

Driving us crazy

Driving in Dhaka is possibly one of the most hazardous, as well as stupid, undertakings one could venture on. Hazardous because of mindless driving patterns of most road users, and stupid because you knowingly get into a situation that you could avoid by delegating the driving to someone else. Still, we do things that we do.

SHAWKAT ANWAR

Each morning, the media carries news of lives lost on the roads and highways of Bangladesh. Most of these are avoidable, if only the automobiles responsible were driven skillfully and carefully.

Taking a ride in any vehicle, be it a rickshaw, CNG, car, bus, whatever, is risking one's life and limbs. There is no escaping from risk, since the whole traffic system is responsible. Focusing on Dhaka traffic just about tells the whole story.

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While a few Dhaka drivers are well-mannered and, most importantly, possess good driving attributes, a large majority are devoid of driving sense, let alone skills, are rude, irresponsible and rather cavalier about it.

Most drivers in Bangladesh have just one mission in life; how to get from point A to point B in the shortest possible time. They do not believe in lane discipline. They do not care who is in the way as long as it is not a vehicle with flag, or a police sergeant.

They do not care if they are holding up an ambulance begging for clear passage. They do not give a hoot if it is an elderly man or woman, or a young mother with children, trying to cross the street. And, keeping the intersection free? Signaling? Right of way? These are as foreign as the man on the moon, and do not concern Bangladesh drivers.

Dhaka is about the only city where, while you are making a right-turn at the lights, other drivers in lanes to your left, also turning right, speed up, pass you by the left and then muscle on to your lane, jumping in front of you, causing you to stop in your tracks to avoid crashing into the offender. The offender speeds on leaving you in jitters, and if you slow down too much the fellow behind you rudely wakes you up with a blaring horn.

In Bangladesh, it is quite com-

mon to see a car reversing onto the major road in opposite direction of oncoming traffic, holding up all traffic and notching up the risk of accidents. Cars also come out of roadside houses, reversing onto the main road and bringing traffic to a standstill. Nobody thinks anything of it.

A minimal understanding of traffic patterns tells you that traffic flow in any particular lane should be in one direction, not both, at any one time!

What most of our drivers are very good at, and love doing, is snaking in and out of traffic lanes, traveling side by side, literally inches away from the car in the adjacent lane, bumper to bumper with cars in front and rear, and never use the signal. Thank God for the efficient brakes cars have today, as people drive mostly on the accelerator and the brakes and, of course, the horn.

The automatic transmission is a great leveler as you cannot tell the difference between a good driver, who uses the appropriate gears, and a not-so-good driver.

When we learnt driving, we were told to keep the headlights on till half-an-hour after sun-up and half-an-hour before sun-

