnam; that the struggle against terrorism is not the same as the struggle against communism; and that the financial crisis is neither the Great Depression nor the stagflation of the 1970s and early 1980s. He will need to create a new set of terms – start a new conversation – because the present crises are not a replay of the past.

Therefore, when Obama stood as the elected president before that great throng of people, he did so as a black man who is a product of the Civil Rights movement, but not a partisan within it. He stood as a member of a generation that no longer needs to resolve the memories, scars, and legacies of an era that has dominated the last forty years of American politics. And he stood, as he has made clear throughout the early days of his presidency, as a successor to Lincoln. This is a smart choice for reasons that are both apparent and conveniently overlooked. Lincoln remains the bi-partisan favorite among the public and historians. He is that mythological political giant who kept the nation whole; who altered the way future generations of Americans understood their relationship to the nation and its history. But he was also a president who was despised by nearly half the American population and who believed so thoroughly in his understanding of the nation that he was willing to fight a war to prove it. Obama has good reason to channel Lincoln because he was a gutsy political scrapper who never lost sight of the need to provide a vision that transcended his specific and very violent moment.

It is my hope, and it should be Obama's as well, that he will not need to become Lincoln; that he will not need to guide the nation through tragedy and toward redemption. Yet, conditions are so poor that it appears Obama will have his opportunity to make his moment into a movement – if only to revive a nation in dire need of inspiration. And while we might talk about Obama's election as an end or a beginning, what matters is whether this president can transform good will into policy. To do this, it seems to me Obama can't do much better than to strike a balance between the wisdom of Marx and the American Founders; to learn from the examples of FDR and Reagan; and to appreciate the tragedy as well as the triumph of Lincoln's accomplishment.

NOTES

- 1 See Mark Lilla's talk to the Carnegie Council on his book *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007) in which he points out that Thomas Hobbes "changed the conversation" about the role of religion in politics.
- 2 See Sam Tanenhaus, "Conservatism is Dead," *New Republic*, <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=9dfd540a-3d44-4684-a333-415ef34efa5b>

Enter Stage Left: Obama and the Politics of Change

Barack Obama ran for president on an ambitious, progressive platform of change. Among his proposals was an end to the war in Iraq, universal health care, a focus on renewable energy resources, and a rewriting of the tax code that would raise taxes for those making over \$250,000 a year and provide a tax break for the middle- and lower classes.

The Republic did not see America as you and I see America.”

A number of commentators seemed to agree with Palin. A few weeks before the election, the cover story of Newsweek trumpeted “America the Conservative.” In the accompanying article, “It’s Not Easy Bein’ Blue,” editor Jon Meacham issued a gentle warning to the Democratic presidential candidate: “Should Obama win, he will have to govern a nation that is more instinctively conservative than it is liberal – a perennial reality that past Democratic presidents have ignored at their peril.”¹ The leader of the House Republicans, John Boehner, was more emphatic. “America remains a center-right country,” Boehner insisted. “Democrats should not make the mistake of viewing Tuesday’s results as repudiation of conservatism or a validation of big government. Neither should we.”²

There is, however, another way to interpret the results of the 2008 election – that the nation has in fact been trending left on a variety of issues. The unraveling of the conservative era began to take hold in 2005, with Bush’s failed attempt to privatize Social Security, the administration’s incompetence in handling the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, and escalating violence in Iraq.

The Republican Malaise

One of the reasons why the Republican attacks on Obama were so ineffective was that it was Republican conservatism, not Democratic progressivism, which was out of sync with the country. The same week that Meacham offered his opinion that the US was a conservative nation, Ruy Teixeira found that the opposite was the case. Citing a Pew Research poll, Teixeira argued that the Republican characterization of Obama as a socialist redistributor didn’t resonate with the public primarily because they agreed with Obama that tax policy should be reformed. According to the Pew poll, 62% of Amer-



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People celebrating the election on Barack Obama as president, Grant Park, Chicago, November 4, 2008. Foto: Corbis

icans wanted to repeal the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, while only 25% wanted to make them permanent. The same poll found that 58% favored the government guaranteeing health insurance for all Americans, even if it meant raising taxes. Only 35% were opposed.³

A good many Republicans recognize that there is a real danger that the party will be consigned to minority status for the foreseeable future. Speaking to Republican leaders, the Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) expressed his fear that the Republican Party would become a minority party.

