

The right choice

America shows its best face to the world

THE election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States is a truly historic event. We congratulate President-elect Obama on his win and also the American people for the courage and boldness of their choice.

The election as president of a man who, one generation ago would have been a second-class citizen in his own country, and who a mere seven generations ago might have been born into slavery, reflects gloriously on the country, and shows that America can truly be considered a land of opportunity, where a person, no matter what his or her origins, can aspire to the highest office in the land.

President-elect Obama's victory, however, is significant not only for the milestone of his race, but also for the fact that it signals, after eight years of the Bush presidency, that America is ready to turn the corner and open a new chapter in its history. With Obama's election, this is the chance for the country to reverse eight years of failed and contentious policies, and redeem itself in the eyes of the world.

We take heart from the measured tone of Obama's campaign and the prudent and compassionate policies that he has pledged to enact as president. In these times of financial crisis, he has promised a government that will do more to help ease the burdens of its citizens and to look out for the down-trodden. Internationally, he has pledged to renew America's frayed alliances and to bring the US squarely back into the community of nations.

For a world grown weary of the bellicosity and arrogant unilateralism of the Bush administration, a US presidency that promises to treat other countries with more respect and forbearance is welcome indeed. These are fraught times. The world is a far more dangerous place than it was eight years ago, and we welcome a leader who would seek to forge unity and common purpose among the peoples of the world.

What impresses us most about the president-elect is his message of hope. He has proved himself to be a man of uncommon integrity who appeals to the best in human nature, who inspires and challenges people to believe both in themselves and in their power to change the world for the better. In these jaded times, his brand of leadership is just what his country, and, indeed, the world needs.

Let us also spare a thought for Senator McCain and his gracious concession speech. The fight for the presidency was a tough and often bitter one, but at the end he exited with great grace and pledged sincerely to serve his rival. The example of both Obama in victory and McCain in defeat is one that our own leaders would do well to emulate.

Birth registration

Key to establishing child rights

BIRTH registration, a basic component of demographic discipline, is still an area where we have not attained our goal, with less than 10 per cent of the children below five having so far received the birth registration certificate.

It is really surprising that the Births and Deaths Registration Act 2006, which replaced an archaic law enacted in 1873, was the first serious attempt by the government to bring the whole issue under a legal framework. It is not clear why birth registration, the first official recognition given to a newborn baby, did not figure in the plans and programmes of successive governments in the past. The point is all the more relevant in a social setting where the number of vulnerable children is very high and in many cases they are left out of all social development schemes. Lack of reliable statistics also makes it difficult for the planners to assess our social and economic needs accurately.

So, the speakers in a seminar on birth registration held in the city on Tuesday very rightly observed that such registration was a step forward which would enhance the accountability of the state. The point is duly emphasised in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Birth registration will provide a clear picture of the demographic base needed for formulating development strategies. It is crucially important for the health and education sectors where our performance needs vast improvement. Since there are resource constraints, it is imperative that optimum use of the available resources is ensured. And this can be done when the agencies concerned know the facts and figures very well.

However, the task of registering all the births is a challenging one, since a huge number of people lack the awareness needed to place the issue in the right perspective. There is still low demand for birth certificates, as people do not realise the importance of obtaining the certificates for the newborn babies. Obviously, educating the people regarding the benefits of birth registration is the only solution here.

Birth registration is something that the developed societies introduced decades back, but we are still progressing slowly to fulfill this precondition for better handling of all development and social issues. Our target in this area has to be achieved as a matter of top priority.

ONE day my grandmother Toot came home to find a crowd of children gathered. As Toot drew closer, she could make out the sounds of mirthless laughter, the contortions of rage and disgust on the children's faces. The children were chanting, in a high-pitched alternating rhythm: "Nigger lover! Dirty Yankee!" The children scattered when they saw Toot, but not before one of the boys had sent the stone in his hand sailing over the fence. There she saw the cause of all the excitement: my [white] mother and a black girl of about the same age lying side by side in the grass, their heads propped up on their hands in front of one of my mother's books. The two girls seemed perfectly serene beneath the leafy shade. It was only when Toot opened the gate that she realised the black girl was shaking and my mother's eyes

shone with tears. The girls remained motionless, paralysed in their fear, until Toot finally leaned down and put her hands on both their heads.

