

Obama, the Unifier

But at least Obama is thinking big, as Reagan did. The new president (far more than either the Bushes or the Clintons) wants to represent and foster fundamental change in American history. If he is lucky, the voters will stick with him when the going gets rough. They stuck with the Gipper because he stood for something basic. Obama has no nickname, but he's aiming for a similar role.

HOWARD FINEMAN

HERE'S news: this weekend I heard Rahm Emanuel, the new White House chief of staff, publicly -- even proudly -- call himself a "liberal." It was yet another indication that Barack Obama represents a tidal change in American politics.

In place of a generation's worth of individualistic thinking, Obama brings a renewed commitment to another facet of our history: our belief in the ideal of unity, common purpose and community.

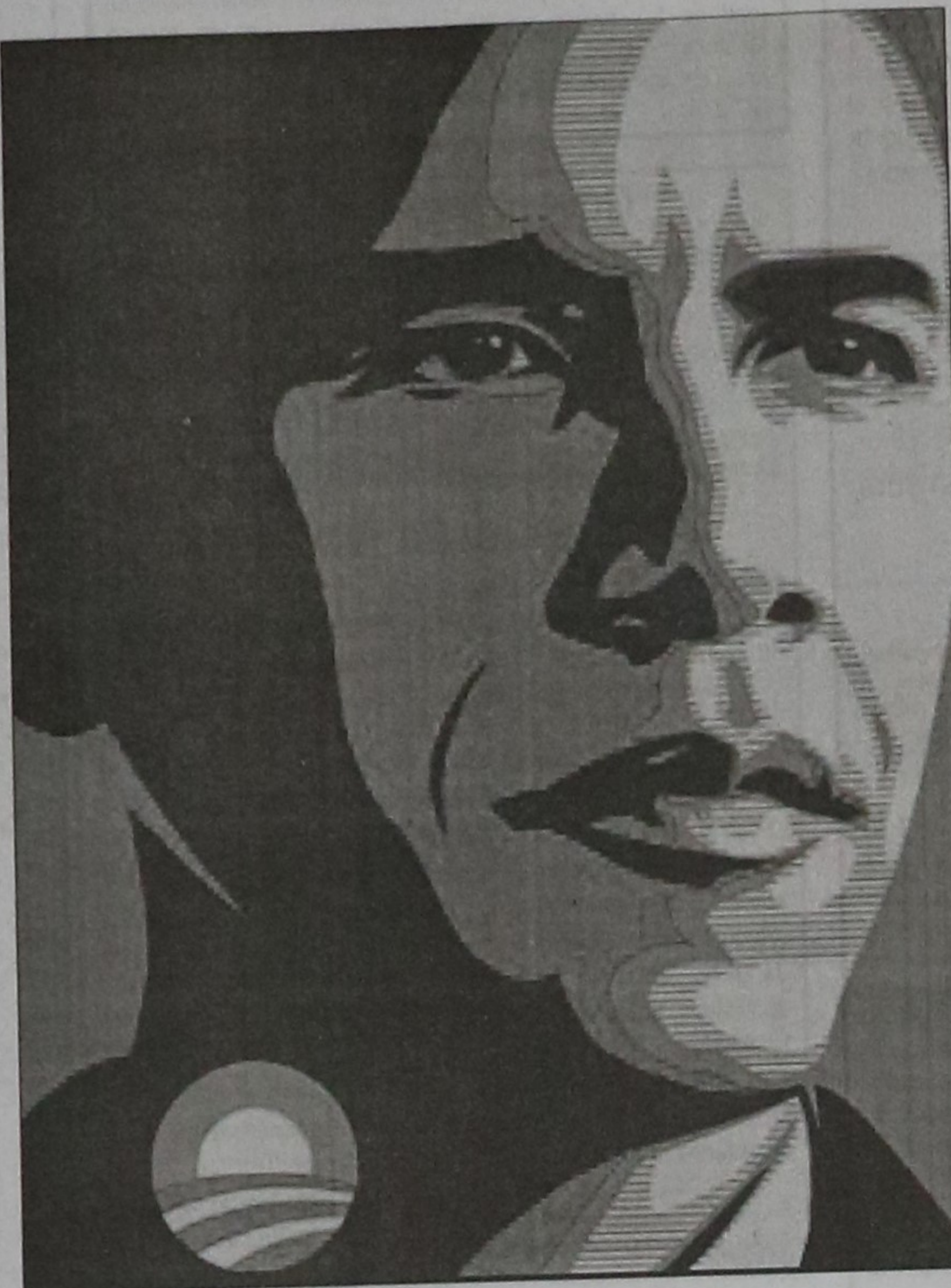
Yes we were pioneers, heading ever west with little more than an axe, a rifle and a bible. But we could not have survived in the virgin woods or on the unplowed prairies without each other.