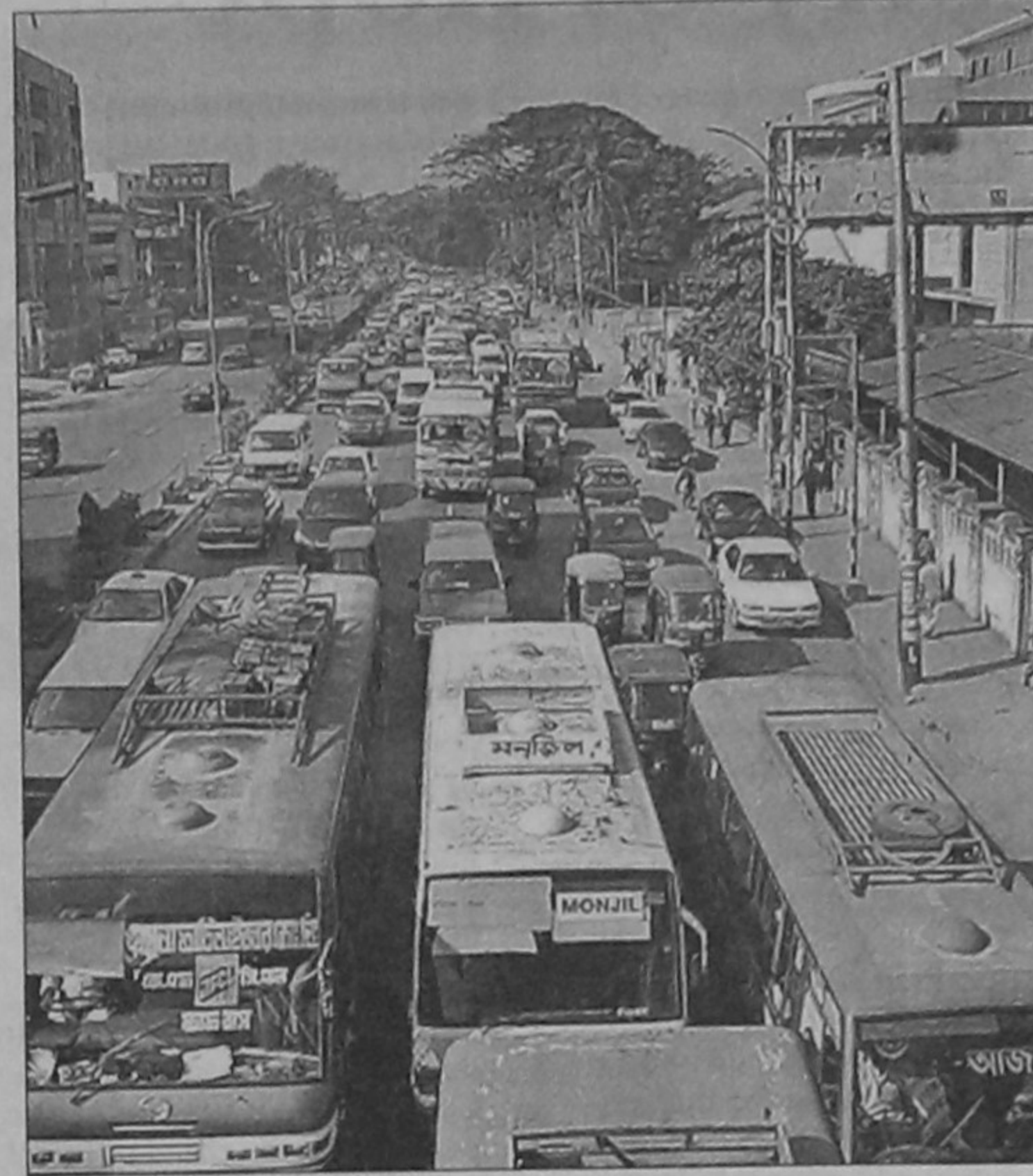
down. Bangladesh drivers fervently believe this is a wasted exercise and drive without lights, in near darkness, way after the sun has gone down.

The concept of defensive driving, switching on the lights on a foggy day is not only not practiced but is also almost unknown. I drove at night on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway last weekend. It was extremely busy with hundreds of trucks carrying heavy loads far beyond their authorised limit. Most of the trucks did not have their rear lights on, some did not have tail-lights and some were even without one of the two head-

lights. It is truly a miracle that there are not many more accidents on that road, I guess the innumerable near-misses keep drivers awake and alert.

One must congratulate Bangladesh drivers for their incredible confidence in themselves and their machines. They come at a high speed from side roads to the main road and screech to a halt, only inches away from traffic already there, baring which, they continue at the same high speed on the main street.

Taxis have a code of conduct of their own, albeit, unacceptable. Some small, tinny, black taxis dart in and out of traffic lanes. They share the roadway to the same extent as the huge buses, do. They appear suddenly, sur-



Bumper to bumper traffic is the norm in Dhaka.

reptitiously, behind or alongside you, and then leave you to eat dust.

If they do hit you they do not have much to lose, and it is very unlikely that they carry valid insurance cover. The taxis hardly ever use their indicators, like buses and most cars. The driving pattern is about the same for all. Nobody stays in the same lane

long enough to allow signaling while making lane change.

In most cities of the world a policeman/woman on traffic duty reigns supreme, except in Bangladesh. Here, the officer stands at traffic lights as an adjunct, with a thin cane in his hand, and waves traffic about with the cane, go, stop, turn right, left, etc. and quite often he

The legacy of Benazir

The death of Benazir, from a bullet or a bomb or from head concussion was, nevertheless, highly tragic. She was so gifted and articulates that, despite being the leader of an impoverished Asian nation, she could catapult herself to the position of a world leader. Nicknamed the Daughter of the East, Benazir drew inspiration from the past and was unique in herself.

