

Democrats face test of power

AFP, Washington

Barack Obama's Democrats are basking in their longed-for monopoly on the US government, but now face the responsibilities and pitfalls of power as they drive a sweeping reform agenda.

Obama's emphatic win in Tuesday's presidential election, twinned with expanded majorities in the Senate and House of Representatives gives Democrats their first stranglehold on Washington since 1994.

Democrats have an ambitious agenda of getting US troops home from Iraq, middle class tax cuts, overhauling foreign policy, providing healthcare to all Americans, tackling climate change and weaning America off foreign oil.

But the clutch of deep crises afflicting the United States, including the worst financial meltdown since the 1930s, the threat of a deep recession and two foreign wars may put severe curbs on their room for manoeuvre.

To govern is to choose, we have to choose our priorities very carefully about what is achievable and

what can be done in the best possible way," said House speaker Nancy Pelosi Wednesday in her first post-election remarks.

"I believe that the aspirations that people have for themselves that they have pinned on President Obama will recognise that it will take some time to get much of this done."

President-elect Obama's team will be conscious of the danger of overreaching or of implementing an overly radical agenda, and the way Obama interprets his mandate could be key to his 2012 reelection hopes.

History provides a clear lesson. After two years of disarray and drifting to the left, Democratic president Bill Clinton suffered punishing losses in the 1994 'Republican revolution', which put constraints on the rest of his presidency.

"I think that the Obama administration will have a pretty good recollection of recent history and probably is very familiar with that being something that ended up happening," said Andrew Dowdle, a political science professor at the University of Arkansas.

One key relationship that will

likely help define Obama's early years in the White House will be that with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Pelosi was a strong backer of the Illinois senator, but now both of them control rival centres of power in the government -- which was specifically set up by the founding fathers to dilute any one person's hold on ultimate power.

Though Democrats are in firm control of the House, their coalition is not a monolithic block, but is made up of many different interest groups.

A key role will likely be played by the 'Blue Dog' Democrats -- members of the House from conservative districts, whose own political futures depend on blocking radical liberal policies by some of their colleagues.

Obama could send signals that he will not unleash the kind of sudden change that would shock swing voters by courting moderate Republicans in Congress and appointing prominent Republicans to his administration.

"I think Obama is smart enough to understand incremental change

and reaching across the aisle. I don't think he will overreach," said Dan Shea a political scientist from Allegheny College, Pennsylvania.

"There is going to be a push to reach far -- I don't think that is his style, I think it will serve him well."