You can walk from Canada to Mexico and from Maine to Arizona without ever leaving a state with a Democratic governor. Not a single Republican senator represents the tens of millions of Americans on the West Coast. And on the East Coast, you can drive from North Carolina to New Hampshire without touching a single state in between that has a Republican in the U.S. Senate.

McConnell's anxiety about a geographical trend working against the Republicans is well-founded. Since 1988, progressives have seen gains in not only metropolitan areas, but in the suburbs and in exurbia.⁴

The question is of course how to reverse this trend. A number of conservatives openly acknowledge that the GOP needs to remake itself to appeal to a wider demographic. As longtime Republican political adviser Michael Murphy put it on the Sunday morning TV program Meet the Press, the party needs to modernize conservatism by reaching out to groups that the party has alienated. He pointed out that Ronald Reagan may have won the election of 1980 with 51% of the vote, but if the election were held in 2008, with the current demographics, he would have received only 47% of the vote.⁵

Murphy's comments came as a response to a clip showing radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh at the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) meeting the week before. Limbaugh had been criticized for expressing the hope that Obama would fail. Limbaugh defended his statement at the CPAC meeting, asking why would he want Obama to succeed in his "mission...to restructure and reform this country so that capitalism and individual liberty are not its foundation."⁶

Limbaugh's rhetoric is a continuation of the kind of invective that lost the Republicans the election of 2008. Limbaugh, however, is not alone. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, widely regarded as a potential candidate

for president in 2012, gave the GOP response to Obama's address to the nation on February 24. Jindal chose that moment to deliver the tired nostrum about government being the problem, going so far as to argue that Bush's failure to offer adequate help to the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf after hurricane Katrina in some way proved the inefficiency of government itself rather than the incompetence of the Bush administration.

By engaging in the politics of resentment and racial backlash over the past three decades, the Republicans have painted themselves into a demographic corner. Obama won the minority vote (comprised primarily of three main groups – African Americans, Latinos, and Asians) overwhelmingly. As John Judis has pointed out, minorities made up 26% of the vote in 2008, an increase of over double that of 1972, when minorities accounted for only 10% of the vote. The groups comprising the emerging Democratic majority – women, minorities, union members, the young, and independents – are growing, while the traditional white working-class has shrunk precipitously from a clear majority of the workforce before World War II (58% in 1940), to just a 25% in 2006.⁷ Obama received 66% of the vote to McCain's 32% from the so-called Millennial Generation – those born between 1978 and 2000. This group, a majority of which holds progressive views, is adding 4.5 million potential new voters every year.⁸

The Obama Agenda

However, it would be to indulge in a form of demographic fatalism to claim that any lasting transformation of the American political landscape will simply unfold inevitably. In order to sustain the leftward turn of large segments of the American public, Obama recognizes that he has to not only make good on his campaign promises. The symbiotic relationship between the interests of the constituencies that comprise the emerging Democratic majority and the efforts by the Obama administration to advance those interests will determine whether the election of 2008 will mark the beginning of a long-term change in the American political landscape.

Obama's speech to the nation on February 24, 2009 laid out a sweeping agenda for progressive reform and massive public investment that echoed Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. It built on the issues that he had been speaking about on the campaign trail. Two areas of change that Obama spoke of during the campaign are health care reform and unionization. Both enjoy widespread public support. Indications are that Obama will succeed in implementing change in both these areas.

The Future of Unions

In a poll covering a 70-year period from the New Deal era to the most recent mid-term elections (1936 to 2006), Gallup found that a majority of American approved of labor unions even though support has diminished somewhat in the past 3 decades.⁹ However, union membership rose for the second year in a row in 2008 for the first time since 1983, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁰

Passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would make it easier for workers to form unions, is a top legislative priority for the labor union movement and would likely result in further increases in union membership.

