

And so we begin

The swearing in of Barack Obama

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A column I read stated that the swearing in of Barack Obama was the most anticipated inauguration since that of John F. Kennedy. I was only 5-1/2 when JFK took the oath and I have no memory of seeing it. But I have noticed that, everywhere I've gone in Oakland, spirits have been high and unprecedented celebrations were planned for Inauguration Day.

For weeks, local buses bore signs telling people which routes to take to the Oracle Arena, (where the NBA Golden State Warriors play their home games), to view the Inauguration Ceremonies. Tickets were \$5.00 a piece, a small price to pay for purchasing a lot of company if you did not want to watch for free on your computer or television by yourself or with an intimate group of family, friends and neighbors. The Oracle event turned out to be one of the largest Inaugural gatherings, if not the largest, outside Washington D.C. itself.

The espresso machine at my corner coffee shop was so heavily used it ran out of steam Inauguration morning. The local trattoria had an all day happy hour.

The festive mood wasn't just in Oakland and Washington D.C., both majority black cities. And it wasn't restricted to black people celebrating the inauguration of the country's first black President. There is a sense that a great weight has been lifted from the shoulders of the nation. Away, with the oath of office botched by the Bush-appointed Supreme Court justice, and away, with the limo and the helicopter than took Cheney and Bush out of the capital, went the burden of acute embarrassment over a regime that stole two elections, lied to get us into war, destroyed our reputation in the international community by engaging in torture, let a major American city drown, expounded theories of government that do as much violence to our democracy as could any terrorists' bombs or bullets, and handed over our treasure to financiers and war profiteers like children sneaking to their friends the ill-gotten gains of a raid on mama's cookie jar.

In a permitted protest in front of the FBI building, people waved placards that said "Arrest Bush." And as Bush's chopper flew over the National Mall, people sang

NAH! NAH! NAH! NAH!

NAH! NAH! NAH! NAH!

HEY! HEY! HEY!

GOOD-BYE!

During that flyover, I recalled the words of Gerald Ford when he addressed the people after taking the oath with far less ceremony

but just as much urgency as today: "My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works ; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men."

Today's national nightmare is far from over. But after speculation in some quarters that we would not even have a Presidential election in 2008, that the Bush-Cheney cabal would find a way to precipitate a crisis necessitating the declaration of martial law, we saw, on January 20, the peaceful transition of power that has marked our Republic's history in uninterrupted fashion since George Washington handed over the reins to John Adams.

So now we begin to set aright a nation devastated by a political force no less powerful as the hurricane that devastated New Orleans. Our new President has much to do; he can't do it overnight and he can't do it alone.

But, despite the rhetoric of responsibility, the proclamation that we all must do our part to rebuild the country, the fact remains that much damage was done behind our backs or otherwise without our consent, and by means that were beyond our control as ordinary citizens. And repair of that damage is equally out of our hands. The fact remains that Obama is the leader and the question remains as to what he is willing and able to do.

I take a skeptical view of him because I do not see how a young, black, first-term Senator gets to be President of the United States without the consent and help of "The Powers That Be," those "Malefactors of Great Wealth", as Theodore Roosevelt called them, who caused the problems in the first place. For example, the financial interests (Wall St.) were the largest donors, by sector of the economy, to the inaugural festivities. What will Obama do to rein in their influence, to set up an economy where finance is the servant of real productivity, not its master?

Will the man who, as Senator, voted for Telecom Immunity, dismantle the machinery of fascism left to him by the neo-cons, or will he prove right a colleague of mine who recently said that government never gives up a power it has acquired?

What does it mean for the prospects of true and lasting peace in the Middle East that Obama's inaugural address contained a message to the Muslim world, but none to Israel?

I celebrate our new President's intelligence and articulateness. Yet I think Jon Stewart of The Daily Show made an interesting point Inauguration Night in comparing the rhetoric of Obama's inaugural address to various of Bush's speeches. The similarities were discomfiting. Are certain themes expected in a presidential address or are the leaders of both heads of our one corporate party fundamentally the same? Time alone will tell.

This is not to say that we won't get anything refreshingly new from Obama, if he meant what he said in his inaugural address. He said three things that really struck me as signaling his intention to steer a new course. One was the comment that "we will restore science to its rightful place..." This was a direct rebuke of Bush's politicization of science, especially as it relates to climate change. NASA scientist and noted climate-change expert James Hansen recently said, "We cannot afford to put off change any longer. We have to get on a new path within this new administration. We have only four years left for Obama to set an example to the rest of the world. America must take the lead." If that's the case, Obama's inaugural words about science were encouraging indeed.