Everybody in the capital is comparing Obama to Abraham Lincoln. But the

more recent -- and illuminating -- comparison is Ronald Reagan. In 1981, Reagan came to town vowing a massive shift in philosophical thinking. "Government isn't the solution," he declared. "Government is the problem." Individual striving was the answer.

It was a message that resonated deeply at a time when voters felt they had lost touch with some fundamental American values; that government had grown too large, corrupt and incompetent; that taxes and bureaucracy were crushing creative freedom. They saw Reagan as the iconic Western cowboy, who meant what he said (even if he was a movie actor). And majorities of voters remained loyal to him, ignoring criticism from the national media.

A genial man, Reagan reached out privately to his political adversaries as he arrived in town. Even before his inauguration, he held a dinner at the old



F Street Club for the city's reigning (and about to be deposed) Democratic establishment. He did not win them over, but he sent out a signal that he respected their history.

Obama did the same thing the other day, at a private dinner with conservatives.

As he wended his way here to Washington by train on Saturday, and in his speech Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial, Obama has repeatedly and eloquently called forth the theme of common purpose.

And he has done it in the American grain, not by asserting the triumphs of the welfare state (such as it is), but by invoking images of good wars and epic crusades: the American Revolution, the Civil War, the Second World War, and the Civil Rights struggle.

He is mixing the fife and drum with the "mystic chords of memory" and the music and passion of Martin Luther King Jr. All are about eras in which Americans finally, and not automatically, came together to achieve a common goal, overcoming boundaries of race and region.

Emanuel's declaration came at a concert sponsored by The New Republic magazine. Preceding music by Yo-Yo Ma at the Harman Center, Emanuel spoke along with Rep. Barney Frank and Larry Summers, who will be Obama's chief economic advisor. All three stressed the

role of government in helping the country and the world out of the economic mess it finds itself in.

Marty Peretz of the New Republic summarised the liberal view of economic history: that scientific, humane thinking had rescued capitalism from its own excesses before World War I with Woodrow Wilson, and again in the 1930s with Franklin Roosevelt. Now, he said, it was time for a third wave and another rescue-by-government.

And that is the Obama surround. No, government isn't the only answer. And "government" and community isn't the same thing when Big Money owns the government. And Obama will make mistakes, and he will make compromises, and Democrats will be at each other's throats, and Republicans will grow recalcitrant, and the public will grow impatient -- and there are a hundred other caveats I could mention.

But at least Obama is thinking big, as Reagan did. The new president (far more than either the Bushes or the Clintons) wants to represent and foster fundamental change in American history.

If he is lucky, the voters will stick with him when the going gets rough. They stuck with the Gipper because he stood for something basic. Obama has no nickname, but he's aiming for a similar role.

(c) Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

A renaissance in the offing?

She has sent out clear signals: intolerance to corruption; an inclusive polity where the opposition will be allowed to play its role in Parliament; a bold, new cabinet filled with energy and enthusiasm, even if lacking in experience; a vision for the future.

K.A.S. MURSHID

THIS is a different person altogether, it would seem! The daughter of Bangabandhu has finally come of age and has put her colleagues on notice. She has sent out clear signals: intolerance to corruption; an inclusive polity where the opposition will be allowed to play its role in Parliament; a bold, new cabinet filled with energy and enthusiasm, even if lacking in experience; a vision for the future commensurate with our democratic ambitions and economic goals.

No one should make the mistake of taking these early signs as being transient, merely intended to fool a gullible public. The market has taken her seri-

ously, judged by the almost overnight slide in food prices. It is not just what she has said so far, but how she has said it, that tells you that she has entered into a covenant with herself, she is resolute, and means every word.

