

# A celebration, and an appeal

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*To the young, to the young at heart, to Americans, to the world.*

*“Black, the night that ends at last!” — Les Misérables*

We are liberated. The darkness ends, and a new dawn beckons. The planet heaves a collective sigh of relief, and looks expectantly to what happens next.

It is a night that will be remembered in the annals of human history: the first African-American elected President of the United States. A culmination of centuries of struggle against injustice, against slavery, against ignorance, against bigotry, against discrimination. A President elected on an anti-war platform; a President supported and elected for his stand against the financial deregulation which is leaving the world economy in tatters; a President supported and elected for his courageous stance against war.

Celebrate, America. Carouse together, sing songs, burn bonfires, play music, and dance in the streets all night. Dance with all the intensity, all the determined celebration, all the resolute urgency of the moment that history demands. Pour out all the disappointments, all the frustrations, all the horrors and wars and torture and guilt. Sing, chant, embrace, kiss; run aimlessly in delirious circles of pure exuberance. Sing hymns of joy and let the heavens ring; turn up the beats, let the world hear the rhythms of change; cheer and whoop until the echoes redound to millions around the world; smile and radiate the compassion, kindness, and conscience that will envelop the world. Laugh with the entirety of your being; laugh at the improbability; laugh at the adventures, and the challenges, and the gambles that await us. Clear out the damage to your soul; now you have the chance to wipe the slate clean. Announce to planet Earth that change has come; announce to the universe that Earth may yet not be as insane as she seems; announce that this feeble speck, surrounded by unfathomable depths of silence, yet speaks; announce that all is not yet lost.

Tell the world that maybe now the government might speak for you. Celebrate, America; and celebrate, Earth.

Let it all out. There is so much to expunge from our conscience. Many of us know nothing but living under darkness; under a government committed

to meanness, inequality and violence as a matter of principle; under wars, terrorism, secrecy and torture; under the constant erosion of individual liberties; under naked and explicit policies of world domination; under wars of aggression based on knowing lies. Our experience is of such high principle, such high ideals, such potential, such opportunity, shipwrecked upon such a sharp, shocking, shattering, soul-crushing education in the cynicism, the hypocrisy, the corruption, and the mass death of contemporary reality. Our experience is of such bitter, tragic disappointment between that which is, and that which could be, that which should be. It crushes us; but now, perhaps, we can stand upright.

So weep, America. Weep the sorrowful, cleansing, grieving tears of an old world nearing its end; cry the choking, spluttering, inchoate, spasmodic tears of a new world desperate to be born. Scream with all the rage, all the suffering, all the endurance that has accumulated under the surface, all the burden, the aggregate damage of all these years. Look at what your government has done! To you, to your country, and to the world. And now, perhaps it will not. Perhaps. It is a moment when anything seems possible.

Your government has done such damage to the world, yet the world still loves you. It loves you despite what your government has done; and now is your chance to make amends. As he often says, now is your time. Now is your chance. Heal it. Save it. The world may yet choke on its fumes, it may drown under rising seas, it may die of hunger or thirst or nuclear war. But you can stop this; and if humanity emerges from the twenty-first century unscathed, it may well become a planetary civilization worth the name.

It is a turning point. It is a transformative moment in history. It is the beginning of a great turning. It is the point at which the world really begins the new century. It is the beginning of a new direction in the affairs of the mightiest nation in the world, in the affairs of the world —

Maybe. All this is with one caveat. It may be, if you make it so. And if you do not, it will not be.

It is not the end. It is not the culmination. It is not a time to be relieved. It is not the time to go home and forget about politics for four years — to do that is to guarantee that the change will be as minimal as possible. Politics is more than elections. Politics is the struggle of every day, every decision, every place, every time. It is not a time to stop paying attention. When Obama says he needs your help, that is precisely what he means; above all, he needs your conscience and your action.

