

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

If you want a Big Brother, you get all that comes with it.

--Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 1941.

In this Issue

Congratulations to Barack Obama.

CONGRATULATIONS TO BARACK OBAMA.

Let it never be said that we here at The Political Forum cannot be gracious in defeat. Though technically we didn't lose anything last week, we never made any secret of the fact that we would have preferred that John McCain win, meaning that the election results were disappointing for us, to say the least.

Nevertheless, we believe that in the interests of unity and patriotism, we should join the rest of the conservative commentariat and offer at least perfunctory congratulations to Barack Obama. So here goes: Congratulations Mayor-elect Obama. May your term be productive and peaceful, and may the change and the harmony you promised be both achievable and beneficial.

What's that, you say? We called him what?

Oh. Our mistake. Of course, we meant to call him "President-elect." But you can understand and forgive the slip-up. Barack Obama may just have been elected President of the United States, but by any reasonable interpretation of history, of his rhetoric, and of the election results, he is on his way to Washington to serve as America's Mayor.

The current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, George W. Bush, is famously known for derisively dismissing what he calls "small ball." The purpose of the presidency, in his estimation, is to advance large-scale, long-term goals; to do things like reform the troubled entitlement systems, as he attempted and failed to do with Social Security; to set a broad tone for the country; to restructure the tax code and reduce tax rates across the board; to develop a wide-ranging government philosophy and a consistent and coherent foreign policy doctrine.

Politics being what it is, a president is unlikely to be broadly successful in these pursuits. But the job affords so much power and so much prestige that its authority should be utilized to advance the larger agenda, not, Bush believed, to dink around with the small stuff.

But don't bet that that philosophy will survive past January 20th of next year. If you look at what Barack Obama promised during his campaign and extrapolate from that to determine what his approach to governance will be, there is little question that the next four years will mark a dramatic and unparalleled return to "small ball."

Got a problem with health insurance or your doctor? Barack Obama will fix it. Having trouble finding and affording decent childcare? Barack Obama will fix it. Worried about your local schools? Barack Obama. Need a little more "cash in your pocket" to make it through 'till payday? Gas prices too high? Want your city's streets to be safer and cleaner, and its residents more hopeful and merry? Obama, Obama, Obama.

President-elect Obama doesn't really want to "change" things, at least not all at once. He wants to put into action the old lefty cliché: to change the world "one life at a time." He wants to make "real" issues better for "real" people. He wants to be involved in our lives in a positive way, to make a difference. In short, he wants to be our mayor. Everyone's mayor.

Obama is not exactly the first politician to have adopted such an approach to politics. Indeed, President Bush's criticism of "small ball" has always been interpreted as a knock on his predecessor, who, like Obama, eschewed the "big picture" stuff to focus on the daily lives of every day folks. Of course, Bill Clinton, could afford to play small ball, given the "holiday from history" that coincided with his presidency. But by contrast to the Clintonian era of "peace and prosperity," Obama inherits two hot wars, a broader cold war-ish struggle against an indefatigable enemy, a severe and potentially dire economic crisis, and the re-emergence of an antagonistic Russian bear. Small ball may seem particularly small these days, but

that's not going to stop Obama and Company from trying to turn the presidency into something less imposing, less grand.

This shift will affect the nation deeply. For starters, it will, by the end of the Obama presidency, be far more statist than it is today. This is not, we should note, a comment on Obama's penchant for statism, since he shares the same preferences as did John McCain, and George W. Bush, and the others before them. It is a comment, rather, on the skill with which Obama has obscured the ends of his efforts, thus allowing more rapid pursuit of those ends.

In response to our post-election comments last week, we received several notes from readers suggesting that we (and Ludwig von Mises) missed the point by failing to understand that Americans are perfectly capable of choosing socialism; that they need not have socialism imposed upon them. It's not just, as von Mises maintained, that they "lack the intellectual ability and courage to resist a popular movement, however pernicious and ill considered." It's that they are perfectly willing to accept socialism at face value.

We agree with this, but only to a point. Yes, Americans are perfectly capable of choosing socialism, but, in our humble opinion, they are not likely to choose it consciously, or to put this in another way, to shackle themselves intentionally.

This is why Obama's "small ball" national-mayoralty is so important. It shrouds the ultimate ends of this endeavor in seemingly harmless, good-deed oriented, kindly paternalism.

Americans are, temperamentally, ideologically, and rhetorically, averse to socialism and to socialistic sentiments. They consider themselves to be free, and capitalist, and Western, and all sorts of other things that they sincerely believe distinguish them from socialists or communists or any other "ists." They reject such labels and reject the very idea of such economic control. They would never vote for a socialist, at least not knowingly.