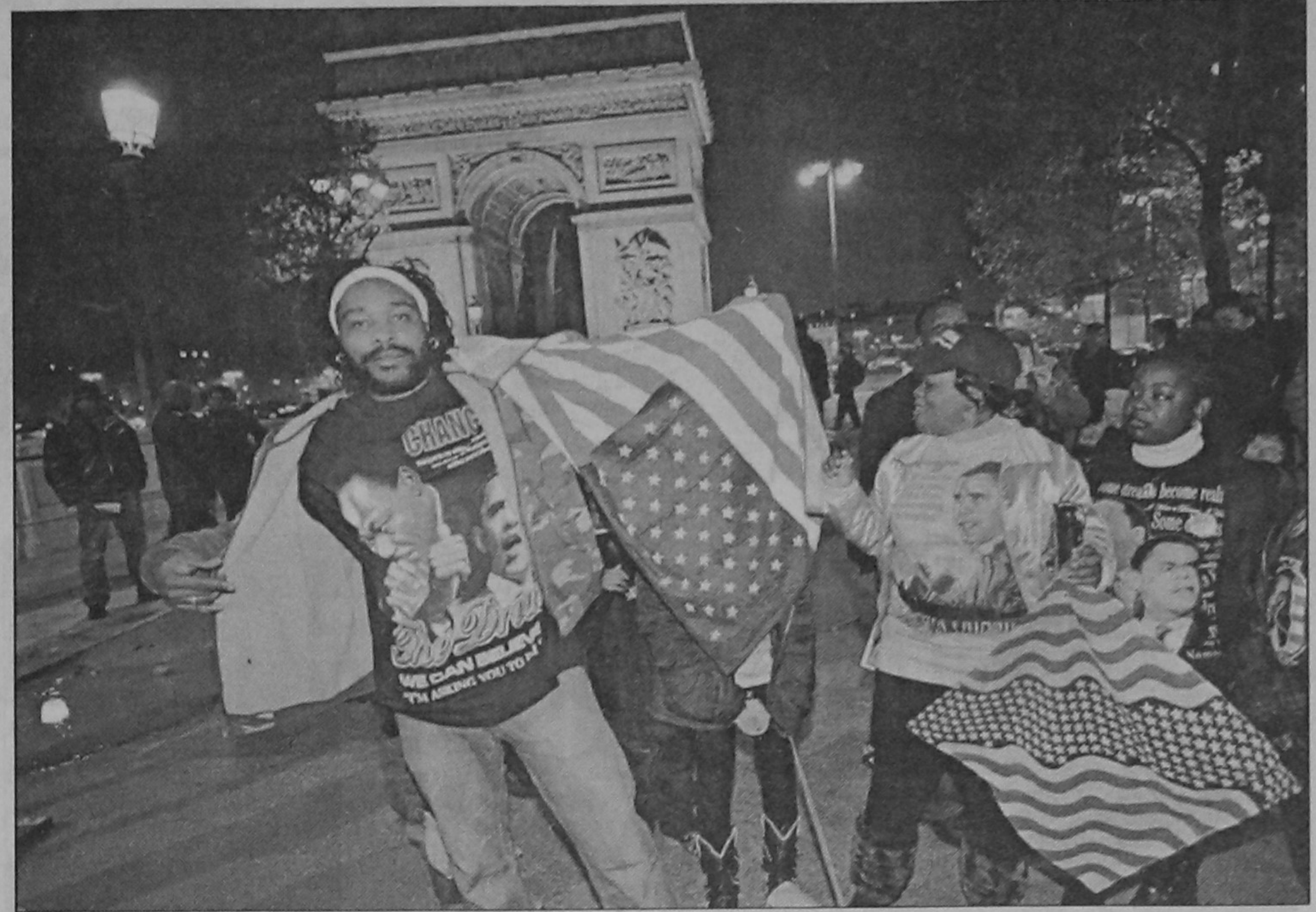
"I think he understands that the country is moderate, maybe even moderate to the right."

With a handful of seats still decided, Democrats were set to increase their previous majority of 36 in the House by around 20 seats, according to television projections.

Democratic power will not be completely unchecked. Though they are set to make five or more gains in the Senate, the party will likely fall short of the magic 60 seat threshold in the 100-seat chamber needed to thwart Republican delaying tactics.

Mitch McConnell, by default the most powerful Republican in Washington, promised to work with Obama in the minority.

"I congratulate President-elect Obama and will work with him on behalf of the American people," said Republican Senate minority leader McConnell said.



Supporters of US Democratic party elected president Barack Obama celebrate on Wednesday in the Champs-Elysees in Paris, during a rally called by CRAN (French Council Representative of Black Associations), a day after Barack Obama was declared winner of US presidential election, defeating Republican party candidate John McCain.



US citizen and Kisumu residents take to the streets on Wednesday as they celebrate the victory of US Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama in the Nov 4 election. Obama's friends and relatives celebrated his victory with song and dance in the Kenyan family homestead of Kogelo, urging the nation's new hero to change the world and remember Kenya in the process.

Two 'skinheads' charged in alleged Obama plot

AFP, Washington

Two white supremacists have been charged with allegedly plotting to assassinate Barack Obama and violating federal gun laws, court documents said Wednesday.

Daniel Cowart, 20, and Paul Schlesselman, 18, were charged by a federal grand jury in the southern state of Tennessee on seven counts, officials said.

The pair was arrested last month for plotting a killing spree of African-Americans, including now president-elect Obama, officials said.

"The indictment against defendants Cowart and Schlesselman alleges several violations of federal firearms laws and threats against a presidential candidate," said Lawrence Laurenzi, acting US attorney for the Western District of Tennessee.

Great expectations: Obama will have to deliver

AP, Washington

Over and over, Barack Obama told voters if they stuck with him "we will change this country and change the world." They did, and now their expectations for him to deliver are firmly planted on his shoulders. Many supporters greeted his victory with euphoria.

Impatient for a new American era and overcome by a black man's historic ascension to the White House, they took his achievement for their own weeping, dancing in the streets, blaring happy horns into Wednesday morning.

But campaign rhetoric soon collides with the gritty duties of governing, and hard realities stand in Obama's way.

