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Obama Would Bring Out the Best in Us

Opinion

By **Peter Dreier**

Published October 23, 2008, issue of [October 31, 2008](#).

At a time when America is facing great economic turmoil, we need a president who is steady, mature, responsible, thoughtful and clear-thinking. We need a president who is deliberate, not volatile.

We also need a president who can inspire Americans to listen to their better angels — who understands that the hopes that unite us are greater than the fears that divide us. We want someone who not only will restore our confidence in government but also in ourselves. By experience, track record, temperament, values and vision, Barack Obama is that man. He has the potential to be one of a handful of great presidents — like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt — who turns a serious crisis into an opportunity to move the country in a new and positive direction.

In endorsing Senator Obama, former secretary of state Colin Powell recognized his extraordinary leadership qualities. Powell called Obama a “transformational figure” who has “displayed a steadiness, an intellectual curiosity, a depth of knowledge.”

Americans know that our country has been mismanaged, and our values compromised, during the last eight years of Republican rule. We are worried about losing our jobs, health care, pensions and homes. We are angry about the rising costs of gas, food and college tuition — and about having to live paycheck to paycheck. We want government and business to do more to protect the environment, consumers and workers. We are embarrassed that the United States has the highest levels of child poverty, infant mortality and income inequality among the world’s well-off nations. We want to improve our public schools. We want to protect a woman’s right to choose. We worry that our civil liberties and the constitutional separation of church and state are under assault.

Obama’s own story reflects America’s best virtues. It is a story with which we, as Jews, should be very familiar. He overcame racial prejudice and his family’s economic disadvantages to earn the best education the country has to offer. After graduating from Columbia, he chose to work as a community organizer on the streets of Chicago for \$13,000 a year, helping ordinary people meet extraordinary challenges, a period during which he discovered his vocation. Graduating from Harvard Law School — where he served as the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review — he rejected numerous lucrative offers in order to live a life of public service, improving society from the bottom up as a civil rights lawyer, law professor, state legislator and U.S. senator.

At each phase of his career, he has helped translate people's hopes into concrete improvements in their lives. With this background, it isn't surprising that Obama is committed to making government more accountable to ordinary people. But he knows that government alone cannot solve all of America's problems. To fulfill our nation's potential, we must be active citizens, not passive bystanders. We must engage with others in our communities, civic groups, workplaces, unions, schools, PTAs, congregations, environmental groups and other voluntary activities that are the strength of our democracy. One of the hallmarks of an Obama administration would be this invitation to work together to address our greatest challenges.

As American Jews, we have a proud tradition of fighting for social justice, prosperity that is widely shared and support for individual rights. Obama has not only demonstrated a moral commitment to this vision but also has put forward a detailed policy agenda to move America forward, not backward. His economic policies would create millions of new jobs, including "green" jobs that save energy, protect the environment and break our addiction to foreign oil. His domestic agenda would provide affordable health care for all, reduce the cost of prescription drugs and protect Social Security from the Republicans' risky privatization schemes. He would protect families from foreclosure and expand housing choices at all income levels. He would strengthen workers' rights on the job. A consistent supporter of protecting a woman's right to choose, his appointments to the Supreme Court will restore balance from the increasing rightward turn that not only jeopardizes abortion rights but also civil liberties and civil rights.

Obama offers a sharp change in direction from the morally irresponsible and disastrously incompetent policies of the Bush administration.

Yes, Obama will provide a steady hand in these unsteady times. But, as he has already demonstrated in his extraordinary campaign, he will also be an inspirational leader who, like Lincoln and FDR, will use the power of his office to bring out the best in the American people. Like John F. Kennedy, he has already encouraged numerous young people to translate their pent-up idealism into the work of making America a better country.

Obama understands that it won't be easy to reform health care, strengthen labor laws, tackle global warming, restore job security, regulate banks to make them more consumer friendly, improve the standard of living for the middle class, lift millions of working families out of poverty, and require the very wealthy and big business to act responsibly and pay their fair share of taxes. Like FDR and other great presidents, his success will depend on working with congressional allies to enact a progressive policy agenda. But it also will require Obama to use his leadership skills and bully pulpit to mobilize public opinion and encourage Americans to regain a voice in their own government in order to overcome the influence of powerful special interests and their friends in Congress.

"Nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope," Obama has said. Change comes about by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."

Barack Obama has clearly touched a nerve in America's body politic. Americans are hungry for hope and ready for reform. We want a president who can solve immediate problems but also help bring out the best in America. At stake in this election is what kind of country we aspire to be. Obama is asking us to put aside our cynicism and work together to build a better future for ourselves and for coming generations.

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