

January 18, 2009
KUFM / KGPR
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The Type of Change in Leadership We Badly Need

Tomorrow a new leader takes charge of our government. Many of us, maybe most, even those who did not vote for Obama, welcome this change with hope and enthusiasm. Without pointing fingers of blame at anyone, most of us can agree that the last eight years did not go very well for us, either at home or abroad. We limped through the slowest economic expansion in recent times and then plunged into the worst financial and economic collapse since the Great Depression. Abroad, we are still at war in two countries and in between those two wars, the Israelis and Palestinians are again at it. Meanwhile most of the world looks at us with either puzzled disappointment or outright hostility.

That is sobering enough and a daunting challenge that no one would have wished on the new President. But when one steps back from these current crises and contemplates some of the “big picture” issues we face, it is not clear that Obama’s promise of “hope” and “change” will be enough to steer us in the fundamentally different direction that will get us out of the corners into which we have increasingly painted ourselves.

What we really need right now is a cautious, sober leader who is willing to lead us away from the radical adventurism of the past eight years or, to be more truthful, the last 60 years.

As a result of World War Two’s massive destruction around the world, the United States emerged as the dominant world power. The collapse of the Soviet Union confirmed our dominant position and seemed to provide real world proof of our nation’s

greatness. For most Americans and their leaders, this simply confirmed the correctness, even righteousness, of our political and economic system and the appropriateness of our spreading our philosophy and institutions to the rest of the world. Instead of reacting magnanimously to our mid-century military and economic success, we tended to react in a paranoid manner: Any one who resisted seeing the world as we did was viewed with suspicion and hostility. We will be safe as a nation, so our leaders have told us, only when the rest of the world largely looks like us.

That was the guiding vision behind Bush's invasion of Iraq: We were going to replace an authoritarian regime with a model free-market democracy. When the rest of the Middle East saw that new Iraq, a shining replica of America prospering in freedom, the authoritarian regimes from Iran to Palestine, from Egypt to Pakistan, would crumble. Terrorism would subside, free market economies would blossom, and America's position as world leader and model would be confirmed.

Of course that is not exactly what has happened. Obama, showing rare insight and courage for a young ambitious politician, opposed the Iraq invasion from the outset, implicitly rejecting that positive falling domino theory. He has also made clear that he wants to show more respect for both our friends and opponents and lean more heavily on diplomacy, including ongoing dialogue with those we have largely shunned as our enemies. But he is also very hawkish about Afghanistan, where he supports a massive build up in order to "win" the war against the Taliban and keep the pro-Western government in power.

Our disgust for the backward, bloody, and narrow-minded Taliban is understandable. The fact that they may still harbor Osama bin Laden also fires up our

desire for revenge for the September 11th attacks. But we have to keep in mind that one dominant power after another has tried to take control of Afghanistan and, after long wars, has always failed: Earlier, the British Empire and more recently, the Soviet Union. The key question is whether we and our NATO allies can avoid a similar long and costly quagmire. That will be possible only if our goals are limited and an exit strategy is in place.

If we are going to avoid a bloody quagmire in Afghanistan, Obama and his foreign policy team have to begin cooling down the traditional American rhetoric about our historical mission to change the world in our own image. As long as we continue our national dream, or fantasy, about managing history and leading the world in a direction of our own choosing, we will continue to fall victim to battles we cannot win, at an enormous cost in terms of lives and treasure.

We need to look at the world and our role in it in far more realistic and pragmatic terms, focusing on direct threats to our security rather than on distant regimes we dislike. We also have a full time job here in our own huge and complex nation. We can best lead by putting our own house in order and setting an example that others voluntarily choose to follow.

Our economy is in tatters and the truth is that our financial and economic errors have helped pull down the world economy. We were the source of the sophisticated gambling schemes that were passed off as financial securities but turned out to be virulent financial viruses. We are the people who have built our prosperity on consumption levels we could not afford, funding that consumption by borrowing enormous amounts of money from countries much poorer than ourselves. We are the

people who waste energy on an extravagant scale and then ravage our own landscapes in the search for more and fight wars around the world to keep access to foreign energy sources. Global warming is the result of our own and other rich countries' two centuries of economic development energized by burning fossil fuels. Yet we have led the opposition to greenhouse gas controls, blaming the threat of global warming on the **future** emissions of poorer countries like China and India.

We have much, much to do here at home. Actually committing to solving these problems and then doing it, will do far more to enhance our position and leadership in the world than continuing to strut militarily around the globe, drunk on the fantasy that the way we Americans do things is the only right way.