

Reflections on the State of the World — 9

In Feverish Quest for Leadership

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Every four years, Americans in large numbers contract a peculiar disease of the nervous system. After four years of political stupor, they suddenly become enormously excited, not to say flipped, over yet another presidential campaign, which determines who will be their next leader; who will convey them closer to the American Dream or take them farther down into collective misery.

This year's—2008—presidential (democratic) hopeful, who is the main focus of popular exhilaration and imagination, is Barrack Hussein Obama. He seems to have arrived on the political scene seemingly from nowhere. This is, however, a misleading impression, because for many years Mr. Obama made his mark as a member of the Illinois Senate and since 2005 has done so as a U.S. senator. His work has won him the respect of many of his peers.

Young-looking Mr. Obama was born in 1961 in Hawaii from an African father (who had renounced his Muslim heritage) and a Caucasian mother. Neither of his parents, who are both deceased, could have suspected his meteoric rise in the skies of politics.

Mr. Obama was educated in Indonesia up to the age of ten. He then continued his education in Hawaii where he graduated from high school. He went on to earn a B.A. from Columbia University, with a major in political science. For a few years, he worked in business before becoming a successful community organizer for the Catholic Church. From 1988 to 1991, he studied law at Harvard and graduated *cum laude* as a doctor of jurisprudence. Subsequently, he taught constitutional law at Chicago University for twelve years; was elected to the Illinois Senate in 1996, reelected in 1998 and 2002, and thereafter joined the U.S. Senate in 2005.

Today he is the first African American to run for the U.S. presidency, and he is causing a considerable stir, with millions of people regarding him with the same chiliastic hope that was once lavished on former President William (Bill) J. Clinton.

One ought not to doubt Mr. Obama's competence as a politician, writer, speaker, or organizer. Possibly he has other admirable qualities. However, whether he has the qualities of a wise statesman in a difficult world cannot be judged in advance. Only time can tell.

But what is most interesting and also disturbing is that the Americans' near-religious fervor over nominating a new leader is shot through with a terrible amnesia. They actually believe—or want to believe—all the wonderful promises made during a presidential campaign. They want to ignore the past history of deceptions, distortions, failures, and outright lies. They leave no room for doubt and hence leave no room for the possibility of disappointment and rectification. They have forgotten that once their

favorite candidate is safely installed in the White House, he most of the time sits behind his large desk with hands tied behind his back and legs shackled. Former president Bill Clinton might well have had genuine good intentions when he started out to captain America's juggernaut vessel, but he was opposed almost every inch of the way, and in the end he was cornered and perjured himself. Other presidents before him had their own share of troubles in implementing a vision that they thought was good. Sometimes, they even paid with their life for their convictions.

Above all, presidents need a responsive public—a public that does not merely want to be suckled and spoiled but that is willing to actively *implement* a viable vision. As the popular maxim goes: You can lead a horse to the water but you cannot make it drink. A president can point the way (if he or she even sees one), but he cannot force the public to walk his talk. Only he can do this. The public must assume responsibility for its own part in the political-social-economic process, which is huge.

More than anything, Americans have an obligation to the world to reduce consumption. This is not a popular message and one which presidential candidates are the least likely to communicate. After all, consumerism is the engine that drives the false but still potent ideal of economic progress. To be sure, this ideal is in reality unworkable, but it has lost none of its appeal in political circles and with a largely uneducated and covetous public. Yet, if the natural environment is to continue at all, the motivating principle of economic progress must be discarded on the garbage dump of historical blunders—one piece of rubbish that, once discarded, will definitely foster rather than harm the environment.

Mr. Obama apparently has proposed and also pushed through legislation a number of sensible bills. I have not listened to any of his campaign speeches, nor will I do so as a rule, if nothing else. What really matters is what legislation he will be able to have passed by the U.S. Congress when he is in office. What matters is whether he will give in under the pressure of the public's discontent at economic decline and whip America's economy into bullish years again. Or will his policies sanely take our deeply troubled environment into account and *ergo* oblige his countrymen to curb their long-standing habit of overconsumption. Or will he buckle under the onslaught of the every-greedy, ever-expansive multinational corporations, which lobby governments incessantly, intensely, and without sparing any cost. Or will he. . . No one knows in advance what kind of a president Mr. Obama or anyone else will be.

What we do know for certain is that the "American Way" has proven incredibly destructive to the environment and to the lives of millions of people around the world. We also know that, given the alarming realities of the world's environment, the "American Way" cannot be sustained for very much longer. Whoever will move into the White House next will have to face problems of a magnitude that no other U.S. president has ever had to face.

Today the stakes are certainly very much higher than they were when Mr. Clinton assumed office. Not only does the U.S.A. have to deal with the fallout from two unjust wars—in Iraq and Afghanistan—not least a worldwide bias against the White House and Americans in general, who are seen as money-grabbing, brutish bullies. But the environmental crisis has become an environmental catastrophe, and oil—the fluid that keeps the developed world in its well-worn grooves—is fast running out. Some see civilizational collapse on the horizon. It is good that Mr. Obama thinks that he is a first-

rate poker player. But, for sure, the present “world game” can be won only with total integrity.

Seriously, the next U.S. president will inherit a vastly different world from the one that President Clinton was facing. The Bush regime has seen to that, and it would appear that some of the problems are irreversible. It will take decades to reverse the negative image of America in the minds of millions of Muslims. But even a hundred years will not return the excessively polluted ocean into a pristine, livable environment, nor will a thousand years bring back virgin forests, or a million years put gobbled-up oil reserves back under the ground.

America does indeed need a new leader, and not only because the present leader’s term of office is up but mainly because the country is in desperate need of a healthy vision to live by. If Mr. Obama is that man, the better for him, for America, and for the rest of the world.

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First published September 2008