You live in a system, and you have changed some people in that system. You have not yet changed the system itself; and the system has its own dynamics. You have perturbed one orbit in that system, perhaps significantly; you have not yet lifted the whole system to a new and higher orbit.

So tonight, celebrate, America. Tomorrow there is work to be done; tomorrow the work begins.

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I speak as an outsider. I did not vote today because I cannot vote; I am not a citizen of the country; I am a foreigner. Like much of the world, I am directly affected by the election yet have no say in it; this is one of many possible senses

in which US elections — the closest thing we yet have to an election for world leader — are undemocratic.

I have never seen anything like the enthusiasm of young idealistic Americans for Obama. It amazes me. I must admit I do not seem to share quite the same level of enthusiasm, though I think I understand where it is coming from. Sometimes it has disturbed me a little; sometimes it has seemed a little too uncritical, for there are criticisms to be made.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a heartfelt plea for an end to the Bush administration and its policies. But sometimes Obama and Biden are not so far away from Bush administration policies, and it troubles me.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a deep yearning for a more peaceful world. But that same cheer might be interpreted by Pakistanis as approval of Obama's policy to bomb their country whenever he believes it might kill some enemy; or by Afghans as approval of his plan to escalate there, a plan which has little chance of any success, according to most military experts, but which is sure to cause mass civilian deaths.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a compassionate desire for a better health care system, for a society that where all are cared for. But that same cheer might be interpreted by private health care companies as an approval for them continuing to profit from sickness and disease, since Obama's policy is not to introduce an efficient and effective single-payer scheme as in most other industrialized nations.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a conscientious urge to get the troops out of Iraq. But that same cheer might be interpreted by Iraqis as approval of his plan to leave tens of thousands of uniformed troops there and withdraw no mercenaries at all — against Iraqi wishes. And it would not be interpreted at all by the uncontroversially hundreds of thousands who have died as a result of the invasion — by some estimates, over a million.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a visceral disgust for the Bush administration taking the nation to war based on manipulated intelligence and lies. But that same cheer might be interpreted as approval for Biden's role in promoting and enabling that war — as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, when with the responsibility to investigate claims about Iraq's weapons programs, he refused to hear dissenting voices, voices which understood those programs, voices of those who had inspected them — and who were right all along. Did those cheers for peace elect a warmonger?

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as an outpouring of sympathy towards fellow human beings and respect for human rights. But that same cheer might be interpreted as approving Obama's position in favor of the death penalty.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a rejection of the Bush administration's disrespect for the law, such as engaging in mass warrantless wiretapping. But that same cheer might be interpreted as approval for Obama's vote which granted immunity for telecommunications companies

involved in that warrantless wiretapping — as to the extent of which, we still have no idea; and the only way we might have found out was by discovery in the civil courts.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a desire to return to diplomacy as the primary method of engagement with other nations, particularly with respect to Iran. But that same cheer might be interpreted by Iranians as approval for Obama's unwillingness to put any military option — including an attack on Iran with nuclear weapons — off the table.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as a hope for a less militaristic society. But that same cheer might be interpreted by weapons contractors as approval for his stated policy of increasing the military budget, which is already about half of Earth's military budget.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as agreement with their speaking out against financial deregulation and the dangers of unrestrained capitalism. But that same cheer might be interpreted by Wall Street as approval for Obama's role in redistributing \$700 billion to the wealthy.

When I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I can interpret it as an expression of solidarity with suffering people around the world. But that same cheer might be interpreted by Palestinians as approval for Obama's advocacy of Israel annexing East Jerusalem, an extreme position even among the pro-Israel movement.

And when I hear all those cheers, I cannot help but remember that there were at least two major Presidential campaigns which took more principled, more compassionate, more humane, more conscientious positions on all these questions — and that as long as California is not a swing state, one can vote one's conscience — and I am a little puzzled. And when I am at a rally for a progressive cause, and I can see a crowd full of Obama/Biden signs, but no Nader/Gonzalez and no McKinney/Clemente signs, I am puzzled again. I know that those campaigns are washed out of the mainstream media; and I do come from a nation which has mandatory voting and an instant runoff system; but still, I am puzzled. And when I repeatedly hear at that progressive rally that the United States is the greatest nation in the world — without any reason given — I am puzzled again. These are all great nations, great nations among many, each with many flaws and horrors, each with much to be proud of.