The youthful president-elect appears to know this. His victory speech emphasised humility far more than his fabled confidence, with remarks heavily leavened by references to the difficulties before the nation.

He declared "change has come to America" and closed with his "yes we can" campaign slogan, but not before speaking of the certainty of setbacks. "The road ahead will be long," Obama warned. "We may not get there in one year or even one term."

Atop Obama's challenge list is the global and domestic turmoil that he inherits. None of it is his own making, but it will shape his presidency before he lifts one finger.

The worst financial crisis since

the Great Depression. Two wars in unstable, hostile lands. Other foreign hot spots such as Pakistan and Congo, nuclear standoffs with North Korea and Iran. A warming planet.

Then there are high health care and energy costs, sunken home values, wiped-out retirement and investment accounts. A federal deficit that is exploding as the nation throws money at its economic problems, sure to crimp Obama's ability to spend his way to solutions.

He also faces challenging political realities.

Obama has a largely liberal voting record and owes a debt to the left wing of the Democratic Party, which mobilized millions on his behalf. These folks embraced

his promises to end the Iraq war, move toward universal health care coverage and address harsh terrorist interrogation practices.

But Obama also appealed to the broader electorate as a pragmatist who pledged virtually party-blind government. He will have to decide whether it is better to disappoint the more liberal troops out of the gate or wait until later.

"A lot of people are not going to be happy in the first two years," said Democratic strategist Joe Trippi.

Matt Bennett of the centre-left group Third Way said that Obama's centrist ideas such as middle-class tax cuts and seems likely to wait on contentious goals such as overhauling the US health care system.

Can Obama bring racial equality to US?

AFP, Chicago

Ron Hilson stood alone as the streets of Chicago filled with people celebrating the election of the first black president of the United States.

People around him spoke of how Barack Obama has achieved the dream of racial equality that civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. described on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington some 45 years ago.

The country has changed, they said. Anything is possible now.

Hilson was hopeful they were right. But he'd been hopeful before. And he'd seen that hope die in 1968 when King was assassinated.

He saw drug addiction rip families and communities apart. He saw gangs turn neighbourhoods into war zones. He saw schools in inner city neighbourhoods crumble with neglect after whites fled to the suburbs.

Hilson blames the violence, crime and social problems which plague the black community on the despair which set in after the civil rights movement failed to deliver

equal opportunity alongside equal rights.

While the income gap has been slowly narrowing over the past 40 years, the poverty rate for blacks is still three times that of whites and blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as whites.

Blacks are six times more likely to be murdered than whites and seven times more likely to end up in jail.

If racial equality is to be achieved this time around, the black community will have to hold onto the hope and optimism, which erupted Tuesday night, Hilson said.

"I hope this carries on past tonight, past tomorrow, past next week," Hilson told AFP.

"If the young people would look at this as an opportunity to grow and change their ways that would help this country incredibly. Because we all need to pitch in."

Obama acknowledged that there is plenty of work ahead as he celebrated his victory in Grant Park, the site of violent clashes during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

"This victory alone is not the

change we seek - it is only the chance for us to make that change," Obama told a crowd of 240,000 supporters.

"And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you."

Repairing the social damage wrought by slavery and segregation is the responsibility of the black community, said Conrad Worrill, the co-founder of the National Black United Front and a professor at Northeastern Illinois University.

Obama's election was "a historic moment in breaking down racial barriers in the United States" but it remains to be seen if "this moment in history inspires us to significantly change our behaviour and the way we treat each other," Worrill said in an interview Wednesday.

But while there is a need for people to step up and change their lives and their communities, significant structural problems must also be addressed, said Mark Sawyer, the director of the Centre for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Politics at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

Asian-Americans eye posts in Obama admn

AFP, Washington

A majority of Asian-Americans chose Senator Barack Obama for president and expect him to appoint representatives from the rapidly growing community in his new administration, officials said Wednesday.

Sixty-two percent of the seven million Asian voters picked Democrat Obama compared with 35 percent for Republican Senator John McCain in the historic presidential election on Tuesday, media exit polls showed.

"This is one of the best coordinated Asian-American campaign efforts and I think the community ought to be very proud of it," said Mike Honda, the chairman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

Studies showed that Asian-Americans were a "deciding factor" in the presidential race in states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, Virginia, Nevada and Minnesota.

"Asian-Americans played their part in this week's elections with record turnout at the polls, breaking nearly two-to-one in support of dramatic change," said Toby

Chaudhuri, spokesman for the liberal Campaign for America's Future.