MOINUDDIN CHISTI

The elections are over in Pakistan, with all predictions coming true; a new government composed of the victorious Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League is about to take over. But the cry for President Musharraf to step down even before the dust has settled appears a little premature and not in good taste.

It sounds almost like a war cry after the war has been fought and won. The reason lies, probably, in the peculiar constitutional amalgam in Pakistan, where the president has in his hands substantial power to intervene in the constitutional process.

Time and again, presidents in Pakistan have dismissed elected governments on unconvincing, flimsy reasons, reducing the very concept of parliamentary government to a sham. At least, the people always felt so, and also concluded that such infringements were either intentional or unnecessary, or could have been handled differently.

The sixty years of Pakistan's

history are replete with instances when unwary people woke-up to find popular governments toppled overnight. This had trickled down even to the provincial level, when the then governor dismissed the government of Abu Hossain Sarkar in the then East Pakistan barely within twenty-four hours of its formation.

With such a morbid history it is not so surprising that a government in the making in Pakistan would be suspicious of the president's intentions, and would want him to go before they take up the task of constitutionally limiting the powers of the president and make the post a truly ceremonial and titular one. They would want to usher in a genuine parliamentary form of government, where the prime minister does not lose his/her office at president's whim.

The remarkable comeback of political parties in Pakistan, specially the PPP, was written on the wall for anybody to read. There was, of course no serious opposition to such an electoral outcome. A Bhutto not living

proved to be stronger than a Bhutto alive. But then the question who killed Bhutto, like who killed Kennedy or Patrice Lumumba or Martin Luther King, will continue to remain a mystery and continue to hover in our minds long into the future, even after the tragedies have faded in memory.

Nothing shook the world in recent times so much as the violent incident in Rawalpindi, that took away the life of the most vibrant, loved, and lively leader. Like any politician, Benazir Bhutto loved crowds. People's cheers are the lifeblood and inspiration for any public leader. Benazir was no exception. The inner self of such people would shrink and die if they could not go near their people and come within reach of their extended hands.

When Bhutto ended a long exile abroad, she knew about the dangers of returning to her homeland. But her people were more important than herself, more necessary than a sheltered life.

The tragedy that ended her life

unfolded from the very moment she stepped into the city of Karachi. Her assailants kept on striking repeatedly and relentlessly until they could make their mission a success. It is immaterial that she had stuck her head out through the sunroof of a car. The killers would have struck anyway, in a different manner, in a different design, in a different place.

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This was no mean achievement, and did not come about so easily. The ordinary Pakistanis adored her as much as the elite, the gentry that ultimately matter in any society, did. The people believed that only she was capable of removing social and economic injustice, and courageous enough to stand up to the establishment, the oligarchy of rich Pakistani families, whether or not she could actually translate into reality the avowed ideals of "roti, kapra, aur makkan" (bread, clothes and shelter).

A great majority believed that her Pakistan People's Party would come to power again to fulfill their desire to establish an exploitation free, egalitarian society.

Never mind if she was dismissed twice on charges of corruption and nepotism. Such ups and downs, people viewed as only natural for an affable, adorable and popular person. Charisma is more important than ability, the dream of a promised land more prominent than reality.

Benazir could always make her mark through brilliant rhetoric. Maybe this alarmed her opponents most and caused her ultimate undoing. The legacy left behind by Bhutto is largely what she had inherited in a turbulent Pakistan.

Pakistan People's Party, a relatively new political outfit, gained quick popularity, and it's founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto rose to unbelievable heights of popularity in an incredibly short time. Using popular socialistic slogans Bhutto left every other Pakistani leader far behind him.

The years that followed, however, saw many inconsistencies in the policies of Z.A. Bhutto, even in foreign relations. The brilliant brain that worked in settling border issues with India under the Simla agreement somehow lost its way, and the past mistrust crept in to bedevil the relationship between the two neighbours.