A new version of EFCA was introduced in both houses of Congress in March, 2009. During the campaign, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) ran an ad featuring Obama expressing his support for the EFCA and saying unequivocally that "it's time we had a president who honors organized labor, who has walked on picket lines, who doesn't choke on the word union." He ended by urging voters to "reclaim the idea that opportunity is open to anyone who is willing to work for it."¹¹

Organized labor contributed heavily to Obama's campaign because it saw him as a supporter of unions. The labor union movement was therefore encouraged by Obama's nomination of Hilda Solis to be Secretary of Labor. Solis was the first Latina to be elected to Congress. She served 5 terms in the House of Representatives, representing the 32nd congressional district in California that includes East Los Angeles.

Solis's selection was positively received by the union movement for two reasons. She has long been a vocal advocate for EFCA. The EFCA is a top priority for the union movement, which hopes for early passage of the legislation under the new administration. Furthermore, as the daughter of Mexican and Nicaraguan immigrants, Solis also represents one of the fastest growing minority groups within the labor movement.

Upon first hearing of Obama's choice of Solis, SEIU President Andy Stern exclaimed "It's extraordinary. On every issue that's important to us, she has stood up for an America where everyone's hard work is valued and rewarded." After often contentious Senate hearings, Solis was confirmed in February.

Many Republican were staunchly opposed to Solis's nomination, primarily because of her support for the EFCA. Mitch McConnell raised the specter of Europeanization in connection with a bill he characterized as "an outrageous proposal. It will fundamentally harm America and Europeanize

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America and we will have a big political fight over this.” Bernie Marcus, cofounder and former CEO of Home Depot, went one step further and lamented that passage of the act would be “the demise of civilization.”

The intention of the bill is the exact opposite of the caricature presented by Republicans and conservative businessmen and pundits. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), an independent federal agency charged with conducting workplace elections for union representation, has been weakened since Roosevelt’s day. After workers submit a formal request to organize, the NLRB schedules a secret-ballot vote. In the ensuing month or more, companies are free to hire anti-union consultants and use scare tactics such as spreading rumors that the workplace might close if the union is approved. In such a coercive environment, simply signing cards would facilitate union organization.

An earlier version of the bill, co-sponsored by then-Senator Obama, passed the House in 2007, but Senate Republicans succeeded in blocking a vote on the bill that year. Solis voted for the bill and Obama expressed his support for it during the campaign. The Obama administration hopes to see the EFCA passed in 2009, despite the defection of Arkansas Democrat Blanche Lincoln, whose state is home to the corporate headquarters of Walmart, which has vigorously opposed the legislation.

Health Care for All

In 1993, the Clinton administration proposed comprehensive health care reform. It was defeated. The 1994 mid-term election was called a “referendum on big government” and the Republicans won control of both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years.

Opposition to Clinton’s health care reform was fierce. The conservative commentator William Kristol provided the ideological rationale for Republicans to strike down any health care reform legislation. In an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, he wrote, “Passage of the Clinton health care plan in any form would be disastrous. It would guarantee an unprecedented federal intrusion into the American economy. Its success would signal the rebirth of centralized welfare-state policy.”¹² In other words, a successful health care plan that could garner widespread public support could pose a threat to Republicans who were against any form of government intervention.

In 2007, President Bush vetoed legislation passed by Congress to increase funding for the State Children’s Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP). SCHIP was established in 1997 to cover uninsured children from families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid, but who cannot afford private

insurance.

The bill would have expanded SCHIP by \$60 billion over 5 years to cover an additional 3.3 million children who remained uninsured and consequently received no health care.

In vetoing the bill, Bush echoed Kristol in expressing concern for the consequences of such legislation: “when you expand eligibility...you’re really beginning to open up an avenue for people to switch from private insurance to the government.” Polls taken after Bush’s veto showed that Democrats and independents overwhelmingly supported the bill. Even a narrow majority of Republican favored expansion.¹³

An SCHIP bill was one of the first pieces of legislation to pass the Democratic Congress after Obama’s inauguration. It would allow 7 million children to continue receiving coverage and would expand coverage to an additional 4 million children. In addition, the five-year waiting period for children of legal immigrants was eliminated. In signing the bill, Obama declared: “The way I see it, providing coverage to 11 million children through CHIP is a down payment on my commitment to cover every single American.”¹⁴

Once again, Republicans opposed to the bill argued against creeping government intervention in the health care system. As Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) put it, “This debate [over SCHIP] had nothing to do with children.... It had everything to do with making more Americans dependent on the government for their health care.”¹⁵

The push for comprehensive health care reform and passage of the EFCA, two unabashedly liberal issues, are just two examples of how the Obama administration plans to use the support of the emerging Democratic majority to turn the country left of center. The election indicated widespread support for these and other liberal issues. It will be Obama’s task, working with the Democratic Congress, to turn this support into legislation.