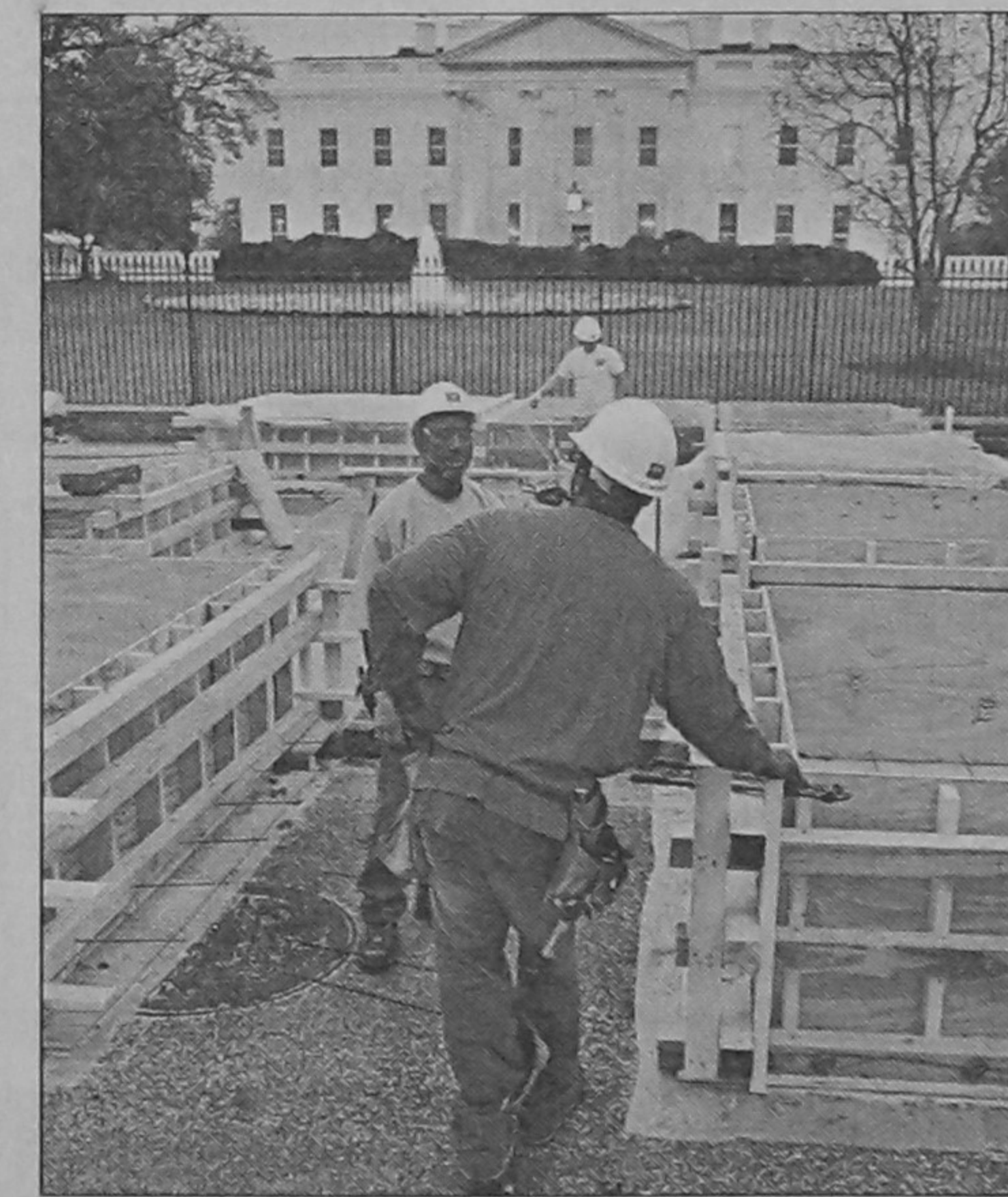
All six Asian-Americans in the House of Representatives successfully defended their seat in congressional elections held simultaneously with the presidential contest.

Five others, however, failed to win House seats, including Indian American Ashwin Madia, an Iraq war veteran who ran as a Democrat in a hotly contested election in the mid-western US state of Minnesota.

Asian-American leaders said they expected president-elect Obama to appoint members of the community in key posts in his administration to reflect the rapidly growing ethnic group.