The older woman in my grandparents' apartment building who became agitated when I got on the elevator behind her and ran out to tell the manager that I was following her; her refusal to apologize when she was told that I lived in the building. Our assistant basketball coach, a young, wiry man from New York with a nice jumper, who, after a pick-up game with some talkative black men, had muttered within earshot of me and three of my teammates that we shouldn't have lost to a bunch of niggers; and who, when I told him to shut up, had calmly explained the apparently obvious fact that "there are

America creates history



AMERICA has spoken. It has opted for change and dared to vote and elect to the office of the US president a person who, not very long ago, was an unknown quantity in US politics, not to speak of the world, and who, just a century and a half ago, could have been bought and sold as property. History has been created.

Almost 250 years after the Declaration of Independence, nearly 150 years after the abolition of slavery, and nearly 40 years after a black preacher from Atlanta proclaimed to his countrymen his dream to be free, a black American has been elected to the country's highest office. It was a resounding victory with a landslide as far as the Electoral College is concerned, not so though as far as the popular vote, which was quite close.

This was an election, the 56th consecutive US election to elect the 44th US president, of many firsts. It is the first time since Jack Kennedy that two sitting senators ran for the post of the US president. This is the first time that neither of the candidates was born in the mainland US. This is the first time that there was a good chance for America getting

the oldest president since Ronald Regan. And, of course, this is the first time a black American vied for the post of the most powerful office in the world and won.

The world had been waiting eagerly to see how the 22-month campaign would be capped. There was one thing that the world wanted to see America prove, in the same way perhaps that America wanted to prove to the rest of the world that the choice of the American people for the Oval Office was motivated not by the colour of a candidate's skin or the religious conviction he chose to follow or the family background he was brought up with but by the merit of the policies that he enunciated.

It was really as if the world was daring the American nation to prove that the White House was ready for a black president. America did not fail the world. A nation that voted for a person like G. W. Bush changed 180 degrees in

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

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a matter of four years, to vote for a man that was, till the Democratic convention day in 2004, an unknown state senator from Chicago, and who happened to be the main speaker at that convention.

This has been a campaign dominated by dollars, where the Democrats had the luxury, or the benefit, if you like, of close to 700 million dollars to support their campaign far in excess of what McCain's campaign was able to muster. The contest as one can recall has been the most closely fought with both the candidates running their campaign well into the night before the day of election.

This was an election that had also evinced a very keen interest all across the world, primarily because many outside America saw it as a race of the race, with only Africa preferring McCain over Obama (except in Kenya) mainly because of the Bush administration's policy of providing huge

monetary aid to the African countries to revamp their economy.

This is perhaps the time when the pundits from both the camps will start internalising the results of the election, particularly the McCain camp, for the reason why many red states went over to the Democrats, not to speak of the several swing states that went blue.

The incumbent administration record of failed policies, both at home and abroad, disadvantaged the McCain campaign. No president since Richard Nixon had so poor a rating as George W. Bush. It is little wonder that McCain chose to keep both Bush and Cheney away from his rallies. In the end, it was a botched Iraq war and the economy that decided the matter in favour of Obama. This is the fifth consecutive time that a war veteran failed to get elected to the presidency.

But pundits also ascribe to Obama's victory the efficient and clinical way that the Democratic

campaign was run. It was focused on the need to change, no personal attacks but the emphasis was on policies. McCain had flip-flopped, and not security but economy was the main issue that mattered to the American voters. His attempt to paint Obama as green and unaccomplished and without experience floundered seriously when McCain chose Sarah Palin as his running mate.

Obama's real test has only just started. He will inherit an economy which is under serious strain. He will inherit two wars being run simultaneously which has been funded so far by borrowing huge sums of money and relying on allies. And these two wars remain open-ended. John McCain had said that he would choose to lose an election rather than lose a war. What we wait to see is how the new Democratic government goes about "winning" the war, and indeed how a win will be defined by the new administration.

