



Agitate

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An Open Letter to President Elect Barack Obama

Dear Mr. President-elect:

First, I want to congratulate you on this most epic journey. You have made history in a way that many people never thought they would witness in their lifetimes. You and your campaign have made it possible for me to raise my son in a country where he can find a presidential face that is, in his own words, "brown like me."

Yes, you made it clear during your campaign that the election was not about race and largely, and to the credit of America, I believe that it wasn't. Your talent was in transcending race and in emphasizing change. Questions of race were certainly in the atmosphere, but you quieted them and focused on issues that were of concern to all Americans regardless of color.

It's interesting, however, that after your meticulous campaign brought victory race is now a central topic. The barriers that have been breached cannot be ignored, the precedent that has been established should not be denied; the pride we all feel in our country now that it is one step closer to ending the scourge of racial prejudice is foremost in our hearts. Maybe change really is possible. Maybe this is our moment to make history.

The consequence of the campaign and a focus of your term as president certainly has racial overtones. You may have broken through, but you have not yet overcome. All eyes are on you, and many of those eyes are not color blind. As the first black president it may be incumbent on you to be the Jackie Robinson of politics, not just on a par with the best, but better than the best. This may be an unfair expectation, but there it is.

To add to this burden, you are taking the helm of a ship that is largely out of control. Our economy is the most imbalanced and unstable it's been since before the Depression. We are engaged in two wars, both of which are untenable. Our environment is in crisis. Our friends among nations are wary of us. And there's an ungainly accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of an elite few invested in the status quo. Our nation, conceived of the principles of liberty, has turned its back on human rights, freedom and dignity. Instead of being a beacon of freedom, we are now an exemplar of oppression. Being the best of the best in the best of times is hard enough. But it looks like you will be faced with this task in some of the worst of times. It could be said that you are the first president of America's second reconstruction.

To meet the demands placed on you as the new president you'll need to be possessed of the most unique combination of qualities. Examples of these traits are few, and their status lofty. To set the goals and inspire us to achieve them you'll need the vision and the personal charisma of John F. Kennedy. To accomplish the radical change needed to set the country on course will require the political aptitude and doggedness of Franklin Roosevelt. Perhaps most importantly, to heal the wounds left by the last generation of political miscreants, you'll need the wisdom and compassion of Abraham Lincoln.

Kennedy, Roosevelt and Lincoln. These are giants of American history. If there is a pantheon of American presidents, these three are among the chosen. As great as they are, however, they are also deeply flawed individuals. As the first black president you don't have the luxury of such great personal iniquities. You are held to a higher standard.

When we elected you we did so because we looked beyond the traditional color divide. We were looking at the hope and the positive vision that you offered for the future. Your campaign was run on the universal desire of making the future a place of hope. We believed in your vision of change and we cast our votes accordingly.

Now that we've accepted your promise, we expect you to deliver. Frankly, the rhetorical convention that America is no longer interested in business as usual is, *ipso facto*, business as usual. All candidates promise change, but few deliver.

Perhaps this is an institutional issue. As president of the world's largest and most powerful institution there is tremendous pressure to maintain the status quo, reinforce traditional norms and values, even if said norms and values are not representative of the culture as a whole. You, Mr. President-elect, as a presumably new kind of leader, will have to make decisions based on the best interest of the people you represent and the promises you've made rather than on the institution of which you are the apex. This is no small task.

The change you promised cannot come soon enough. America is at a tipping point where the status quo is demonstrably inadequate, even corrupt. Americans are starting to question the legitimacy of our institutions. We expect our politicians to lie, our corporations to steal, our jobs to disappear, our religious leaders to betray our trust, our schools to fail and our media to pander to banality. The institutional fabric of our society is unraveling. We cannot afford another disappointment in the oval office.

For much of the 20th century the government has pursued global corporate interests and imperialism at the expense of social responsibility. We have rested on the costly foundation of militarism and big stick diplomacy rather than ideals of liberty. Domestically, the US has emphasized individual responsibility for some while at the same time showering favors on an economic elite. Without social responsibility, liberty and a level economic playing field, personal responsibility and freedom is a deception.

The United States has the most inequitable society in the industrialized world. Americans work harder for less pay and less benefits than any of their contemporaries. Our citizens are either lacking health care or at the mercy of insurance companies bereft of such emotion. In all social categories, from infant mortality to wages, to literacy, the United States lags behind the rest of the world. We are choking on the bitter remnants of domestic neglect.

At the same time, the empire expands. The US military budget is ten times that of our nearest competitor and greater than the defense spending of the next thirty national military budgets combined. The US military footprint can be seen on every continent and in every ocean. Our military presence includes over 700 bases worldwide. This contingency is not, as past leaders have emphasized, for the sake of defense. The United States has not hesitated to use this presence, having engaged in over 250 military adventures since World War II. It's no wonder that when surveyed many nations see the United States as the most dangerous on earth.

Empire, however, is expensive, and Americans do not like to pay taxes. To maintain this posture the United States must borrow from other nations. Often, we borrow from the very nations we've designed our military to defend us against. US treasury bonds are now in the coffers of the world's most oppressive powers. The very money that we borrow for the sake of fighting the so called war on terror is borrowed from states that fund terrorism. We may be safe from military invasion, but not from economic invasion.

It should be clear that this posture is unsustainable. No culture has ever survived such mismanagement. Rome invested heavily in its military and expanded its presence throughout the Mediterranean world. It offered its citizens little more than bread and circuses. It fell, and with it the keystone of the civilized world. As is true for every empire, empires fall. There's no reason to assume that the United States will be the exception to this rule. We cannot continue to invest in a gluttonous military structure and a top heavy economic elite fattened on foreign funds while at the same time neglecting our citizens.

More and more of our citizens understand the misdirection of your predecessors. A majority voted for you because you represented a new and better direction. You inspired the faith that things can be better. This 53% had no reason to believe you; after all, they've heard such rhetoric before. Americans were told that it was morning in America in the 80's. They believed it. The morning, however, was not much better than the dismal day before. We were offered a thousand points of light, but they turned out to be dim and far away. We were given a bridge to the twenty-first century, but the cost of construction was higher than we thought.

Now you are telling us that we "can." That's great. We know we can if given the opportunity and the right kind of leadership. Our uncertainty at this tipping point in American history is what has us paralyzed. The platitudes of politicians past have turned out to be ruinous. Real change must happen and it must happen now. We "can," but are you the president who will help us, or will you stand in our way like your predecessors? Do you offer us profound rhetoric to secure your election or do you really believe in the principles that got you elected.

If you are a true believer you have support among a majority of the people. Even those who did not vote for you are looking for change. You'll need our support because you will face institutional resistance to your plans. FDR was able to use his tremendous popularity to pressure recalcitrant institution into making much needed reforms. You, Mr. President-elect, can follow this precedent to lead us away from corporatism, militarism and imperialism. With your vision you can stabilize the nation and resolve our uncertainty.

My son and daughter are coming up in a troubling world of war, terrorism, economic turmoil and cultural sterility. The only question on my mind is will they raise their children in a society that is free and just and prosperous? The last eight years have made me skeptical of their future. Their future is now in your hands.

It is my hope that when my son sees your face, brown like his, on a poster in school he will look on it with pride.

Sincerely

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Take Action!

OK! Perhaps you worked hard on a campaign and you got your candidate elected. The work is not over. Will Rogers once observed that all politicians "go in on promises and out on alibis." There are plenty of pols exiting with their alibis in hand. Now that your candidate is in office you must pay attention to what he or she is doing and let them know that you expect them to fulfill the lofty promises they campaigned on. See the Activism page for Federal Government contact information.