So, what happened all of a sudden? Perhaps it was not all that sudden -- we will never know. She has had more than her due share of tragedies. In addition, the sudden rise of reformists within her party, and the thinly-veiled antagonism of party pillars, must have been perceived as an unkind cut if not outright betrayal. Two years in a sub-jail, with plenty of time for soul-searching and introspection, probably led to some profound insights into the nature of political survival in Bangladesh, her own role and that of her party, the need for

reforms, and some ideas about the way forward.

It is unlikely that there is a well-conceived National Perspective Plan or a Five Year Plan, though such documents suffer from lack of credibility given a history of "planned failure." From despair came wisdom, and from wisdom the resolve to reform and change.

What next? The journey ahead will be rough. The prime minister will need to muster all her physical and mental prowess to forge ahead with her goals. She will face opposition at every step, along with a ceaseless cacophony of distracting noises emanating from the usual sources. She must be able to discern the voices of reason and sanity, of criticism that is well-meant, of sycophancy and excessive adoration, so that she can be selective about what she hears.

She would need to choose her filters carefully, forging communication links with people who are not afraid to call a spade a spade. Sycophants only try to please you with words that hide and distort the truth, painting a rosy and contrived picture to suit rather narrow ends. That is what patronage and

clientage is all about -- and this is precisely the self-reinforcing bond that must be broken.

Easier said than done, of course, because we are talking about the essential glue that binds a leader to his/her followers and supporters, in a system that percolates down to the lowest rungs of the leadership ladder. Once this glue is gone, what pray, will hold the party together? Ideology? Love of country? Hmm, let's think about it, because everyone will be looking for that reward; a contract (albeit implicit) was made, and the time has come to honour it. The rush is already on: there are people waiting for promotions, seniors wanting to be eminent persons, scholars hoping to be policy makers, housewives hoping to be ambassadors, while the lowly secretary of the Thana Unit would be happy to get a regular job with the local government.

Are you saying that all these aspirants will be simply turned away empty-handed? Should they be? After all, they played by the rules of the game and the norms that have survived for generations. How were they to know that you



Pondering the changes.

were sitting there in your sub-jail and contemplating to overhaul these? What then is my incentive to work for the party? You actually want me to compete for that damn road contract? How

unfair! Maybe I should switch sides, then?

It would be lovely if one could completely upset the apple-cart and go for a dramatic reversal of the rules of the game, replacing patron-client relationship with impersonal, explicit, merit-based rules that do not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, class, gender, party-affiliation etc.

Alright, so that is too much to ask -- it is so easy to go overboard when talking about reforms. Haste is usually something that is best avoided. However, the journey should begin. I believe it has begun, but now needs to be sustained, nourished and pushed to its logical conclusion. If we can make substantial progress on this journey, we will have put in place the fundamental institutions needed to bring about true, merit-based, inclusive development. This will sound strange to most people used to thinking of development in terms of GDP growth rates spiced with poverty reduction.

Bon Voyage.

K.A.S. Murshid is an economist, policy researcher and occasional contributor to The Daily Star. E-mail: kasmurshid@gmail.com.

Children in disaster risk reduction

Children's participation should not be seen as an isolated event, but as a process where children are supported, encouraged and engaged by adults. Formation of a children's organisation and training them to use the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach can be a useful option.

AZMARINA TANZIR

WHEREAS children's participation in the development process is recognised, the recognition of their participation in disaster risk reduction is a rising concern. Although much attention is given to the needs of children in emergencies, it is mostly from the perspective of adults acting on behalf, and in the best interest, of children.

There is less focus on working with, and

not working for, children in reducing their vulnerabilities and disaster risk. While much of the support for children needs to be in the context of their family, community and culture, there should be an increased focus on working with children.

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups during a disaster. Factors such as their age affect their vulnerability and shape their ability to cope and survive in a disaster context. Children have needs that must be met for their healthy growth and development. Beside physical threat to

life, experiences of fear, violence, separation from parents and caregivers, exploitation and abuse threaten their well-being. The loss of livelihood of their families can lead to homelessness and extreme poverty. Exposure to disaster can affect development potential and psychosocial condition of children.

Children are ignored in decision-making. Nevertheless, they have a role to play before, during and after floods. Their participation in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), highlighting their capacities in reducing disaster risks, should be ensured.

Children are never regarded as active participants in evaluations of disaster risks, especially in Community Risk Assessments (CRA). It places communities in the lead role in reducing the community's risk to disasters. The focus is on identifying the most vulnerable groups in a community, and explores what local capacities can be used to enhance the

resilience of the community.