William Kristol had it right in 1994. He was writing on the cusp of the Gingrich revolution that openly attempted to roll back the New Deal. Ten years later, President Bush followed in Gingrich’s footsteps by proposing partial privatization of Social Security. His proposal met with widespread opposition and was dropped. Obama is promising the return to activist government that was Kristol’s nightmare. That’s why Limbaugh doesn’t want Obama to succeed. He knows that Obama’s success would consign the conservative movement to minority status for at least a generation.

NOTES

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“Yes We Can” and “No We Can’t”: Change and the 2008 Presidential Election

The watchword of the 2008 presidential election was “change”. Indeed, some commentators have gone beyond the slogan (which was initially used by the Obama campaign to represent Hillary Clinton as the candidate who did not want change) and talk of realignment. The 2008 election, they have said, marked a retreat from the economic and cultural conservatism of former years amongst large swathes of the electorate. It was a critical or realigning election.¹ The Democrats had established a basis for long-term electoral and ideological hegemony. For some on both the left and right, the US was becoming a “center-left” or “Europeanized” nation. As Harold Meyerson wrote in *The Washington Post*:

Even though Obama’s victory was nowhere near as numerically lopsided as Franklin Roosevelt’s in 1932, his margins among decisive and growing constituencies make clear that this was a genuinely realigning election.²

Although Mike Davis has also pointed to shifts in the character of the suburbs, brought about in part by the expanding housing market, these commentators owe much to the conclusions drawn in John Judis and Ruy Teixeira’s 2002 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. Published just ahead of mid-term elections in which the Republicans made significant gains, Judis and Teixeira talked of a realignment based upon the growing weight of minorities within the electorate and the rise of highly-educated professionals and, as a consequence, the growth of “ideopolises”. The full character and extent of the realignment would, they argued in a later article, depend upon the ability of Democrats to enact “landmark legislation” that would solidify the allegiance of coming generations to the party.

Long-term trends are, however, always vulnerable to disruption by external shocks. Judis and Teixeira argue that the September 11th attacks and the “war on terror” that followed in their wake held back the swing to the Democrats that they had identified:

The focus on the war on terror not only distracted erstwhile Democrats and independents but appeared to transform, or de-arrange, their political worldview. They temporarily became more sympathetic to a whole range of



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Former president George W. Bush is greeted back in Midland, Texas, January 20, 2009. Foto: Bob Daemmrich/Corbis



conservative assumptions and approaches. In the past, voters had trusted Democrats to manage the economy, and in 2002 that preference should have been strongly reinforced by a recession that occurred on Bush’s watch. Instead, voters in that election believed by 41 percent to 37 percent that Republicans were “more likely to make sure the country is prosperous” ... opposition to abortion also followed the same curve. The percentage of voters who believed that abortion should be “illegal in all circumstances” (based on Gallup Poll annual averages) rose from 17 percent, in 2000, to 20 percent, in 2002, and was still at 19 percent in 2004.³

Against this background, the Bush-Cheney ticket narrowly won re-election in November 2004. Once, however, the shock waves created by 9/11 had receded, the Democrats began to make the gains forecast by those who either explicitly or implicitly talked of realignment. The party secured control of Congress in November 2006 and, two years later, regained the White House. Obama’s share of the popular vote (53 per cent) was the highest gained by a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson’s landslide in 1964.