While there is very little difference in the policies of the parties so far as security and foreign policy issues are concerned, the way those are applied are perhaps different. The world therefore waits eagerly to see how the new administration will address the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the Middle East conundrum, and whether it purges the mindset that had plagued the Bush administration regarding the so-called "axis of evil."

It will be interesting to see whether the Democratic government will be able to withstand the Israeli lobby pressure in formulating the Middle East policy. How the Iraq quagmire, in spite of the

improved situation after the "surge," is addressed, as well as Afghanistan, without appearing to "lose" the war is a significant challenge facing the new US president.

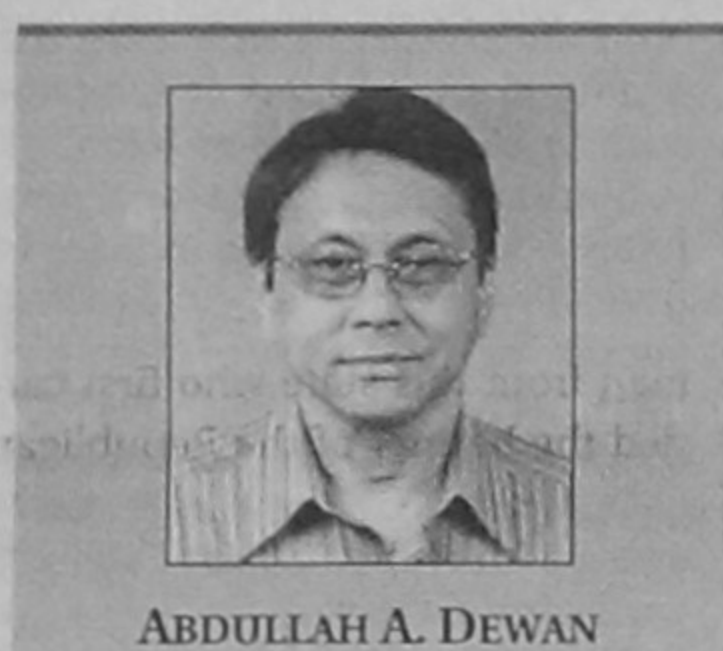
It will be very important for the new administration to convince the Muslim world that the war on terror is not a fight against Islam. It will do well for Obama to realise that the anti-terror efforts cannot be conducted by antagonising the people of the Muslim countries. People's support is as important as that of the governments.

But nothing in the US election has left a deeper imprint on me than the grace and magnanimity with which McCain conceded defeat. His was a demeanour that all political leaders should try to emulate. His was an attitude that asserted that victory was not the be-all and end-all of politics. Respect for the people's verdict, and of unstinted support to the next US president these are lessons for those that pass themselves off as politicians in our country, particularly our leaders.

The US election has many lessons for all of us. But while one cannot end without putting the question whether race really had a role in the election and whether America has breached the racial divide at last, what can be said without any fear of contradiction is that it is only in America that "a skinny kid with a funny name," the colour of whose skin would have made him a second-class citizen only a generation ago, has not only a place in the country, but can go on to hold its highest office.

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A kinder and gentler Obama presidency



NO matter what the odds some people are born to be president.

Who could have ever envisioned -- other than a fairy tale teller -- that the son of a white mother and a non-immigrant African father (whom he met only once at age 10 -- mostly raised by grandmother) would be elected president of the most powerful nation on earth by a stunning margin.

Notwithstanding the worst character assailing of a presidential candidate ever with all kinds of vituperative diatribes by his Republican rival's vile campaign machinery, and the race-baiting 24 hour Fox news channel propaganda and cant, the vast number of neutral white Americans have chosen 47 year old Barack Obama as their 44th president.

Throughout his 22 months long campaign for the presidency, Obama has cogently espoused for unity of both political parties to solve the people's problems. His "coming together" message can be traced back to his past history as community organiser in south Chicago and his Illinois state sen-

NO NONSENSE

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ate days. He always listened to dissenting views and their perspectives without reservations, even if he failed to persuade them to resonate to his views.