The mainstream, post-election analysis has beat this point into the ground. America, according to conventional wisdom, is still a “center-right” nation. Voters may have voted for change, but they also voted not to change. They generally like things the way they are and would be uncomfortable with a dramatic or revolutionary transformation. Obama didn’t win a mandate. Obama’s most popular positions were his most conservative positions. His economics team is centrist. Tax cuts still resonate with voters. *Etc., etc., ad infinitum.*

But so what? The voters may not consciously have chosen socialism or statism, but that’s what they are going to get. When Obama gets the federal government involved in daycare, the bus to a socialist state will move a little bit faster. When he refunds taxes that weren’t paid in the first place, it will move faster still. When he compels or, at the very least, strongly and coercively encourages “community service,” it will speed up even more.

Each of the little things that Obama promises will cause the bus to move just a little bit faster. There will be no sweeping change, no revolution; just little, hardly perceptible, incremental steps toward greater and greater government control and intervention in everyone’s daily life. And not only will Americans not care, they won’t even notice.

Uber-Mayor Obama is going to stomp on the accelerator and get this bus moving. And, in fact, *that’s why people elected him.* John McCain would have kept the bus moving in the same direction, have no doubt about that. But he would not have driven so fast. And in any case, he didn’t realize how accepting Americans are of this journey, even as they mouth opposition to it. The inimitable Mark Steyn made a similar point this weekend:

Unlike those excitable countries where the peasants overrun the presidential palace, settled democratic societies rarely vote to “go left.” Yet oddly enough that’s where they’ve all gone. In its assumptions about the size of the state

and the role of government, almost every advanced nation is more left than it was, and getting lefter. Even in America, federal spending (in inflation-adjusted 2007 dollars) has gone from \$600 billion in 1965 to \$3 trillion today. The Heritage Foundation put it in a convenient graph: It’s pretty much a straight line across four decades, up, up, up. Doesn’t make any difference who controls Congress, who’s in the White House. The government just grows and grows, remorselessly. Every two years, the voters walk out of their town halls and school gyms and tell the exit pollsters that three-quarters of them are “moderates” or “conservatives” (ie, the center and the right) and barely 20 per cent are “liberals.” And then, regardless of how the vote went, big government just resumes its inexorable growth . . .

If you went back to the end of the 19th century and suggested to, say, William McKinley that one day Americans would find themselves choosing between a candidate promising to guarantee your mortgage and a candidate promising to give “tax cuts” to millions of people who pay no taxes he would scoff at you for concocting some patently absurd H G Wells dystopian fantasy. Yet it happened. Slowly, remorselessly, government metastasized to the point where it now seems entirely normal for Peggy Joseph of Sarasota, Florida to vote for Obama because “I won’t have to worry about putting gas in my car. I won’t have to worry about paying my mortgage.”

While few electorates consciously choose to leap left, a couple more steps every election and eventually societies reach a tipping point. In much of the west, it’s government health care. It changes the relationship between state and

citizen into something closer to pusher and junkie. Henceforth, elections are fought over which party is proposing the shiniest government bauble: If you think President-elect Obama's promise of federally subsidized day care was a relatively peripheral part of his platform, in Canada in the election before last it was the dominant issue. Yet America may be approaching its tipping point even more directly. In political terms, the message of the gazillion-dollar bipartisan bailout was a simple one: "Individual responsibility" and "self-reliance" are for chumps. If Goldman Sachs and AIG and Bear Stearns are getting government checks to "stay in their homes" (and boardrooms, and luxury corporate retreats), why shouldn't Peggy Joseph?

We would note only one problem with Steyn's analysis. He suggests that there is a choice involved here, and that Americans have made this choice. But by his own admission, the "choice" Americans make every four years really doesn't affect the progression down the road to statism. Sure, the rate of acceleration may change, but the path is always the same. Even the great and lauded conservative icon Ronald Reagan couldn't change the course. And he couldn't stop the growth in government. To be sure, he slowed the acceleration. But that is hardly the same thing as stopping the growth altogether.

And that's sort of the point, we guess. Americans, like all Westerners, choose comfort. They choose ease. They choose competence and convenience. They don't choose socialism or statism. But statism is inevitable, given the demands placed on their governments. Americans chose Barack Obama because he promised all of those things, while effectively toeing the line and avoiding the appearance of socialism or any sort of radicalism. They chose him to be their mayor. And that's what he'll be. We doubt seriously that he'll screw things up by trying to move too quickly. What would be the point in that?

Obama has been given the keys to the bus and unlike his predecessor, he doesn't have to feign allegiance to some small-government ideal. All he has to do is move slowly enough that he doesn't wake Americans from their complacent slumber. That won't be easy, given the dunderheads who will be running his party's Congressional arm. But we have little doubt that he'll try and, for the most part, will do so effectively.

That brings us to the second implication of the reign of Mayor Obama, namely that those Republicans who are rubbing their hands and licking their chops at the prospect of retaking the political momentum and, with it, the Congress in 2010 are, well, nuts. It's not that it's impossible that the GOP will be the party on the upswing two years hence. It's just that it's highly unlikely.