Benazir did try to repair such mistakes, and was immensely popular with Indian society. She was more practical and moved away from stunt slogans, and was not willing to eat grass to make an

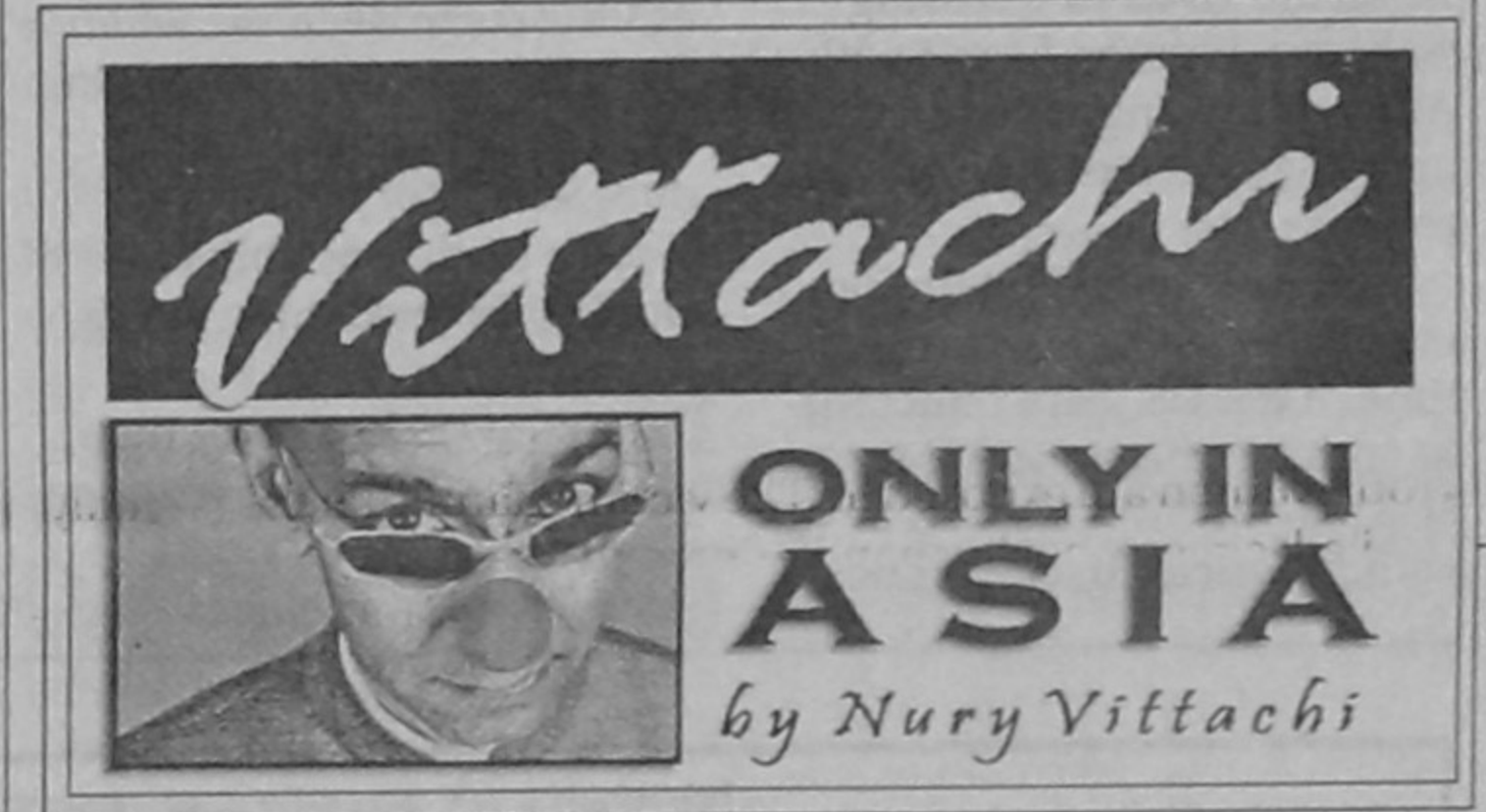
Islamic bomb or fight a thousand years battle with India. She was also trying to balance the policy with the West without overlooking China, and tilt toward the East without annoying the West.