While receiving the key to the White House, president elect Obama will also inherit two on-going wars -- Iraq and Afghanistan -- America's much diminished international image, and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The economy he'll soon be steering is in an all encompassing shambles -- millions of homes are foreclosed and many more millions are facing foreclosure, nearly 47 million people are without health insurance, the value of savings and retirement funds has dwindled to a desperate level, and mounting weekly job losses bring the symptoms of a deep and prolonged recession (740,000 jobs lost since last December).

Under President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney, the country has been besmirched in almost all fronts -- the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the justice system, and the separation of powers have come under relentless attack. He exploited the tragedy of September

11, 2001 for promoting his political and ideological agendas to the extreme rather than holding the national unity resulting from the tragedy.

George Bush pledged a presidency of "compassionate conservatism," which I have seen evolve into a reign of dispassionate egocentrism -- one that inflicted pain and misery at home and abroad, making him the bête noire of his Republican Party now.

"Mr. Bush has arrogated the power to imprison men without charges and cudgel Congress into granting an unfettered authority to spy on Americans. He has created untold numbers of 'black' programs, including secret prisons and outsourced torture. The president has issued hundreds, if not thousands, of secret orders. We fear it will take years of forensic research to discover how many basic rights have been violated (NYT Oct. 23 editorial)."

Eight years of Bush's lack of leadership and arrogant exercise of power at home and abroad made Americans choose a candidate under chronicles of despair and promises of change. The most momentous "change" has just

come about -- an Obama presidency. But the "hope" for peace and prosperity must linger a while.

In his August Democratic convention speech, Obama said: "Government cannot solve all our problems, but what it should do is that which we cannot do for ourselves: protect us from harm and provide every child a decent education; keep our water clean and our toys safe; invest in new schools and new roads and new science and technology." Sounds very much like George H. Bush's (GHB: President Bush's father) 1988 post-victory speech.

At his first post-election press conference, GHB said he would pursue the objective of a "kinder and gentler nation."

Later on, in his inaugural speech in January 1989, GHB succinctly elaborated his vision: "There're the homeless, lost and roaming. There're children who have nothing, no love and no normalcy. There're those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction drugs, welfare, and the demoralisation that rules the slums." He said his goal was "to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world

(NYT, January 25 1989)."

Although Obama didn't use the "kinder and gentler" catchphrase in his campaign platform, seems to have been premised on that theme on both the domestic and the international fronts.

He campaigned for changing the tax structure to one that was equitable. When President Bush sliced Clinton's top marginal tax rate (MTR) from 39.6% to 35%, the wealthy had benefited lopsidedly. Bush's tax cut if not extended will automatically roll back to 39.6% in 2010. Under Obama's tax plan, only those making over \$250,000 annually will see their taxes increase, but not exceeding 39.6%, while 95% people will see their taxes decrease.

During Bush's eight years, working Americans saw their living standard decline, their children's education and future prospects suffer, and millions failed to receive adequate health care, and so on.

Obama wants to enact some form of universal health coverage, and \$4000 tuition tax credit to college going students in exchange for their services. He pledged to pursue climate-friendly energy independence for America.

Obama campaigned to raise the minimum wage (currently \$6.55 per hour) to \$7.25 -- effective July 24, 2009. He also intends to index minimum wage to inflation rate.

In his 30 minutes uninterrupted simultaneous infomercial (8:00pm, Oct. 29) on seven TV channels, Obama said: "We've seen over the last eight years how decisions by a president can have a profound effect on the course of

history and on American lives; much that's wrong with our country goes back even farther than that."

The question is: Will Obama be allowed to carry through his "kinder and gentler presidency?"

In his pre-election piece, *The Permanent (smear) Campaign* (Oct. 14, *The American Prospect*), Paul Waldman predicted: "If Obama prevails -- without a doubt -- the drones of the right-wing echo chamber will raise a new mountain of absurd charges, like termite construction their mound from a mixture of twigs, dirt, and their own phlegm. And they will have help from Republicans in Congress, many if not most of whom can be counted on to make it their purpose in life to prevent Obama from accomplishing anything."