But also, when I hear a cheer for Obama and Biden, I interpret it as a desire for the historic election of an African-American to the Presidency, for someone who took a stand against war, for someone who represents a more reasoned and more intelligent approach to the world, for someone who speaks of unity, understanding, compassion, and tolerance.

And, given the desperate trouble in which the nation and the world finds itself, and the disillusionment and disappointment with the current state of affairs, and the power of Obama's oratory, and the movement he has generated — I interpret it as a desperate desire for change.

When I hear those cheers, I interpret it as the raw, beating heart of humanity, yearning for a better world, yearning to be free.

And there, I agree wholeheartedly, and cheer with them.

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But as the above makes clear, Obama is left of Bush but hardly progressive on many issues. Best described, he is a centrist — at least by US standards — and centrists can go either way. As a very wise woman said at Stanford recently, “Obama is a centrist... so move the center.”

Centrists can be manipulated. Obama, in particular, has plenty of advisers and people in his orbit who are very much within the corporate establishment and very hawkish; and he has put them there, no doubt, because he agrees with them, at least in part. He also has a massive, youthful, idealistic grassroots movement supporting and propelling him. He has multiple forces acting on him. The system is complex, human affairs are complicated; democracy is messy, and with power and wealth as concentrated as in the United States, things are even more difficult. Obama’s policies and opinions on several issues have changed in the course of his campaign; they will surely change in the future. He can and will be manipulated. But manipulation by the people is not manipulation at all — constant manipulation of the government by the people is called democracy.

If pressure is constantly applied to Obama to make good on his promises of change, it can happen. If the grassroots movement that has supported and propelled him into office — a fantastic achievement — continually presses him to adopt humane policies, they will create a reality where he cannot do anything less than accept that reality, created by the grass roots, by the people.

If you see Obama as the embodiment of a great democratic dream — as many people do — then the fate of that dream is in your hands.

One of the most usual responses to criticisms of Obama is that, although he may not be perfect, he’s the best viable candidate and we should first concentrate on electing him to office. Well, now we have — so now, he must be perfected.

So, if Obama moves in a direction you don’t like, question it. If he makes a decision you disagree with, criticize him. If he goes in the wrong direction, protest him. If he goes too far, oppose him. No support for any individual can be complete and total. Total support can only be given to ideas; individuals are to be supported as long as they embody or promote those ideas, and no longer.

If you do nothing, the system will most likely slip back into its former orbit — a new candidate has come to the highest office, and his party has majorities in the Congress, but they are still as beholden to various corporate interests and lobbies as they always have been. The system will be altered, but the disturbance will die down, it will peter out, and things will eventually settle back to normal. His advisers, his cabinet, are all likely to be establishment, many from the Clinton administration — and we will see little new. Remember Clinton’s bombing of Sudan, Serbia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Somalia — and the murderous sanctions placed on the Iraqi population — and all that was before the events of September 11, 2001.

I, for one, do not want to see Obama’s magnificent oratorical skill used to glorify unprovoked bombings, or to justify civilian casualties. I do not want to see his intelligence diverted to defending the indefensible. I do not want to see his courage turned to cowardice, placating the intolerant, ignorant, or violent.

I want to see his courage and his bipartisanship explaining why humanitarianism, compassion, tolerance, respect for all peoples, respect for international law — that is, a foreign policy based on human rights and international law — is in fact the best course to improve national security, to achieve a more just and peaceful world. I want to see his courage and intelligence explaining why aggressive wars are crimes against the peace, that nations no longer invade other nations in the 21st century. I want to see his courage and his intelligence re-explaining Keynesian economics after the dismal failure of neoclassicism, yet again, 80 years on. I want to see his courage and his oratorical skill explaining how a New New Deal based on rebuilding the infrastructure of the United States will both stimulate the economy out of crisis, and lay the groundwork for a sustainable future. I want to see his courage to face fully and honestly the history of the United States, with respect to its indigenous population, the history of slavery, and the history of destroying democracy around the world.

