

Inaugurate This: Waiting for Barack Obama

To Discover Who Will Make Change, Supporters Need to Look in the Mirror

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The inauguration of a new President is drawing close and the excitement in our media is palpable. All the outlets are planning big coverage and newspapers are doing special sections, with full color pictures and endless memorabilia. In the midst of this midwinter depression/recession—whatever it is—many Americans want to celebrate the end of the Bush era and the coming of a President they believe they can believe in.

You would think that Barack Obama might tone down the festivities, given the hard times, but the millions on their way to Washington next week don't want to hear that. They want to mark a historical moment by investing hopes and hearts in Barack Obama's triumph, by hoping that change is coming and that he will and can deliver on all his promises, heal a troubled world, crush the fiscal crisis, and turn a very nasty political page for the better.

I share those hopes but also call on my fellow Obamacrats to recognize that it will take the power of people's power—the grass roots organizing, internet magicians, and You Tube guerillas who put Barack in office—to help him achieve the change he told us he wants to bring to America.

We have to stop looking at him and start looking to ourselves, the people who knocked on doors, raised money, reached out independently of the campaign, signed petitions, held up signs, registered voters around the clock, made media and organized the most amazing campaign in American history to see who has the leverage to defeat the lobbyists, special interests and Republican operatives who will do everything they can to derail any and all progressive change. That is if any makes its way out of the centrist bureaucrats and pols Barack has felt it necessary to appoint to navigate the shark infested waters in Washington politricks.

In the aftermath of the campaign, every network ran retrospectives, recapping their highlights of the campaign, the chronology, the endless primaries the ads, the oratory, the polls, the debates, Reverend Wright, Sarah Palin, Bill Ayers, , Joe the Plumber, and all the familiar hot button issues and controversies that were recycled daily by pundits who were largely blatantly partisan and mostly wrong.

While politicians ran for office, the media ran for ratings and bragging rights about exclusives and "breaking" nooze. They all celebrated themselves as much as the victor.

What was most missed was the actual campaign and what made the difference. In partnership with Anant Singh's Videovision, I am directing a film that tells this story, that goes deeper than the hype. It shows how a former community organizer organized a community of believers that outworked their adversaries and did what was originally

considered impossible by the cogniscenti: put a candidate of color in the highest office in the land.

How was this done? Who done it? We were unable to secure the campaign's support to tell this story—we were told they are in “lockdown,”— but we went ahead anyway with the enthusiastic cooperation of people who know Obama well and others who anonymously marched in his army as cogs in what became a well oiled machine. They think the real story must be told.

In many cases, these people were early converts, risking derision in their own communities and friends convinced by the media that the better-known front runners were unbeatable. These were people who followed their passion, invested time and money and in some cases gave up their normal lives to organize rallies, man (and wo-man) offices, make phone calls, send emails and work under the radar of a media that only focuses on events, celebrity candidates and political elites, rarely the people down below.

They held the faith when no one knew who Obama was or what he stood for. They stood by him when he was viciously attacked, denounced, lied about and maligned. They came from all races, all parts of the country, and many sacrificed jobs and income.

They were small d democrats in the sense that they showed us that grass roots democracy still has “legs.” They were people who moved into high gear for many reasons—many because of a desire to end the war, or because he knew how to communicate with young people, or out of racial pride, or just plain disgust with the Bushviks and McNasties.

Some were political. Many were not. There was a wellspring of creativity. 1500 videos were made by the campaign along and probably twice as many by independent filmmakers, animators, and musicians. There was a rock musical, the Obama girl phenomenon (Yes, eat your hearts out (smile) I met her too,), Amigos De Obama, the Great Schlep, comedy, paintings, stickers, and endless emails. The social networking power of the internet was tapped with blogs, Flickr, Facebook, My Space. Twitter and texting. By the time it was through, Obama built a data base of ten million names, No one has ever done that. Half of his large war chest was raised on the internet in small donations.

More importantly, many of the campaign groups are still meeting sill organizing, still committed to the values Obama invoked. The world is waiting for Obama. I know many progressives, myself among them are disappointed by many Cabinet picks and cagey statement. I fear that many of the activists who have already opened up on Obama—who want him to be Hugo Chavez , not the centrist he is— risk alienating his supporters who have to be encouraged to stay engaged and press for the changes they worked for. Obama will need that kind of pressure, even if he won't always welcome it publicly. There will be a learning curve for all of us.

The democracy scholar and DEMOS fellow Ben Barber told us: “The world awaits Obama, there's no question about it. Everywhere I go, everyone I talk to, the expectations are just sky-high. And the sense that this is going to be a new kind of American President, a new face, a multicultural, a black face, a diplomatic face, an internationalist face of America is ever, so much so that you will certainly be disappointed.”

I then asked, “Is there something about Washington, about politics, about special interests that is like a swamp, no matter what your intentions are, no matter what changes you

wanna make, you get sucked into this vortex of a certain way of dealing, deference , playing to the power people, governed by the rules and protocols. I fear that no matter where, where you coming from you end up trapped in this machine.”

He replied:

“Cynics will tell you that Washington is a swamp and no matter where you come from, when you get there you get muddy, you’re gonna get mired, you’re gonna, get quick sand. Your gonna end up is dirty as everyone else...

(However) if you are a historian you also look and say: wait a minute some people have come to Washington and have done better than others. Even the swamp can be changed, you can drain the swamp, you can spray the swamp, ... you can dehydrate, there is a lot of things you can do about a swamp other than get sucked up by it, and there have been presidents who’ve been more successful and less successful doing it.

Will this be a period like the aftermaths of the civil war, like the New Deal, where America remakes itself, where it drains the swamp and fixes it and the answer to this is: it could happen, it could happen, we will see.”

I will be sharing more of our insightful interviews as I cover the inauguration and its aftermath.

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