

“Was this a Transformational Election?: Challenges Facing a New Administration”

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Transformational elections in the United States occur about once a generation. Was 2008 such an election? Let us first examine history. The elections for presidents numbered three, seven, 16, 26, 32, and 40 transformed America.

Three: In the United States of 1800, communication and travel were no faster than in Greek and Roman days. Horses and sailing ships carried passengers and the mail and mainly partisan newspapers were generally of limited circulation. The 16 states of the Union individually established voting requirements. Generally, white male landowners could vote but only five states specifically limited voting to the white race. However, the popular vote was not definitive and in many states the electoral vote was determined by the legislature. The electoral College vote was critical. Presidential elections depended more on party control of legislatures rather than the vote of the people. In fact, there is no record of the popular vote in many of the states for the election of 1800.

Thomas Jefferson lost to John Adams and the Federalists four years earlier and was determined not to lose again. The election of 1796 was important because Washington voluntarily gave up power after two terms and that set a standard which lasted until Franklin Roosevelt. It also revealed a flaw in the electoral College which would become crucial four years later. Political parties were not contemplated in the Constitution and no distinction was made in the balloting for president and vice president. Adams won a bare majority of electoral votes and defeated Thomas Jefferson by three votes. Adams vice presidential partner Thomas Pinckney ran third. That gave Adams, a Federalist, a Democratic-- Republican opponent, Thomas Jefferson, as vice president. Jefferson never took an active role in the Adams administration but worked to build the strength of the new Democratic -- Republican party.

In 1800, Jefferson and his vice presidential candidate Aaron Burr received a majority of the electoral votes with an interesting twist. Electoral votes were cast independently and both Jefferson and Burr received 73 votes. That sent the election to the House of Representatives where each state had one vote. Keep that in mind if we ever have another situation where no candidate wins a majority of electoral votes. At that point California and Wyoming will each have one vote for president. It was generally understood that Burr was a candidate for vice president but ambition got in the way and Burr saw that he was only one vote away from being president. The Federalists controlled the House of Representatives by a small margin and the first vote was eight states for Jefferson, six for Burr, and two divided. The contest continued for 36 ballots before the exhausted losing Federalists abstained and allowed the Jeffersonians to make him president.

This was the first change in party at the presidential level, and the fact that it occurred peacefully was transformational itself. It was also the time of *Marbury vs. Madison*, the famous Supreme Court case where Chief Justice John Marshall established the primacy of the Constitution and judicial review of legislative acts. The election of 1800 began 24 years of what became known as the Virginia Dynasty. Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe led through the war of 1812 and the clear establishment of the United States as an independent and growing nation.

Seven: In 1828, land travel was still by horse but steamships were now beginning to challenge sail. The first railroad in the United States was in service but the total mileage was only 30. The nation now boasted 22 states with voters selecting electors in all but two. Fifteen states limited voting to white males, but for all practical purposes white male landowners still dominated elections. Andrew Jackson lost to John Quincy Adams in 1824 in an election determined by the House of Representatives. The glitch in the electoral College was fixed so that an elector now only voted for president, but four candidates, all from the Democratic -- Republican Party vied for the presidency. Jackson won a plurality of states and popular vote but failed to gain a majority. When the House voted, the members from several states Jackson won voted instead for Adams and decided the election. The votes of five states were decided by a single delegate. Jackson was furious and began almost immediately to plan for the next election.

It was considered unseemly for presidential candidates to personally campaign until early in the 20th century. They "stood" for election and didn't "run" for election. But their partisans were fierce and the accusations personally against both Jackson and Adams make today's negative campaigning seem extraordinarily mild. Jackson was accused of being born out of wedlock between his mother and a mulatto man. Adams was charged with being a "pimp for the Russian Czar". Both stories were wildly inaccurate but repeated regularly.