Yes, destroying democracy. I want to hear Obama, with all his grand oratory and eloquence, say: the United States will no longer plot to overthrow democracy where it is against our interests; and will no longer support authoritarian regimes where they serve our interests. I want him to apologize to Venezuela for involvement in the coup of 2002; to Iraq, for multiple well-known catastrophes; to Sudan, Kosovo, and the other catastrophes of the '90s; to Nicaragua, for the terrorism and unprovoked intervention for which the United States was found guilty by the International Court of Justice in 1986; to El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Panama; to Afghanistan for training the Taliban and Osama bin Laden; to Chile for assisting the overthrow of the democratic Allende government in 1973; to Greece for supporting the military junta there; to Guatemala for overthrowing the democratic Arbenz government in 1954; to Iran for overthrowing the democratic government of Mossadegh in 1953; and the list of horrors goes on and on. It will be a long speech — and highly educational — but that is the speech, more than any other Obama could possibly give, that would announce a turning point in world history. It would announce that international relations will no longer be a large-scale version of the mafia. Accompanied by appropriate policies, it would open the way to a planetary community and worldwide democracy; a true globalization.

And if I do not hear it, I want to work to make him give that speech, to force him to give it. And to see that justice is done.

I doubt he will ever give that speech; but if people do place in him their sincere hopes for democracy, human rights, change, and peace in the world, that is precisely what they should be expecting and demanding — for that has been much of the US role in it. And if they do not know about these episodes — as many do not — they should educate themselves about it. And if they know about them, but think Obama would not give the speech, they should ask why — for it would be healing, uniting, and principled, perfectly in character. If they understand that, perhaps they understand something about the system of the world.

But the situation confronts the Obama movement urgently. Now is perhaps, in fact, the most crucial time, as the various positions within the Obama ad-

ministration are decided. The dynamics of the new system are still being set; and many of the individuals suggested appear to be — to put it mildly, not so dynamic.

All the energy spent on this campaign, all the canvassing, all the donations, all the phone banking, all the get-out-the-vote efforts, all the organization and contacts established in the course of this historic campaign — this must not fade away. For this is precisely the machinery that will keep President Obama honest, and which will transform this potentially transformative moment in history, into an actual transformative period of history. We can interpret history all we want — but the point, as we all know by now, is to change it.

The grassroots movement that supported and propelled Obama should feel no qualms about asking for progressive policies, and expecting them; and if necessary, demanding them. If he is the movement's friend, and the movement creates a reality, he will accommodate to them. For he is a centrist, and the movement can move the center.

A Green New Deal? Solar and wind power? Single-payer health care? A complete withdrawal from wars and occupations? A commitment to international law and to abide by the decisions of the International Court of Justice? War crimes trials? Scaling down the military, a peace dividend? Nuclear disarmament? Tougher regulation of corporate crime? Mortgage relief? UN Millennium development goals? Carbon emissions reductions of the order of the 80% or so required to avoid runaway climate change? Public transportation? Education? The list goes on. Network, educate, organize, mobilize. It's up to you.

A man with much experience in this regard once said, "The people can have anything they want. The trouble is, they do not want anything."

At moments like these, anything seems possible. More accurately: anything is always possible; at moments like these, we realize that anything is possible. Things become possible simply when we realize they are possible. So the first statement is true.

I am not so sure about the second statement. It is in your hands.

What do you want?

History presents us with a great opportunity, and history will be what you make it.

My appeal, then, is not to stop, not to go home and disengage for four years. I appeal to you instead to continue, and to make history.