Children's participation should not be seen as an isolated event, but as a process where children are supported, encouraged and engaged by adults. Formation of a children's organisation and training them to use the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approach can be a useful option. Children can develop a work plan, then carry it out using their own methods, and from their findings, they can analyse their risks and capacities and develop their own risk reduction plans. This process can be incorporated into the CRA process.

It is also important to have children as active members of disaster planning groups in disaster prone areas. Only through recognition of the importance of including children in decision-making can lasting changes be made. Training and dissemination of information about children participation should be highlighted in future policies.

Bangladesh is currently reviewing its Standing Order on Disaster Management, which identifies roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders before, during and after a disaster. However, to get children recognised and have the standing order changed requires time. However, changing the mindset of adults can automatically lead to changes not only at grassroots level, but also at national level. By taking bottom up (training adults & children leading CRAs) and top down approaches can lead to significant change at both levels.

To ensure such a child-participation process, CRA work should be conducted through schools. For teaching teachers to facilitate the CRA process and giving children school assignments to carry out, PRA tools are more sustainable than merely forming children's organisations.

Not only do children and youth have unique needs in disasters, they also offer a potential role as a resource or receiver of

information. Young people can act as informants within unofficial communication networks which evolve within a community as the need arises. In communities with high poverty indices, children and youth already play a major role as interpreters and relayers of messages to their households and communities. Children offer immense creativity and the will to reduce risk. When given the resources and the opportunity to take action, children can become catalysts of simple yet significant strategies to make their communities safer.

Therefore, it is the call of time that policy makers and practitioners realise the potential and benefits of including children in the disaster risk assessment and reduction process by making necessary changes in the policy.

Azmarina Tanzir is a post graduate student of Dept. of Development Studies, Dhaka University, and a development worker. E-mail: tanzir15@gmail.com.



Reasons to be cheerful

OKAY, so you've lost your job, you're about to lose your home, your investments have vanished, your partner has left you, and the debt collectors have given you a week to live. Now, come on, gang, be honest: are these really reasons to be miserable?

We've all got problems. Look on the bright side. First, you have your health (for a week at least). Second, you have, um, ah, well, you have your health.

Personally, I am fed up of all the gloom in the opinion pages of the newspapers. There are actually a great many uses for

celebration. So here they are.

Reasons to be cheerful:

1. Okay, so the war on terror hasn't been won, but the war against the environment is going extremely well, you gotta admit that.

2. According to yin-yang theory, if you get far enough behind, you end up in first place. Therefore, we are all thriving or about to thrive.

3. Most people cannot afford heating any more, so all this global warming stuff we were panicking about like crazy last year now looks like a blessing in disguise.

4. Now the world has descended into a state of misery, poverty and deep, trigger-happy mistrust, George W. Bush's work is done and he can leave the world stage.

5. Karaoke has almost entirely died out, and if anyone tries to revive the karaoke bar near my house, I will personally stamp it out forever, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

6. OJ Simpson is in jail. Unfortunately, the lawyers who helped him get away with murder are still on the loose, but unlicensed vigilantes will get them with a bit of luck.

7. Time Inc. sacked more than 600 journalists in 2008, but still managed to find \$15 million to pay for exclusive pictures of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt's babies, so at least we know the media has its priorities right.

8. The melting of the north and south poles indicates that people in rundown, inner-city districts will soon have waterfront housing. How cool is that?

9. Despite what the papers say, I know several people who say their businesses are booming. Mind you, they're all insolvency accountants.

10. A guy with dark skin has taken over the most powerful, most globally influential platform in the world. But that's enough about me.

11. A machine called the large hadron collider was switched on and the world did not end. (Actually, I'm not sure if this is good news or bad.)

12. A large number of world records were broken at the Beijing Olympics, including Youngest Lip-Synching Fraudster.

13. But of course, there seems to be general agreement on what was the biggest story of the past 12 months.

Yes, an astonishing election win shook the world and made people realise that true democracy means anyone, of any race, colour, creed or level of animation can stand up and lead their community.

I am talking of course about the voters in Romania who re-elected a dead man as Mayor. Neculai Ivascu died of liver disease, but the electorate didn't seem to mind. "I know he died, but I don't want change," a voter said.

There's hope for all of us.

Visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com.