She could also manage to overcome the occasional dent in her popularity and was fast becoming the most popular leader in Pakistan's history. The army was willing to whitewash her past, quash all criminal cases against her, and let her begin a new journey. A journey, alas, so perilous that ended only in gruesome tragedy.

What if this journey had gone on? Could she have succeeded in ending militancy and terrorism, violence and suicide bombers, or in calming the disaffected Pakistanis? Could she stand by firmly to the ideals of a true people's Raj, ending poverty and illiteracy, and raising per capita income of the average Pakistani? Most of all, could she ever take steps in establishing welfare politics and welfare economics? Could she fine tune the armed forces and engage them solely in the defense of Pakistan? Could she fight Islamic extremism and yet make good a commitment to Islamic ideals, values and principles? All this, sadly, we shall never know ever.

Moinuddin Chisti is a former PSP and a freelance contributor. He is lifetime member Dhaka University Alumni Association and ex-VP of DU Political Science Association.

Fast food and faster words



My friend's daughter works in a fast food shop in an airport. I watched her and her friends in action the other day.

The weird thing is that the staff can communicate perfectly well in English with people from South Asia, China, East Asia, or pretty much any other part of the region.

But when aukka Englishman enters the restaurant, communication gets difficult. Monolingual English speakers "hear" Asian English words differently.

Fast food server: HarlowelcumkaneyleL.pyoo?

Customer: What?

Fast food server: HarlowelcumkaneyleL.pyoo?

Customer: Er, yes, I'd like one cheeseburger please.

Fast food server: Dull Swiss wit Baygon?

Customer: Excuse me?

Fast food server: Dull Swiss wit Baygon?

Customer: Oh, no, I don't want a double-Swiss with Baygon, I mean bacon. I just want a normal cheese-

Fast food server: Humburger wit jees. Setter Al Eckart?

Customer: Pardon me?

Fast food server: Setter Al Eckart?

Customer: Ah, got it. A La carte, please.

Fast food server: One-for-ricer wee tat?

Customer: No, I don't want rice, thank you very much.

Fast food server: One-for-ricer wee tat!

Customer: Oh, yes, please, I want fries with that.

Fast food server: Smormy dyumlud?

Customer: I'm sorry, would you mind...?

Fast food server: Smormy dyumlud. U juansmor, me, dyum, lud?

Customer: Medium.

Fast food server: Ad too duller soup a size.

Customer: What?

Fast food server: Ad too duller soup a size.

Customer: Not supersized, thanks. I'm fat enough already, ha ha!

Fast food server: Wad rink u juan?

Customer: Fresh orange juice, please.

Fast food server: Fray soringe ad too duller. Chippa u buyset.

Customer: Okay, give me a set.

Fast food server: Wit set you juan?

Customer: Cheeseburger.

Fast food server: Dull Swiss wit Baygon set?

Customer: Excuse me?

Fast food server: You juan dull Swiss wit Baygon set?

Customer: No, I don't want -- actually, maybe I do want Baygon.

At least it would kill my appetite.

How come Asians can communicate with other Asians using this sort of English, while tourists struggle with it? Because English is really a whole group of languages. A tourist who can speak only the Queen's English limits himself or herself to communicating with other speakers of the same dialect.

But if you speak Asian English -- which I propose we call Englasian -- you end up with a language that the majority of people in the world can understand.

In fact, I reckon we should train the Queen of England to speak it. I can just picture her on her next tour of Asia stepping off the Royal yacht and saying: "We are most amused to be here. My husband and I would like to say harlowelcumkaneyle L.pyoo."

Tomorrow: The questions Asian men will never answer.

Write to Nury at www.vittachi.com in any language you want.

How much change is change?

All the planning in the world is worthless if a president can't inspire and excite the American people. In researching a book on FDR, I learned that on March 4, 1933, a woman brought along four handkerchiefs to an Inaugural reception, one for each of her children, so that after shaking hands with the new president she could wipe her hand on each hankie and thereby preserve traces of her hero's sweat for each child.

