

The Promise of Obama

By Bala Prasad



Barack Obama's resounding victory has brought even the most cynical observers of party politics to dare to hope, believing that they will soon be witnessing the most progressive presidential administration of their lifetime. This hope rests largely upon Obama's personal

history as a community organizer.

There are several aspects of Obama's personal history which would seem to indicate empathy for those less fortunate. One, of course, is the fact that he is a black man in a racist society. Another is that he grew up in Indonesia (a poor Asian country) and Hawaii (the most racially diverse and economically stratified state.) More significant, however, is Obama's political history. Obama is the product of a progressive grassroots tradition. At Occidental College in the early 1980s, he became immersed in the anti-apartheid movement. Though there have certainly been student activists from the late 1960s who later moved well to the right, left-wing campus activism was not nearly as trendy during Obama's college years, which were during the heyday of the Reagan Era, when College Republicans were often the largest and most visible political group on many campuses.

Upon graduating from Columbia University, while most of his classmates were pursuing lucrative careers elsewhere, Obama began working in working-class black neighborhoods of South Chicago as an organizer for the Developing Communities Project, then reeling from the collapse of the steel industry. His salary was only \$13,000 a year, plus \$2,000 to purchase a beat-up Honda Civic for transportation, recognizing, in his words, "There was something more than making money and getting a fancy degree." Later, as the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*, Obama was recruited by hundreds of top corporate law firms and was offered a prestigious clerkship for a federal appeals court, but he turned them all down to return to South Chicago to continue working to empower people to challenge the system. This history is indicative of someone who not only is cognizant of the impact government policies have on disadvantaged segments of

society, but who recognizes that power ultimately comes from below.

In short, the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, along with an expanded Democratic majority in Congress, may be the best electoral result that progressives can reasonably hope for, given the reality of the American political and economic system. That's a huge qualifier, to be sure. But it is not insignificant. Indeed, given the power of the American president, even a small difference can make a big difference in the lives of millions of people. Some commentators have noted that the only other Democrats elected by such a clear majority in the past century were Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, whose administrations — despite the distraction of wars — did more than any other president's in advancing the rights of the less fortunate. It is also important, however, that both administrations were prodded by progressive mass movements demanding it.

The key is whether the activist community is willing to continue on the offensive and take advantage of what may be an unprecedented opening in Washington to affect real change. This is an opportunity that must not be squandered. And this comes from a hard core Republican who stands right of Ronald Reagan.

Sincerely,

Bala Prasad