For starters, we have to wonder who is going to lead Republicans. In 1980, after the Watergate disaster, and in 1994, after Clinton takeover, the Republicans were led by strong, thoughtful, reasonably well known "conservative" luminaries. Any idea who will fill that role in 2010? We can't think of anyone either.

Second, as the Democrats demonstrated so effectively in 2002 and 2004, it is next to impossible to beat something with nothing, even if that something isn't terribly popular. Right now Republicans Party leaders have no idea who they are or what they represent. Should they move to the center? Should they move to diminish the power of the religious right? Should they be more fiscally conservative? What should they do?

We have no idea. But neither do they. And they're unlikely to be able figure out how to compete with Mayor Obama's low-grade giveaways or, conversely, to convince the electorate that those giveaways are leading them down the road to serfdom. From what we've seen, the GOP simply doesn't have the intellectual firepower to make that case.

Additionally, the actual electoral map for 2010 looks harsh. It is important to remember here that, in the Senate at least, the class of 2010 is also the class of 2004, and the GOP did very well in 2004, picking up

five seats. All of which means that the Republicans will be defending 18 seats next time around, while Democrats will be defending only 15. And this, in turn, means that it is, mathematically speaking, more likely that the *Democrats* will pick up seats in the Senate in 2010, thereby moving even closer to the magical number of votes necessary to cut off debate (i.e., end a filibuster) and vote on any damn thing the majority wants to vote on.

We hope we're wrong, of course, but the field favors Obama and his party.

Finally, there is a very tiny sliver of a silver lining that can be found in the mayoralty of Barack Obama. Given that his success will be in large part derived from his ability to move the bus in the "progressive" direction without allowing anything to jostle the passengers, it seems to us likely that his foreign policy will, at least on the surface, be much like George W. Bush's, and that the fringe, anti-war leftists who enabled his primary victory against Hillary Clinton will be the voters most neglected and most upset by the course of events.

What this means, then, is that we think a precipitous and reckless withdrawal from Iraq is unlikely. Obama will, we believe, do whatever General Petraeus tells him to do in order to maintain stability and security in Iraq. Moreover, at Petraeus's request, Obama will ramp up operations in Afghanistan at the same time, thus putting lie to the leftist maxim that Iraq and Afghanistan constitute an "either-or" proposition. Far from making a hasty retreat from Bush's "wars of choice," Obama will, we believe, opt to preserve the status quo, perhaps even taking on a more hawkish position than that of his predecessor.

The two wild cards in the Obama/status quo foreign policy will be terrorists and the Mad Mullahs. If terrorists attack on American soil – whether as part of their long-term strategy or merely to "test" the new president – Obama will have to break from the status quo and act decisively. If he does not, then his

entire operation will fall apart and he will instantly be transformed into Jimmy Carter. We're not expecting that, but it's hardly outside the realm of possibility.

Similarly, if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon or if Israel attacks Iran, trying to pre-empt such an acquisition, then Obama will have to act decisively. What he'll do is anyone's guess. We suspect that his instincts will be to cut the Israelis loose. But, at the same time, we suspect that the instinct of his Chief-of-staff-designate, Rahm Emanuel, will be to back the Israelis 100%. Hard to say who will win, but again, a failure to act decisively would wreck the entire presidency.

And speaking of Rahm Emanuel, we just want to mention in closing, his relevance to political events of the next couple of years. For starters, in addition to being a Clinton administration grad, he was also the brains behind the Democrats' takeover of the House of Representatives. As the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Emanuel was responsible for recruiting candidates and fashioning the party's message. And he managed somehow to convince then-Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi to shut up, to quit antagonizing the American people with her ditziness and ideological rancor, and to focus on the kind of soft-sell, small-ball stuff that Americans voters like and which Obama just sold so effectively. Having just bequeathed her brains and her voice of reason to the White House, in the person of Rahm Emanuel, Pelosi now becomes the greatest threat to the cautious Democratic agenda and likely the greatest potential source of Republican renewal.

More to the point, Emanuel is also, like his new boss, a product of Chicago and a product of the Daley political machine. Badmouth and criticize the Daleys all you want, and certainly there is plenty of ground on which to do so. Still, the fact of the matter is that the people of Chicago love the family and continue to return its progeny to office. Together, Emanuel and Obama have managed to lock up two of the levers of power in Washington for the Daley machine, and they can now carry that machine's soft-socialist, marginally

corrupt formula with them to Washington, likely with the same results, both in terms of policy and popularity.

If you've ever wondered what the Daley machine might look like on the national stage, pay close attention over the next four years. Of course, Barack Obama will be playing the role of Mayor in this version. But other than that, there will probably be little difference.

Copyright 2008. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.