Realignment reconsidered

Nonetheless, despite the attractions that it holds for the committed partisans who back whichever party seems hegemonic at a particular moment in time, the concept of realignment is heavily contested.⁴ In his 2004 book, *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre*, David R. Mayhew points out, for example, that it is much more difficult to talk of a dominant party in a particular era than realignment theorist suggest. In practice, the parties are often finely balanced. Furthermore, few presidential elections really “fit” the criteria around which the concept is constructed.⁵

Alongside these generalised conceptual difficulties, there are particular problems applying the concept of realignment to the 2008 election. Firstly, there has been no sizeable swing to the Democrats in terms of party loyalties and allegiances. Indeed, identification with the Democrats held broadly steady over the years. According to Gallup polling, it rose to 36 per cent in 2008 compared to 34 per cent in 2000 but that is barely noteworthy. Furthermore, 36 per cent places Democratic identification at the same level it was in 1988, the year the party lost the White House to George H. W. Bush.⁶

Secondly, if the ratings of Congressional Democrats are added to the picture it becomes abundantly clear that there is no particular enthusiasm for the party. Throughout 2009 (and the figures are similar in earlier years),

those who held “unfavorable” opinions of Congressional Democrats outnumbered those who had “favorable attitudes”. The findings for the Democrats’ leaders on Capitol Hill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, are even worse.⁷

Thirdly, there has been no systematic, systematic or comprehensive shift in the character or distribution of political opinion. In other words, although there have been “spikes” resulting from responses to particular crises such as Hurricane Katrina or the Great Financial Crisis there is a significant distinction between fluctuations and a trend. The concept of “realignment” rests upon a trend or trends. Those who talk of a Democratic realignment have to show that attitudes have moved leftwards. However, while there has been a small rise in the proportion of the population describing themselves as “liberal” there has been a parallel rise in the proportion calling itself “conservative”. Furthermore, if the “liberals” are examined more closely, the National Election Studies statistics suggest that they are for the most part “slightly liberal”. There has been a swing back towards a faith in government over the past fifteen years, but 1994 was the high-water mark for anti-government populist conservatism. Popular attitudes at the beginning of the 1990s were informed and structured by cases of Congressional corruption, a belief that taxes were far too high, President Bush’s abandonment of his pledge that there would be “no new taxes”, a federal government budget deficit that seemed to symbolize government profligacy, and a growing fear of the global market. From that point, attitudes towards government could also become less hostile. However, if a longer-term perspective is adopted, there has been a rightward shift since the mid-century years. The ideas that were shaped by the New Deal, wartime egalitarianism and government planning have given way to self-reliant individualism. Whereas 57 per cent of those asked said in 1956 that “the government in Washington ought to see to it that everybody who wants to work can find a job“, just 21 per cent subscribed to this in 2002.⁸

The extent to which Obama’s election constitutes an epochal break with the country’s racial past should also be qualified. Whereas most of the country swung, albeit to a greater or lesser extent, from the Republicans to the Democrats between 2004 and 2008, 9 per cent of voters swung the other way. Larry Bartels notes that Obama’s gains “...relative to Kerry were significantly smaller in states with large numbers of African-Americans – a pattern disguised in the overall vote totals by his strong support among African-Americans themselves.”⁹

In other words, 2008 was much more a victory for Obama personally

than it was for the Democrats or the ideas with which they are associated. There are important attitudinal gaps that will almost certainly have political consequences in the years to come. Obama secured 53% of the overall vote. If CNN's figure for Democratic identification in 2008 is used, 39 per cent (rather than the 36 per cent reported in Gallup polls) is used, identification with the Democrats on 39 per cent.¹⁰ Of these 89 per cent backed Obama rather than McCain. As also noted, "liberal" identification was only 22 per cent or just over a fifth of the voters. Similarly 89 per cent of these voters supported Obama. Earlier datasets suggest that a majority or, at the least, a large plurality of these "liberals" regard themselves as "slightly liberal". In ANES surveys only very small numbers described themselves as simply "liberal" or "extremely liberal".¹¹ In other words, a significant proportion of the 2008 voters backed Obama without being Democratic identifiers while an even larger proportion supported his candidacy without in any way subscribing to liberal forms of thinking. Although incoming presidents always face gaps of this type, they were particularly large in 2008. This was partly because Obama's margin of victory was convincing but also because long-term Democratic identification has been slow to rise and relatively few Americans are willing to embrace either the term "liberalism" or most of its defining tenets.