Three Asian-Americans officials were included Wednesday in Obama's "transition" team in preparation for the new administration taking office on January 20, described as "good first steps" by community leaders.

Outgoing President George W. Bush had over 300 Asian-Americans in both part-time and full-time capacities in his administration -- the most ever in the country's history, officials said.



A day after the United States elected Barack Obama as its 44th president, union carpenters work on the reviewing stand for Obama's Inaugural Parade on Wednesday on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House in Washington, DC. Barack Obama will be sworn-in Tuesday, January 20, 2009 as the next US president.

Much maligned US opinion polls come up trumps

AFP, New York

Politicians fear them, voters mistrust them, but many US opinion polls were impressively accurate in predicting Barack Obama's landslide defeat of John McCain.

Several polling organisations were as giddy with success as Obama fans. "We were dead on centre. We don't want to be obnoxious about it, but we had a really good year," said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.

Obama defeated McCain by 52 to 46 percent in the national vote. While few polls predicted exactly those numbers, the six point spread was matched, or almost matched in seven of 15 pre-election surveys listed on the realelectpolls.com website.

"If you followed all the polls and didn't cherry pick one or two, then that gave a very good sense of what to expect on election night," said Scott Rasmussen, of rasmussenreports.com.

"Our national tracking poll of 52-46 was exactly right ... It was a much better night than people had feared," he said.



An Indian commuter reads a newspaper carrying US president-elect Barack Obama's win in headlines as he travels in a local train in Mumbai yesterday. Indian leaders rushed to praise Barack Obama on his US presidential triumph, but analysts warn that policy changes under his administration could "irritate" what has become a key strategic relationship.

World falls back in love with US after Obama win

AFP, New York

The world learned to love the United States again Wednesday after Barack Obama's stunning election victory.

Tourists at Ground Zero, where the mass terrorist attacks of 2001 prompted an outpouring of international solidarity, said Obama's win filled them with admiration -- sometimes for the first time in years.

"Obama brings hope," said Leticia Giorello, 26, an architecture student from Uruguay, as she surveyed the mammoth building site at the former World Trade Centre. "Everybody in Latin America wanted Obama."

Eight years ago, the world rallied around the United States in response to the deaths of some 3,000 people and the annihilation of the Twin Towers in Manhattan.

"We are all Americans," France's Le Monde newspaper famously

declared. But that goodwill vaporized when the world turned on President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq and revelations of torture of prisoners.

The United States' battered image -- already light years from the days when the country was widely seen as a role model -- took another big hit two months ago with the collapse of the banking system.

Yet Tuesday's landslide election of Obama, the first black president and a stirring advocate for restoring US standing, has rekindled that love affair.

Celebrations broke out around the globe, from the Palestinian territories to the Balkans and from Africa to Asia.

At Ground Zero, a place of pilgrimage for many visitors to New York, tourists said they felt inspired.

NEWS ANALYSIS Obama faces decisions on war on terror

AFP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama faces tough decisions on how to conduct the US war on terror focused on Afghanistan, but also fought elsewhere with secret tactics that have damaged US prestige, analysts say.

US intelligence already is readying briefings for the president-elect that will reveal the full extent of a shadowy seven-year struggle, whose defenders say have averted another September 11-like attack on the United States.

Obama "will see the full range of capabilities we deploy for the United States," CIA director Michael Hayden said Wednesday in a message to staff of the spy agency. Pressure for change is likely to

start with the "war on terror" detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the most visible symbol of the Bush administration's no holds barred campaign against-Qaeda.

The record has included abductions, secret prisons, international renditions of prisoners, harsh interrogations, and warrantless eavesdropping on US nationals, as well as the unheralded operations that intelligence officials say have disrupted planned attacks.

"Probably any legal team, even if McCain had won, will really scrub the authorities and the procedures that people have used for detention and for Guantanamo," said James Lewis, a national security expert at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

As a candidate, Obama called for the prison's closing. But figuring out what to do with the more than 250 detainees there, many of them regarded as highly dangerous, has proved a daunting problem.

"If the president-elect is serious about building bridges with allies and demonstrating core American values, it's what people are going to be looking to see," said Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University.

Analysts also believe Obama will steer away from a heavily "kinetic" approach to fighting terrorism to more varied strategies that will require greater international cooperation and support.

"The first thing you'll probably see is the ending of the use of the phrase 'war on terrorism,'" Lewis said.