

President Obama and Our America

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Posted: January 20, 2009 | 12:59 PM (EST)

A day or two after the election last November, I had a phone conversation with my oldest friend, a man who, like me is in his 40s and with whom I have been friends since the Nixon administration. During our phone call we were both still almost giddy with happiness following Obama's victory and reflected that throughout our lives, we had only known two kinds of presidents, those who we really did not like including Reagan, Nixon and the Bushes and those who we tolerated including Carter, Clinton and, I suppose, Ford. Obama would be something different, a president who would represent us and govern the way we wanted. I suspect we are not the only people of our generation to feel that way. Today, for the first time, I have a president who I actually believe in, trust and like. It is a new feeling for me.

I certainly understand that when Barack Obama put his hand on that bible today, and took the oath of office, the economy didn't magically get better, nor did the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suddenly come to an end, the threat of Jihadist terror whither away, or global warming stop. Politics, however, sometimes is more than just issues and results. Sometimes it is about narratives, stories and even vibe. Today is one of those days. America will draw strength from today's narrative, story and vibe and be able to better face the enormous challenges which lie ahead.

Due to work, family and my distaste for standing outside in the cold weather, I did not go to Washington for the inauguration. Instead, I watched from the university, Columbia, where I teach. At Columbia, the first day of the new semester has been particularly festive as students and faculty watched proudly on giant television screens as one of our alumni became our country's 44th president. Looking at the students watching this extraordinary event, I thought about how their political experiences are different than mine. They will come into adulthood with a president in whom they can genuinely believe and who represents the best our country.

As I walked around the inaugural celebration at Columbia, I could not help but contrast the students I saw to another group of undergraduates who I had seen four years before at another college. Almost entirely by chance, I spent Election Day 2004 at Kenyon College in Ohio where undergraduate students, many seeking to cast their first ever ballot, were forced to wait in lines for up to eight hours in order to vote. Most of the students showed admirable dedication and waited well into Wednesday morning, in order to cast their vote. That day, I was struck that this mostly middle class, mostly white group of students, genuinely, and not inaccurately, believed that the reason for delays was not honest logistical problems, but efforts by the Republican County leadership to prevent them from voting. I had never encountered Americans of their demographic so certain that they were the victim of, for lack of a better way to put it, election fraud. The experience deeply saddened me and made me fear for our democracy.

The students I saw today have had a very different experience and seem demonstrate the renewed faith so many Americans now have in their country. The difference between the despair those students felt in November of 2004, and the hope I saw in student's faces today is almost palpable.

It was not, however, the students at Kenyon or Columbia who were foremost in my mind today. Instead, I kept thinking about four people, as well as an evening almost 35 years ago when I first became aware of politics. My first political memory was when I was six years old hearing my grandparents and aunt and uncle burst into cheers as I slept upstairs in my grandparents house. I found out the next morning that the cheers were because they had learned that President Nixon had resigned. I was only vaguely aware of Nixon at that time, but my grandparents made sure I knew which side I was on.

Today, I thought about my own two children, who are almost the exact same age as Malia and Sasha Obama, and who woke up this morning shouting "Obama is president today!" My children do not really remember the protests we took them to at the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York, but they remember this election, so their first presidential memories will be much happier than mine. They will remember watching Obama's string of primary victories, knocking on doors and eating ice cream in Pennsylvania during the primary and general election and, of course, this day, when a president who they can think of as theirs was sworn in. I feel much more confident about their future and the America in which they will grow up because of this new president. I am also almost a little jealous. They get Obama as their childhood president, while we were stuck with Ford, Carter and Reagan.

I also cannot help but think of my grandparents who did not live long enough to see this day, but who would have shared in my, and our, joy and pride today. I know that if my grandfather were alive today he would be cheering and shouting at the television even more loudly than that night in August of 1974; and he would be even happier.