In 1828, the nation again was transformed. The modern Democratic Party was established and the Federalists disappeared. Jackson, president number seven, won overwhelmingly with the increasing electoral power of the common man. Thousands traveled to Washington, D.C., for the inaugural and followed the president to the White House after the ceremony. A pillar of Washington society wrote to a friend about the event saying "what a scene did we witness! The majesty of the people had disappeared, and a rabble, a mob, was scrambling, fighting, romping. -- -- Cut glass and China to the amount of several thousand dollars had been broken in the struggle to get to the refreshments -- -- ladies fainted, men were seen with bloody noses, and such a scene of confusion took place as it is impossible to describe."

In his inaugural speech Jackson promised to eliminate the national debt, and spoke carefully about tariffs as the prime source of revenue for the government. He promptly crushed Hamilton's dream of creating a national bank and urged the expansion of the Union westward. His was a strong presidency and he dominated the political scene for the next eight years.

After Jackson, power shifted to the Senate. In the next 24 years there was a succession of eight weak presidents with the single exception of James K. Polk. He was the last of the Jacksonian presidents and might be on the transformational list, but he only served one term and did not seek reelection. During his term however, he acquired Oregon territory, set our northern boundary at the 49th parallel, added Texas to the Union, and entered war with Mexico to secure California. He was

truly an empire builder. Not one of the eight was re-elected, and only one was even re-nominated. Presidential campaigning however intensified with partisan newspapers hurling extraordinarily bizarre charges. Political gatherings were large and festive. Liquor flowed freely while testimonials and speeches were given.

At one huge event in 1848 for Zachary Taylor, the men gathered and toasted Washington's Birthday, Taylor, Clay, General Winfield Scott, the Whig national convention, the Army and Navy of the United States, a protective tariff, and finally women "the guardian of infancy, the companion of manhood, the solace of age, from the cradle to the grave, the ministering angel of humanity." Of course those patriotic gentlemen would not allow women to vote.

The Whig party succeeded the Federalists but other parties rose and fell in quick succession. Politics was led by the great triumvirate in the Senate, John Calhoun representing the South, Henry Clay representing the West, and Daniel Webster the North. All left the Senate from time to time, Calhoun to be vice president, and each of them secretary of state, but all returned to the Senate to debate slavery, the issue the Founders postponed.

The union could not have been created if slavery was decided, either for or against, so the Constitutional Convention set aside the issue for future generations. Now the battle was joined and debate raged in the Senate with the addition of each state. Was it to be free or slave? The Whig party died and the Republican Party was born. This new political force was zealously opposed to the expansion of slavery. The U.S. Senate race in Illinois in 1858 gave a preview of the conflict to come. Abraham Lincoln of the newly formed Republican Party challenged the incumbent Senator Stephen Douglas. They engaged in a famous series of debates primarily on slavery.

They agreed on seven debates over a period of seven weeks, each in a different congressional district in Illinois. The first speaker spoke for one hour; his opponent for the next 1 1/2 hours; and then the starter finished up with another half hour. The speaking order was reversed at the next occasion. The debates were intense and the oratorical skills of each were seriously tested. There were no microphones, and most attendees stood for three hours during the program. Audiences were huge, 15,000 attending the first debate in Freeport, which only had a population of 5,000. Most observers believed that Lincoln prevailed in the debates but in the election the Democrats won a narrow majority of seats in the Illinois General Assembly. Since legislatures then selected Senators, the Democratic majority promptly re-elected Douglas United States Senator.

Sixteen: Two years later in 1860 the nascent Republican Party nominated a one-term congressman from Illinois as their candidate for president. That sounds remarkably familiar today. He had little experience in elected office, but had captured the nation's attention with his eloquent speeches on slavery. There were now 33 states and the electors were selected by voters in all states except South Carolina. White males still decided elections. Steam locomotives now covered 30,000 miles and telegraph blanketed the nation. Abraham Lincoln won the hearts of the people in his debates against Douglas and his passionate speeches against slavery. Democrats nominated Lincoln's old adversary Stephen Douglas, but seismic shifts were tearing at America and the Democratic Party split. Southern Democrats refused to accept Douglas and nominated Vice President John Breckenridge of Kentucky. An attempt to unify Americans led to a fourth candidate, John Bell of Tennessee. Lincoln, president number 16, won this divided election decisively but with only 40 percent of the

popular vote. The South immediately seceded and the Civil War began. This was a transformational election with huge consequences. The union was preserved, slavery was banned, and African-Americans were given the right to vote. The South did not return to the Union easily and it required significant protests and the Civil Rights Voting Act of 1965 exactly 100 years later for this right to be exercised.

