

Waiting for Obama

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The breathless buildup to the Barack'nauguration is steaming ahead. Some of us who marched on Washington years ago are planning to party there next week in a spectacle funded, quiet as the contradictions are kept, by many of the companies the President-Elect banned from donating to his campaign.

Still Progress? You betcha! Everything I would like? Hardly.

Even amidst the new promises to cast out the old, Bushworld plots last minute damage with midnight regulations in their role, to use Tom Frank's phrase, as 'the wrecking crew.' The Repugs set out to destroy government's capacity to serve people's needs and have achieved much of it by undermining institutions, deregulating the economy, and defanging the Constitution.

Thanks to Congressional inattention and media complicity, they have done to Washington, by other means, what the Israelis are doing to Gaza.

Soon the whole mess will be in Barack Obama's lap bringing to mind that headline in the ONION, "Black Man Given Hardest Job In The World." Will he be able to reverse our economic decline, win two wars, and rebuild the country, and all before breakfast, in a country with no patience or attention span?

I have been making a film with Videovision's Anant Singh about the grass roots and internet campaign that actually won the election for Obama, although you would never know that happened by watching TV News or reading most news reports that focused on the surface aspects of politics.

Wouldn't you know it that a right wing producer is also doing a film on Obama's victory blaming it on liberal media bias, natch. A Boston Herald writer compares Sarah Palin's appearance in the doc to "Nanook of The North," and sneers that she came out of her igloo to whine about the way the blogs dumped on her.

Obama supporters have a very different critique. "I think the media missed what was the real story that was going to elect him, this grassroots empowerment over the Internet and they don't understand this and there are late to it and they just don't get it," David Fenton a PR wizard and consultant to MoveOn.org told me:.

"They missed it. I, and you know they're use to a very centralized media system where the views of a few pundits basically create public opinion and that's no longer the way it operates. They're used to having the majority of the audience to themselves. Well their audience share has become very fractured and smaller. I think that there's a built-in elitism that distrusts the notion of real democratic grassroots action. That's not what these highly

paid people tend to take seriously.”

Obama didn’t build his campaign around being blessed by CNN or MSNBC. They wrote Fox off along with other TV outlets that have traditionally been the king makers and validators of candidates and the transmission belts for their campaign. Instead, he created his own new media apparatus, one that was interactive and empowered supporters to relay the campaign’s messages and create their own media like stunning art work or fun videos to support it.

Andrew Rajiev of the Personal Democracy Forum was tracking all of this on his TechPrez website. He told us, “old media operates in an economy of scarcity. There is a limited amount of time and space. So, television can only show us a piece of the speech or the sound bite and sound bites create certain kinds of impressions of candidates but if a candidate can use the internet to put the entire speech on line. So that everyone can see it, now the full value of that speech can be heard and change peoples minds. Barack Obama’s speech on race, which is 37 minutes long, has been seen by 8 million people, watching it on their laptops. Now. If that doesn’t, ah isn’t a wake up call for the mainstream media about how things have changed I don’t know what is.”

I asked someone high up in the mainstream media about this. Jonathan Alter of Newsweek and NBC agreed, noting: “The Obama folks thought through the new media environment in a way in ways that the other candidates did not..... And part of that strategy was a very new kind of media strategy, which sometimes would rely on press conferences and traditional media and interviews with traditional media. And other times would go around or over the heads of the traditional media.”

So now what? How should progressives regard a candidate who seems to taking refuge in the center? I asked Jesse Jackson, who at one point was overheard saying he wanted to “cut Obama’s nuts off.” He now asks us to give him time:

“Give him an opportunity. It’s too early to be making harsh judgments. Judge him by principles, priorities, direction and success. We should not try to mini-manage him in these early days. You take flowers out of a vase, a multicolored vase and you keep raising up to see is it growing, and you put it back. You kill the flower. Give the flower a chance to blossom and you can determine just whether or not it will or not in due season.”

But also stay involved: if you worked for Obama, keep working for those changes you can believe in.

Warns Fenton, “The health insurance companies, the pharmaceutical industry, the fossil fuel oil and coal companies, the financial industries, they are all going to be massively pressuring Obama not to do much of what he wants to do, and they’re going to be organizing public opinion and lobbying...

You know there’s a famous story right after Franklin Roosevelt was elected for the first time a group of progressive leaders went to see him and said what they’d like him to do and Roosevelt turned to them and said I agree with you on everything now make me do it. So there has to be a continued, very strong grassroots lobbying campaign.”

The Obama campaign built a ten million person email list with millions of phone numbers that can be texted. What a potentially powerful political resource if put to use. Hopefully,

Obama will create an office to encourage ongoing community organizing. A Secretary for Popular Mobilization might be valuable too.

As he presses ahead, hopefully, we will press him. It's also important to remember what the insightful Virginia Montague shared with us while sitting in her living room in Harlem surrounded by autographed photos of our President to be:

"Don't make him the savior. Don't think that he can say shazam and fix the world. And I believe that there are forces that want that appearance so that when he stumbles, or the appearance of stumbles, it will influence the reporters and the columnists and commentators and disillusion the people who support him. Listen. It's all about news. They will tear him apart just as quickly, just as easily. And I believe that. So I'm saying that, so it's all about the media. It's all about the coverage. It's all about the story."

This is a story still to be written. The question is: will he encourage his supporters to write it with him?

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