The second was, “[a]s for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our founding fathers ... our found fathers, faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.” This suggests that Obama wishes to restore respect for our Constitution and treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions, that the Bush Administration disparaged, treaties that our Constitution makes part of the supreme law of the land.

Obama can start that process by asserting what he, as a former professor of constitutional law, should know: that no statute, including the Patriot Act, can defeat rights granted by the Constitution. Our Constitution, unlike constitutions of some other nations, has no provision for its suspension, and is supreme over any statute, no matter what trying circumstance inspired the passing of that statute. That he voted for the reauthorization of the Patriot Act makes me doubt that he will make such an assertion.

The third was “[r]ecall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please.” I hope this means that the era of pre-emptive war and willingness to use nuclear weapons as a first strike against non-nuclear nations is at its ignominious end.

What Obama will accomplish, assuming he is willing to try, is circumscribed by the people around him, not only those pulling strings (his?) behind the scenes, but the people in the Congress with whom he must work. Let us not kid ourselves by thinking he can accomplish a lot just because the Democrats control both houses of Congress. The Democrats were behind the Wall St. bailouts (as was Obama himself). Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D.-CA) took impeachment off the table and Rep. John Conyers (D.-MI) head of the House Judiciary Committee quietly went along with that.

We need to look into our past, as the South Africans did post-apartheid, to get at the truth of why we do the things we do and who benefits from our actions. We need another investigation into 9/11. A thorough exposition and destruction of the government’s lies with regard to that terrible day would destroy the legitimacy of the Bush regime and everything it did against peace and civil liberties in the name of 9/11 and our security.

We also need an investigation into the war crimes of the Bush regime. A special prosecutor is a must. And we must also remember that Bush was not the first, just the worst. Bill Clinton was the table setter for the Bush Administration disasters at home and abroad. He signed telecom deregulation in ‘96 and financial industry deregulation in ‘99. He called for government backdoors into our personal computers (something Joe Biden championed in the Senate). And when the Taliban expressed willingness to turn Osama bin-Laden over to the US in the late 90’s, Clinton rebuffed them. With Hillary Clinton and so many other Clintonites in the Obama Administration, we are not likely to get a full accounting of the Clinton Administration’s role in getting us into the mess we are in today.

I think that while Obama will do some good things, we will not get the “change you can believe in” unless we punish the criminals, restore and rehabilitate the victims, and tell the people who committed unethical but not criminal deeds, or for whom the statute of limitations has run, that the game is over and they should take their marbles and go home. Anything less will only serve, to borrow a phrase from this summer’s campaign, “to put lipstick on a pig.”

As to what we the people do to hold Obama's feet to the fire, I am frankly at a loss. That millions throughout the world demonstrated against the invasion of Iraq but it happened anyway, tells me we the people don't have much influence over foreign policy.

At home, we can vote with our wallets to a certain extent, but only if we have alternatives. For example, I have my bank account at WAMU/CHASE. In my neighborhood they, Bank of America, and Wachovia dominate the landscape. There is not a credit union I can join.

Politically, we can join third parties, but that is a strategy for the very long haul, not for those who want major change now.

The Internet has broadened the media. Gone are the days when a writer could wallpaper her room with rejection slips. Ideas about alternative political philosophies or economic systems can now be published readily. But they can also be lost in the din as millions of people worldwide publish billions of ideas but the major media dominates the Internet and people seldom look past the first two pages of any search. Writing and journalism have become more and more the careers of an elite few as the rest of us are forced to publish for free, or worse yet, to pay for the privilege.

Alternative healers, farmers' markets and such exist. They are of some help to some people, but they are of no help to people who need an operation they can't afford, or who reside in an inner city with no access to a standard grocery store, let alone a farmers' market. We still look to the large corporate systems to meet most of our needs and will do so for a long time yet, even as we develop different ways of doing things. That's their power and they know it, as do the politicians who know on which side their bread is buttered.

The first thing we need to do it to imagine the world we want. Then we have to work toward it in any non-violent way we can. We have inaugurated a President who, at the very least, does not seem to want to obstruct the development of different ways of doing things as much as his predecessor did, at least where science and technology (especially energy use) are concerned.

How far he will take us, or we will take him, is still an unknown.

And so we begin...

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