

What looms for an Obama presidency?

Dennis Coday | Jan. 19, 2009



What looms for an Obama presidency? Will we have a leader who slides along with conventional Democratic politics or one who remembers his campaign calls for change, and then pushes for some that have true fiber?

I have doubts that President Obama will rise above the ordinary. Omens have occurred already.

His choice of Rick Warren to offer prayers at the inauguration legitimized the Saddleback pastor's bigoted campaign to have his heterosexual definition of marriage be the only definition. On the Warren inclusion, Obama whiffed. But let it pass for now.

Doubt number one involves Obama and the Pentagon, that he will effectively heel it and bring to an overdue end a foreign policy based on military, not moral, might. His choice of the warrior James L. Jones, a former general and Marine Corps commandant, as the national security adviser signals a lurch in the opposite direction.

A favorite of the Bush administration who was appointed to posts by both Condoleezza Rice and Paul Wolfowitz, the hawkish Jones said, for example, in May 2006 that NATO needs to increase flexing its biceps: "We still have to understand that our forces, when they're committed, have to be ... committed relatively caveat-free: with a minimum number of national restrictions as to how our commanders can use those forces." Translation: Citizens and civil authorities, butt out.

Domestically, I doubt that President Obama will seriously back the efforts of fellow Democratic Sen. James Webb (Va.) to reform the U.S. prison system. After decades of irrational and excessively punitive policies, from the Rockefeller drug laws of the 1970s to the 1990s abolition of parole in Virginia, a politician has finally risen up to say that the "criminal justice system as we understand it" is broken. It is arbitrary, racist and ineffective, whether found in the incarceration of drug addicts and the mentally ill or long sentences.

Obama is surely aware of all this, but it's unlikely he will risk grabbing the high-voltage third rail of American politics: the "soft on crime" label. Webb is owed praise for taking on a cause that promises little political gain for him but assures large amounts of personal satisfaction should his work lead to an overhaul.

In his attempts at reforming the health-care system, I doubt if Obama will risk offending that part of the public that is causing much of the breakdown: no, not larcenous insurance companies, not HMOs, not thieving pharmaceuticals. It's the unfit misfits, those unhealthy Americans engorging on the usual negatives "fast food and junk food washed down with soda or alcohol, and worsened by the lack of exercise, and a smoking habit thrown in.

Obama, a committed exerciser, could use his office to get the country on the kind of health kick that would decrease the billions of dollars now spent on curing diseases and illnesses induced by negative behavior. He would be ridiculed as the chief of the Food Police. He'd be mocked as President Aerobic. He'd be attacked by the McDonald's-Burger King-Budweiser lobby. But he'd radically improve the health of the nation, and pull it off by the power of inspiration, not legislation.

On reviving the economy, all a \$775 billion stimulus package can do is return the country to its delusions that the good times will roll again and that no personal sacrifices are needed and surely no collective ones. I doubt if Obama, as a politician, has it in him to tell the country that we have been mentally ill all these decades in embracing the unreality that we can spend as if there is no tomorrow. Under Obama, tomorrow is now, with a foreclosure on the American house of cards. He could explain this in his inauguration speech and later in his first State of the Union address, and begin the nation's therapy.

Will he? Count me as a doubter, but one who is ready to be proven wrong.

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