Twenty-six: A generation of economic and population growth interspersed with financial panics ensued with only one Democratic president in the next 52 years. By the turn-of-the-century, there were 45 states and women could vote in four of them, all in the West. Telephones and automobiles were in their infancy and railroads now covered 130,000 miles. America was growing fast with large immigration, mostly from Europe. Our focus was primarily inward, building America to the west. Economic barons grew stronger both economically and politically. When a young reformer Governor was elected in New York, he quickly created panic among the rich. Even though he was privileged himself, and a Republican, he had the audacity to propose controls over monopolies. His actions as Governor rooting out corruption and machine politics frightened Republican leaders and they pleaded with Senator Thomas Platt to take action.

Senator Platt was an extraordinarily powerful Republican boss of New York and plotted how to remove Governor Roosevelt from his annoying activist role as a reform Governor. He cleverly joined forces with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and other friends of Roosevelt who were pushing him as a vice presidential candidate. Roosevelt was reluctant saying "I would a great deal rather be anything, say professor of history, than Vice President." The Republican convention of 1900 enthusiastically nominated Roosevelt and in early 1901 he was sworn in as vice president to President William McKinley. Platt's friends were happy to have Roosevelt out of the governor's office and out of their hair. Six months later President McKinley was assassinated and Senator Platt's dream turned into a nightmare.

This transformation came not from an election but from an assassin's bullet. Teddy Roosevelt became the 26th president of the United States and immediately embarked on change. America was now populated coast to coast and turned outward to the rest of the world. Roosevelt sent the Great White Fleet of the U.S. Navy around the world as a show of strength by a country now prepared to be a leader among nations. He pushed for construction of the Panama Canal and won the Nobel Peace Prize for settling the Russo -- Japanese war. Teddy Roosevelt proposed universal health care and led an environmentalist administration. The nation and the world were transformed.

Thirty-two: Thirty years later America was a nation of 48 states. All men and women over 21 could vote, although there were significant restrictions on African-American voting in Southern states. Radio had now joined telephone as instant communication and the Movietone news brought dramatic photos from around the world to cinema audiences although somewhat delayed. A growing highway network now joined by airplanes made travel much faster. The United States was clearly a world power. World War I ratified that power but America turned back inward, ignored the growing turmoil abroad, and let the good times roll.

The inevitable crash came and desperate Americans, 25 percent of whom were unemployed, voted for another transformation and president 32, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, took office telling the people "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." He dismantled the Republican team that ruled for

all but 16 of the last 72 years, building a new Democratic majority. Labor, Catholics, blacks, and Southern whites joined to build a new but sometimes fractious majority, which ruled Congress for all but four of the next 48 years.

Roosevelt initiated his famous New Deal for America, created Social Security, built a safety net for the poor, and actively supported Britain in the coming conflict with Hitler's Germany. World War II transformed the world and America emerged as a world power, this time not turning away from international participation.

As we approach an era most of us remember, or participated in politically, our views of transformational elections may differ. Some suggest Eisenhower, but his was a moderate shift from the Truman era, particularly internationally. Kennedy's presidency was cut too short by assassination. Lyndon Johnson tried to fulfill Kennedy's legacy but was devastated by Vietnam. Some even suggest Richard Nixon, whose domestic programs are generally viewed as the most progressive since World War II but were left unborn by the tragedy of Watergate.

