

One Year Later: A Return to Normalcy

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Posted: November 3, 2009 12:33 PM

The election of Barack Obama on November 4th, 2008 was unlike any election day in recent memory. It was not only a day that changed America -- all presidential elections do that -- but it was a day laden with symbolic, and real, meaning. The image of Barack Obama and his family walking onto the stage in Grant Park in Chicago after Obama had been declared the winner of the election will be remembered for years. For many Americans, the day Obama was elected was a day of excitement and hope which had been all but forgotten in our political life.

It was also just one day. The excitement and adrenaline of that historic campaign and its historic outcome has now worn off. Even as Pennsylvania and other key states were being called for Obama that night, many became aware of the extraordinary challenges which President Obama would face, due in to small part to the destructive presidency of the previous eight years. Obama faced domestic and international problems including wars and recessions that were not going to be addressed easily or quickly-and they haven't been.

Politics is often about managing expectations; and the expectations placed on Obama were wildly unrealistic, particularly given the difficult environment in which he took office. These elevated expectations have contributed to some of Obama's difficulties. Obama ran a campaign based largely around the notion of change, but has brushed up against a political culture that has so far proven extremely resilient.

On November 4th 2008, there was a sense that anything was possible in America. We had finally brought an end to the Bush administration and elected our first African American president, a candidate who had campaigned on progressive positions and as an adamant opponent to most of the excesses of the Bush administration. A year later, some of that sense of possibility has begun to erode. Seemingly simple policies like closing Guantanamo Bay have proven elusive. Even simpler things like repealing the policy of Don't Ask Don't Tell have been delayed for reasons that remain unclear. Moreover, governance has proved, as it usually does, extremely difficult and laden with difficult compromises and choices between options ranging from bad to worse.

The sobering reality of the last year is that even with a resounding and historic victory, real change is still extremely difficult. The political process, even with a Democratic President and Democratic control of both houses of congress, remains maddeningly slow. Problems only seem more complicated when they are examined more closely and the ability of the president to do much about them, particularly in the post-Bush period, is less than it seems.

Three hundred days into the Obama administration, it is still a little too early to know whether his presidency will be successful or not. Viewing Obama as a failure, or even dismissing progressive hopes, would be premature. The real evaluation of Obama's presidency will very likely be heavily influenced, and perhaps determined, by two issues: health care and Afghanistan.

A successful health care bill with a public option and avoiding drawing the US into a long and losing war effort in Afghanistan, both of which are still possible, would make Obama one of our greatest presidents. A never ending unwinnable war in Afghanistan coupled with failure on health care will mean a failed presidency.

While we cannot yet fully judge the Obama administration's overall success, there are some things we have seen in the last year. First, since Obama was elected, our country has returned to normalcy. We still face real problems, but the White House now seems to be seriously engaged in trying to solve them, rather than in using rigid, and often bizarre, ideologies as both explanation and policy solutions. There is still a loud and visible far right in the US, but they are relegated to the margins and to Fox News, rather than having the run of the country. The new president does not always make the right decision, but unlike his predecessor, Obama seems to value information and ideas, rather than viewing inflexibility as the most important virtue when making decisions. The US is better liked and more respected almost everywhere in the world compared to a year ago. This makes it possible to seek to address global problems together with our partners and allies.

The new normalcy which Obama's election has brought us is felt every day, often in strange ways. The occasional comment by Michelle Obama about eating healthy food, the extent to which the administration takes science and scientists seriously, the recognition by the administration that there are problems with the economy and that the government should do something about it, the absence of fear mongering when discussing national security related issues are only some examples of this. This normalcy is a welcome relief from eight years of the Bush administration, but it is only a start. If Obama builds on this start by pushing through a good health care bill and getting it right on Afghanistan, much of that hope that we felt on November 4th of last year will come back.