Party allegiances

In place of realignment, there is a case for revisiting the concept of dealignment. This suggests that the electorate is increasingly detached from the parties and former allegiances have been weakened. There was widespread talk of dealignment during the 1970s, particularly in the wake of the Vietnam war and Watergate. It was seemingly confirmed by declining levels of party identification and an increase in split-ticket voting.¹² Dealignment was however abandoned amidst signs of growing partisanship and polarisation from the 1980s onwards. In an era when the parties have been popularly defined by figures such as Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay and more recently on the Democratic side, Rahm Emanuel, talk of dealignment appeared to be an eccentric anachronism.

However, this judgement should be reconsidered. As Russell Dalton has argued, partisan attachments should be considered in other ways beyond simply looking at the proportion of the electorate who, at any particular point in time, express a sense of identification with one of the parties. Willingness to change allegiances is also important. In earlier decades, there was a high level of stability. Individuals often inherited partisan loyalties from their parents and maintained that loyalties throughout their lifetime.

Even if they sometimes engaged in “deviant” voting, the strength of party identification would bring them back to their original identity.

Over recent decades, there has been a weakening of inter-generational partisanship or the extent to which partisanship is inherited from parents between the 1950s and the 1990s. Individuals are less likely to identify with the same party as their parents. Furthermore, individuals are also more likely to shift their party attachment at times during their lifetime. In other words, both inter-generational partisanship and intra-generational partisanship have weakened.¹³

Pew studies show what has happened to party identification in the first few months of 2009. Both major parties lost identifiers. Between December 2008 and April 2009, Democratic identification fell from 39 per cent to 33 per cent and Republican identification dropped from 26 per cent to 22 per cent.¹⁴ Although we would always expect a degree of political disengagement following an election, these are major shifts that challenge the claims of those accustomed to seeing party identification as broadly constant, at least in the short-term.

Consequences

Two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there is a sizeable gap between the Obama vote and the extent to which there is partisan or ideological identification with the Democrats. All of this may limit the new administration’s freedom of action. Despite the hopes of his cheerleaders who talk of a far-reaching realignment, all the early evidence suggests that the White House will, despite the severity of the economic collapse, pursue a moderate and restrained course. To the chagrin of radicals, many Obama appointees formerly served in the Clinton administration. Secondly, although it should not be overstated, there is some evidence of growing detachment from the parties. This suggests that even if the Obama administration holds back from taking radical initiatives, the outcome of presidential and Congressional elections in the years to come is very uncertain. The US political process is in a state of flux.

NOTES

- 1 The concept of realignment rests upon a theory of party systems. The history of the parties can, it is said, be divided into distinct periods or eras. For his part, Walter Dean Burnham talked about 30-36 year periods. Within each of these periods there is a dominant and a subordinate party. In a celebrated metaphor Samuel Lubell talked about one party as the sun and other as the moon. The “sun party” is electorally predominant and largely sets the political and ideological agenda. Although the “moon party” will periodically win national contests, it is on the terms defined by the “sun party”. Although realignment theorists concede that there can be a drawn-out process of “secular realignment” such as the change in the voting patterns among white Southerners as they shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans, there is an emphasis on “critical” elections. A critical election – such as 1896 or 1932 – marks the dividing line between eras. It will often be preceded by a period of electoral uncertainty: “The critical realignment is characteristically associated with short-lived but very intense disruptions of traditional patterns of voting behaviour. Majority parties become minorities; politics which was once competitive becomes noncompetitive or, alternatively, hitherto one-party areas now become arenas of intense partisan competition; and large blocks of the active electorate – minorities, to be sure, but perhaps involving as much as a fifth to a third of the voters – shift their partisan allegiance” (Walter Dean Burnham, quoted in Mike Davis, “Obama at Manassas”, *New Left Review*, March / April, 2009, 9).
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- 12 Split-ticket voting is where a voter backs candidates from a different party (perhaps for the president and the House of Representatives) at the same election.
- 13 Dalton, Russell J., The Partisan Dealignment Debate: The Changing Nature of Party Identification in American Politics, Paper delivered at the March 2004 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, (Chicago, 2004.)
- 14 Pew Research Center (2009), GOP Party Identification Slips Nationwide and in Pennsylvania: No Indication of Further Democratic Gains, April 29, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1207/repulican-party-identification-slips-nationwide-pennsylvania-specter-switch>

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