

Unsettling Signs: Buzzwords, Politics and US Elections

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There are a few buzzwords that every American politician, aiming for high office must utilize, even if disingenuously, to have a reasonable chance at getting elected.

President-elect, Barack Obama's constant use of terms like 'hope' and 'change' contributed greatly to the overwhelming support he has experienced by the American public. Many, admirably so, have overcome a legacy of racial division and prejudice that has defined America for decades, if not centuries. In that regard, voting to office a bi-racial candidate is truly an historic event.

John McCain had an impossible disadvantage to overcome, and failed miserably. He was judged largely based on the many blunders of Republican President George W. Bush, and was evidently caught between a rock and a hard place: to distance himself completely from Bush's legacy, he would risk losing a large margin of his conservative base; to embrace it completely, he would have no chance of broadening that already shrinking constituency. Thus, he too resorted to clichés and buzzwords, which eventually lost any relevance and merely constituted ample material for television comedians: 'maverick', 'straight talker', and, of course, 'Joe the Plummer.'

His desperate and repeated attempts to breathe life into and push forward his under funded, unpopular campaign were of no use. However, his choice of Alaska's governor Sarah Palin as his running mate might go down in history as his greatest blunder of them all.

The fact is, both candidates, McCain and Obama, had much more in common than they would care to admit, as they voted to fund the Iraq war, supported offshore drilling, backed the plan to bail out Wall Street, appealed to the 'middle class', never the many millions of poor Americans, and brazenly demonstrated their undying love for Israel, right or wrong. Any truly independent assessment would most likely show that commonalities between both candidates - especially towards the end of their campaigns - ran too deep that would render designations of them as 'opponents', engaged in constant 'debates', particularly puzzling.

Each candidate also exploited certain advantages over the other. Watching Hilary Clinton's frenzied yet futile campaign to secure the Democratic Party nomination, McCain learned to be very vigilant while scorning his opponent. Any remark that could be misconstrued as a racial commentary was avoided at every turn. Aside from all sorts of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab remarks, actions and inactions, the McCain-Palin campaign steered clear of the issue of race. At one point, McCain assured an anxious supporter of him that Obama is not an Arab, but a "decent family man."

Obama too would tirelessly acknowledge that his opponent was a great “American hero.” Not one mainstream news network, commentator or ‘expert’ failed to solemnly accept McCain’s heroism while serving as a Navy pilot in Vietnam, and for having his aircraft shot down in the fall of 1967 on a routine bombing mission in Hanoi. McCain’s heroic mission entailed the leveling of a power plant in a heavily populated area. Naturally, little is known about the Vietnamese victims of McCain’s ‘heroic’ missions, for whom the ‘straight talker’ had nothing but utter disdain. “I will hate them as long as I live,” he told reporters in 2000, while traveling in The Straight Talk Express campaign bus.

Both campaigns were generously supported by corporate money, but with Obama being the clear favorite, as his victory chances were palpably higher than McCain’s.

To a higher degree than McCain, Obama’s rhetoric was riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions. This is to be expected from any politician in US politics, but Obama again proved to be superior.

Both candidates accused the other of accepting funds from shady sources, including Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, whose failures contributed largely to the US financial crisis and subsequent economic recession. The Washington Post reported in August 27, 2008 that “two members of Mr. Obama’s political circle, James A. Johnson and Franklin D. Raines, are former chief executives of Fannie Mae.” Raines, who was accused of shady dealings himself, which generated him more than \$50 million (according to New York Times John Steele Gordon) just before the collapse of the company was, according to the Boston Globe, put in charge of finding Obama’s vice-president, the ardent pro-Israeli supporter, Joe Biden.

In fact, Obama’s picks for his future administration seem, thus far, consistent with the choices he made for his campaign advisors. Early news reports already speak about an Obama team consisting of Washington’s ‘experts’ and “old guard.” An early ominous sign greeted hopeful Obama supporters just hours after he was declared a winner, when he chose Rahm Israel Emanuel as his White House Chief of Staff. Not only is Emanuel the opposite depiction of unity, hope and change, but one must also question his true commitment to the United States. “His volunteer service in Israel during the 1990s Gulf War is no fiction, with the Jewish press hailing Emanuel’s ascension as a sign that Israel will have its own man in the Obama White House,” wrote Elana Schore in the British Guardian on November 6. In fact, theories are already rife regarding the relationship between Obama’s choices and the support he received from the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington during the campaign, despite his ‘irksome’ middle name and his unsettling ‘ties’ to world-renowned Palestinian intellectuals Edward Said and Rashid Khalidi.

It needs to be said, if Obama’s rise to power provides any positive indications at all, it is that the popular mood has been fundamentally altered in its perceptions regarding race and gender in politics. But the elections tell more about the American voters, than those for whom they voted. The fact that Obama is half African-American or that Biden supposedly grew up in harsh circumstances – or that Palin is a woman and McCain’s airplane was shot down – should be of no essence at all insofar as their policies, decisions and leaderships are concerned. That would be determined by time and experience, although the early signs are hardly promising.

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