JONATHAN ALTER

You hear a lot of moaning about how terrible things are in the United States now, but consider the situation 75 years ago this week when Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn in as president and delivered his stirring "only thing we have to fear is fear itself" Inaugural Address. Unemployment in Toledo, Ohio, was 80%.

Today, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton trying to feel Toledo's pain, unemployment there is 6.4%. The winter of 1933 marked the bottom of the Great Depression. Today, despite the news from Wall Street, we're not even sure if we're in a recession. Millions of people in those days wanted a dictator. When our new president takes the oath next year, we'll be satisfied with some-

one who just gets a few things done.

Or will we? The 2008 presidential campaign has featured rising expectations of real change, especially if Obama makes it all the way. It's not too early to begin to think about what, exactly, this change would mean. How would we define it? How would Obama execute it? Two years from now, will we know if we've achieved it?

Crisis makes change easier. With US financial system in meltdown, FDR's bipartisan bank-rescue plan passed the House on a voice vote with its provisions scrawled on a napkin. But it's a myth that the overwhelmingly Democratic Congress rubber-stamped Roosevelt's 15 major legislative initiatives during his First Hundred Days. Most of those New Deal bills were substan-

tially amended. When he launched Social Security in 1935, many New Dealers thought it was badly watered-down.

Obama tries to prepare his audiences for disappointment. "Change won't be easy," he says repeatedly, explaining how special interests have spent many millions buying Congress. Without a big victory in November that pulls in five or six new Democratic senators (FDR picked up 12 in 1932), it's hard to see how he would get much of his agenda through. Even a landslide guarantees nothing. The Republican minority leaders, Sen. Mitch McConnell and Rep. John Boehner, don't seem likely to catch Obama fever any time soon.

Then there's the budget. Obama admits that with baby

boomers set to retire, "we should have been storing our nuts for winter" and "we can't build our future based on a credit card issued by the Bank of China." But he hasn't yet conceded that rolling back President Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy and slowly reducing the \$12 billion a month we're spending in Iraq just won't generate enough revenue to pay for all of his ambitious domestic agenda.

Obama may find that the biggest changes he brings are less legislative than attitudinal, by, say, repairing America's image in the world and convincing the African-American community that it must do more to solve its own problems.

Even so, Obama's got a few assets in the Washington change game that has gone underappreciated. The first is that he's a senator. Comfortable with dominating their state legislatures, governors-turned-presidents often neglect congressional relations.

Obama was smart enough to hire former majority leader Tom Daschle's well-regarded staffers, who would likely follow him into the White House. He's not

in John McCain's league in working across the aisle, but he has cultivated some important relationships.

For instance, arch-conservative Sen. Tom Coburn routinely puts a "hold" on dozens of bills. He put one on a bill cosponsored by Obama and GOP Sen. Richard Lugar to clean up dangerous conventional weapons scattered across the former Soviet Union. According to Lugar's office, it was only Obama's unlikely friendship with Coburn that persuaded the Oklahoman to lift his hold and allow the bill to become law.

The two senators from opposite sides of the spectrum go out to dinner and clown around in the cloakroom, with Obama teasing Coburn that he can muss his hair, but Coburn can't muss back. Deploying this kind of charm might seem trivial, but it's an important reason FDR and Reagan got so much through.

Another Obama advantage is that he's showing signs of a quality ascribed to Roosevelt -- "longheadedness." Behind their enigmatic smiles, longheaded politicians look farther

downfield than most.

In Obama's case, that means that the onetime community organizer is likely to apply to congressional votes the same meticulous planning he's using to win caucus states. To that end, he has already prioritised his presidency, with ending the war, reforming health care and beginning the transition to a prosperous "green economy" as the big three changes he wants to be judged on.

All the planning in the world is worthless if a president can't inspire and excite the American people. In researching a book on FDR, I learned that on March 4, 1933, a woman brought along four handkerchiefs to an Inaugural reception, one for each of her children, so that after shaking hands with the new president she could wipe her hand on each hankie and thereby preserve traces of her hero's sweat for each child. That sounds like some of the delirium I've seen at Obama events. If it continues, he could bring a lot more change than the cynics think.

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