Garrett Epps wrote in the *Prospect* in 2002: "President Bill Clinton didn't destroy his enemies; he drove them insane, and they destroyed themselves."

Obama is no less an astute politician than Clinton. Don't forget: He prevailed over both Clintons in the primary nomination process and has now won the White House after the humiliating defeat of his rival's all-out ad hominem assaults.

His calm and composed demeanour and the gift of superb intelligence caused a contagion of incontinence and internal mēlée in McCain's campaign that -- I believe -- may have ultimately paved his inevitable win of the presidency.

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President-elect Obama in his own words

The following are excerpts from Barack Obama's 1995 memoir *Dreams From My Father*

black people, and there are niggers. Those guys were niggers." It wasn't merely the cruelty involved; I was learning that black people could be mean and then some. It was a particular brand of arrogance, an obtuseness in otherwise sane people that brought forth our bitter laughter. It was as if whites didn't know they were being cruel in the first place. Or at least thought you deserving of their scorn.

My stepfather Lolo said: "Men take advantage of weakness in other men. They're just like countries in that way. The strong man takes the weak man's land. He makes the weak man work in his fields. If the weak man's woman is pretty, the strong man will take her. Which would you rather be? Better to be strong. If you can't be strong, be

clever and make peace with someone who's strong. But always better to be strong yourself. Always."

My stepfather Lolo said: "Guilt is a luxury only foreigners can afford. Like saying whatever pops into your head." Mother didn't know what it was like to lose everything, to wake up and feel her belly eating itself. She didn't know how crowded and treacherous the path to security could be. He was right, of course. She was a foreigner, middle-class and white and protected by her heredity whether she wanted protection or not. She could always leave if things got too messy. That possibility negated anything she might say to Lolo; it was the unreachable barrier between them.

As I imagined myself following

Malcolm X's call, one line in his book stayed me. He spoke of his wish that the white blood that ran through him, there by an act of violence, might somehow be expunged. I knew that, for Malcolm, that wish would never be incidental. I knew as well that traveling down the road to self-respect my own white blood would never recede into mere abstraction. I was left to wonder what else I would be severing if and when I left my mother at some uncharted border.

If Malcolm X's discovery toward the end of his life, that some whites might live beside him as brothers in Islam, seemed to offer some hope of eventual reconciliation, that hope appeared in a distant future, in a far-off land. In the meantime, I looked to see where the people

would come from who were willing to work toward this future and populate this new world.

In Indonesia, I'd spent two years at a Muslim school, two years at a Catholic school. In the Muslim school, the teacher wrote to tell mother I made faces during Koranic studies. In the Catholic school, when it came time to pray, I'd pretend to close my eyes, then peek around the room. Nothing happened. No angels descended. Just a parched old nun and 30 brown children, muttering words. Sometimes the nun would catch me, and her stern look would force my lids back shut. But that didn't change how I felt inside.

South Side Chicago had never fully recovered from this racial upheaval.

The stores and banks had left with their white customers, causing main thoroughfares to decompose. City services had declined. The boarded-up homes, the decaying storefronts, the aging church rolls, kids from unknown families who swaggered down the streets -- loud congregations of teenage boys, teenage girls feeding potato chips to crying toddlers, the discarded wrappers tumbling down the block -- all of it whispered painful truths.

If the language, the humour, the stories of ordinary people were the stuff out of which families, communities, economies would have to be built, then I couldn't separate that strength from the hurt and distortions that lingered around us. And it was the implications of that fact, I real-

ised, that had most disturbed me. The stories that I had been hearing from the leadership, all the records of courage and sacrifice and overcoming of great odds, hadn't simply arisen from struggles with pestilence or drought, or mere poverty. They had arisen out of a very particular experience with hate. That hate hadn't gone away; it formed a counter-narrative buried deep within each person and at the centre of which stood white people -- some cruel, some ignorant, sometimes a single face, sometimes just a faceless image of a system claiming power over our lives. I had to ask myself whether the bonds of community could be restored without collectively exorcising that ghostly figure that haunted black dreams.