No, my vote for the next transformative election is president number 40, Ronald Reagan. He demolished the Roosevelt Democratic coalition, winning large parts of union labor, Catholics, and for the first time in the 20th century changed the South into Republican territory. Reagan also successfully articulated a conservative philosophy which led to Republican presidents for the next 28 years with the single exception of Bill Clinton, who moved the Democratic Party to the center to win. Reagan's insistence on a strong military and space program, coupled with new Soviet leadership combined to end the Cold War. "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall," was not just rhetoric but the goal of President Reagan's philosophy.

From the beginning of our republic to Ronald Reagan are 192 years and six transformational elections. That is an average of 32 years or approximately one generation between these transformations. The shortest interval in the last two centuries was 28 years, the longest 48 years. That would suggest another transformational election sometime between 2008 and 2028.

It just happened. Now we will learn whether it is to be a transformational presidency. Will President Obama reach out to the common people like Jefferson and Jackson? Will he successfully conclude a war like Lincoln? Will he challenge his own party like Teddy Roosevelt? Will he move decisively during an economic crisis like Franklin Roosevelt? Will he end a renewed Cold War like Ronald Reagan? Or will he reach out to America and the world in a totally new way?

The agenda before America is long, immediate, and serious. I can think of no better way to start than for President Obama and the people of America to rededicate ourselves to the 52 inspiring words of the preamble to our Constitution.

We, the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

The word "People" in the preamble was capitalized deliberately for our founders realized that our nation could not succeed without our people being directly and constantly involved.

On inaugural day next January, President Obama will be challenged by our economy, global climate change, international security, health care, and stabilizing our entitlement programs. Most of these priorities will require skilled, dedicated, and innovative engineers. We will need engineers who know law, economics, and the environment. We need engineers who can partner with doctors, business leaders, and public officials. The day of the nerdy engineer is over. Broadly educated, innovative, talented engineers must play a crucial role in this transformative time.

Our economy is in critical condition, but passing out checks to stimulate spending is a horribly shortsighted response. Instead, we need to reinvest in our worn-out national infrastructure. We are currently living off the capital investment of past generations. Who is going to invest for our children? Smart engineering of needed infrastructure will produce good private jobs and 21st-century transportation, energy, and utility investments. Construction activity can help restore economic health, rebuild our bridges, produce 200 mph train travel between our urban centers, clean our environment, increase our productivity, and shorten our commute time. It is a whole lot better answer than passing out spending money from a huge national deficit. (I even think a quick start on repairing Husky Stadium should be part of our local economic stimulus.)

Debate on global climate change rages, but I believe we are focused on the wrong question. It is not whether or how much humans are responsible nor whether computer projections of vastly different future temperature changes. It is instead whether a prudent society should buy insurance. None of us knows whether we will ever have our house burn, but we buy fire insurance. We also buy life insurance, flood insurance, and earthquake insurance, all to protect ourselves against the unknown. The intensity of climate change may be unknown, but we should invest in protective measures that are both cost-effective and efficient. Clever engineering should produce affordable non-polluting energy, highly efficient transportation, and even adaptability to a changing planet.

International relations and security faded in importance during the last month of the presidential campaign. Our economic crisis consumed the nation's attention. But our place in the world is critical to our future. I believe President Obama's first task is to restore America's international reputation, not by the force of our arms but by the value of our deeds. Those deeds should include sharing our expertise to help other nations grow their economies in an environmentally sound manner. We also must recognize that global abject poverty leads to pandemic illness, political chaos, and potential terrorism. These international priorities require simple yet ingenious engineering solutions for clean water, environmentally friendly stoves, effective small energy sources, and the tools of basic health care.

Change was the key word of this presidential campaign. I saw the faces of change in the huge crowds at Grant Park in Chicago on Tuesday night. I saw the enormous but good-natured lines of people waiting hours to vote. The tears of some and the smiles of others reflected the joy of participation. Americans were more invigorated by this election than any in my memory. This was clearly a transformational election. America cleared a high hurdle by electing Barack Obama. We will never be the same. Now the challenge is for President Obama. Four years from now will we add President number 44 to the list of transformational presidents? I believe we will.