

Obama's Presidency: An American Renaissance?



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

On election night a year ago the American people felt that change was finally within their grasp. The nation had elected the first black President, affirming the egalitarian ideals enshrined in the American dream. He was sincere, committed, intelligent, determined to

transform business as usual in Washington with an agenda for equality, sustainable economic growth, building bridges of solidarity with foreign countries and world peace. He stirred people's hearts with his battle cry of "Yes we can." Hope reigned in a land chastised by the Bush Presidency. The world shared these feelings with the American people.

A year later it is not clear yet whether, yes he can. He has set out with an ambitious agenda, fighting on many fronts and still without sufficient victories to provide confidence that at the end of the day he will bring about the promised changes. He has not made major mistakes however, and nothing of import has occurred that will

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deny him a prominent place among American presidents if he is able to work out his agenda.

Given the disastrous financial and economic state of the union, and the foreign entanglements he inherited from Bush, it is indicative of his courage, will and commitment that he set out to handle the crisis while at the same time pursuing his own agenda in such matters as healthcare. It remains to be seen whether he has the leadership abilities to bring his initiatives to meaningful fruition. The Republican victories in the governor races just held in Virginia and New Jersey could erode the support he needs to accomplish his goals.

Up to now he has had some solid successes. The financial system has been stabilized, the

automotive industry is once again turning profits and the latest numbers indicate that the country is emerging from recession. But this is bittersweet because jobs are not being created yet and the country is feeling the pain. He has also dramatically improved America's image abroad. The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to him was characterized by President Sarkozy of France as that Obama has again placed America in the heart of the countries of the world.

But still he has not been able to close Guantanamo, the troops remain in Iraq and pro-



crastination, justified or not, in Afghanistan as to sending more troops or devising a new strategy, casts him in an indecisive mode that undermines his ability to lead on other matters.

A victory on health reform would strengthen considerably his position. But, he cannot settle for any bill. The public option or its equivalent has become the measure of success in this endeavor. Puerto Rico appears to be doing well in the reform with an expansion in Medicaid coverage, and protection of Medicare Advantage. But the situation is so fluid that no one can predict what will come out of Congress. After their victories in Virginia and New Jersey, the Republicans smell blood and will certainly try to undermine Obama in healthcare. The measure of the Presidency is at stake and they know it.

If he comes out successfully in healthcare, Obama will be in a position to push forward his other initiatives that are in the process of maturation: in education, climate change and energy reform—another major battle with the Republicans—immigration and, on the international level, the nuclear issue with Iran, disarmament with Russia and the framework for cooperation with China.

From a Puerto Rican point of view Obama's presidency is to be credited with the stimulus package and the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. With regard to his specific promises on status and the economy he has

expanded the agenda of the Clinton-Bush Task Force on status to include the economy. He has not, to my knowledge, expanded it to include civil society or the minority party. My impression is that he has not focused on this and that these matters are being handled at lower levels.

The appointment of Sonia Sotomayor is a major accomplishment for Obama. The essence of this accomplishment is the constructive rupture with tradition and the mindset that has characterized Supreme Court appointments in the past. By appointing her, Obama set foot in an area where others have feared to tread. He entrusted one-ninth of the supreme judicial power of the United States to a woman not stemming from the dominant culture. Sonia Sotomayor brings her hispanic values with her to the court. They will have a bearing in the philosophical matrix that characterizes constitutional law, the supreme law of the land. Such a decision, more than any other, will put forward the true values of multiculturalism and integration without assimilation in the United States. A giant step forward.

There is no doubt that in the year that has passed since the election the Obama administration has moved the country in the right direction. But not far enough. Yet

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the test is not whether he accomplishes his goals quickly but rather whether he accomplishes them well, so as to be a President that has made a positive difference in the history of the United States. Will he be a Roosevelt or a Jimmy Carter? Will he usher in the country to an American Renaissance? It is too early to tell. The jury is still out. Let us hope that when the verdict comes in, we can all say, yes he could. ■

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