

Re-elected Obama's Pluses and Minuses

There were positives in Barack Obama's reelection, particularly the rejection of many reactionary Republican policies and offensive tactics, but Obama's second term may be beset by many of the same failings as the first, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Barack Obama won reelection on Nov. 6 and the reaction of many on the Left was: "So what?" Well, we are spared four years of Mitt Romney. Again, the response: "So what? They are both two peas from the same pod."

Well maybe, but even peas can vary. Here are some positive differences to consider, which will be followed by some negative similarities to Romney and his conservative advisers. We will start with the bright side:

–In terms of probabilities, under Obama the U.S. is less likely to find itself at war with Iran than would be the case with Romney. On such issues as war in the Middle East, Obama seems to be able to think relatively independently while Romney, by his own admission, can't tell the difference between U.S. interests and those of Israel.

–Obama took a sensible attitude toward the Arab Spring uprising except, of course, in Bahrain where his administration's support for the monarchy was lamentable. Romney's reaction to the Arab Spring would have been to ring up Netanyahu and ask him what to do.

–On issues of women's rights, gay rights, the environment and educational concerns, an Obama administration is much preferable to a Romney one.

–If there are Supreme Court vacancies in the next four years, we are much less likely to have extreme conservatives nominated than would have been the case under Mitt Romney.

–Obama dropped Bush's torture directive. Given Mitt Romney's neoconservative advisers, a President Romney might well have been tempted to reinstate it.

The Similarities

These are only some of the positive things and they are far from unimportant. Nonetheless, Obama has a darker side that sometimes echoes the conservative Republican mindset. For instance:

–Barack Obama is an African-American with, apparently, only selective concerns for civil liberties. He employs another African-American, Eric Holder, with similar blind spots. Holder heads up the FBI and has allowed that agency to entrap Americans mostly of yet another minority group, in this case Moslems, in alleged terrorist activities which, without the FBI’s scheming, would almost certainly never have been carried out.

–Throughout his first term, Obama went after “illegal aliens,” deporting them in high numbers, and only modified this policy as the election neared. He cannot be trusted on this front.

–Obama has continued to enforce President Bush’s criminal policies many of which are institutionalized in the Patriot Act and related laws. These include unconstitutional practices such as indefinite detention and warrantless eavesdropping.

–And while Obama’s foreign policy in the Middle East probably will not lead to the war so ardently desired by Romney’s buddy, Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu, Obama is still willing to kill innocent people with drones and harm even more with draconian sanctions.

Romney’s Minority

The election itself was anything but reassuring. Take a look at [the map](#) showing who won which states and there is a scary amount of red (how the media came up with the color red for Republican states only one generation after the demise of Russian communism is beyond me!).

The only saving grace is that these are (with the exception of Texas) the less populous states. Nonetheless, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer’s final election figures (Nov. 8), some 57,591,058 American voters cast their ballots for Romney, a man who could be confused with the [“dwarf chameleon,”](#) a subgroup of lizards that is particularly adept at “adjusting their colors for camouflage in accordance with the vision of species” confronting them.

Romney’s voters included 62 percent of voting white men and, more surprisingly, 56 percent of voting white women. Were most of these folks just motivated by a desire to vote against Obama rather than for Romney? Or were they good hypnotic subjects who were easily mesmerized by expertly choreographed flip-flopping?

After Obama’s victory, the reelected president gave a “let’s all come together” [speech](#) that, under present circumstances, is embarrassing to listen to. Having been crudely defamed and ridiculed for months on end one would like

to see from Obama a public hint, a mere glint, of annoyance with the Republicans. Those feelings would be human and proper.

However, according to Obama, though some of us might disagree “fiercely,” the insulting tone taken toward him was just a manifestation of “noisy and messy” democracy. In President Obama’s estimation, despite the political mudslinging, we all want the same kind of America.

Somehow I don’t think so. The Tea Party Republicans and neoconservative militarists do not want the same sort of America that (many of us sincerely hope) Obama does. It is a pretty safe bet that even John A. Boehner, the Speaker of the Republican-controlled House, does not want the same America as Obama.

Nonetheless, on victory night Obama told his supporters, “I just spoke with Gov. Romney and ... I also look forward to sitting down with [him] to talk about where we can work together to move this country forward.”

This may not be just a *pro forma* offer, a gracious victor extending a hand of conciliation. I am convinced that Obama wants to do exactly as he says in this regard, for in his heart of hearts he is a compromiser. He will compromise with just about anyone on just about anything.

Given the political structure within which he lives, that means he will compromise with rabid Republicans, Zionists and neoconservatives if they will only “see reason” and compromise with him. Actually, the probable exception to this list are American progressives who may be viewed by Obama and his advisers as a fringe group whose goals and values don’t merit much consideration.

Thus all the early indicators are that the second-term Obama will be a lot like the first-term one. Yet there are so many of his supporters who are sure this will not be the case. They swallow whole that teasing line “the best is yet to come.”

As one 2012 supporter said, “things are going to be different in Washington now that Obama proved he has the majority of Americans on his side.” I thought he had already proved that in 2008.

Obama Wish List

Well, all right, for those who count on the “real progressively inclined” Barack Obama showing up for his second term, here are a number of things the President can do to prove that things will be different. I take many of the following points from Juan Cole’s recent column “Top Ten Wish List for President Obama.”

–Obama can propose and fight hard for legislation that will overturn the

horrible *Citizens United* law that, among other things, reinforced the farce that corporations are really people and Super PACs somehow have the right to try to buy elections. And, simultaneously, the “real” Obama can expend some political capital pushing hard for meaningful campaign finance reform.

–Obama can push for strong economic regulation, particularly for the banking and financial sectors of the economy.

–He can fight to strengthen union rights both in the public and private sectors.

–He can fight for legislation that will make illegal conservative efforts to restrict the franchise through such gambits as required photo IDs.

–The President can reshape the priorities of the FBI and other national law-enforcement agencies, moving them away from enforcing the unconstitutional Patriot Act; away from the manufacture of terrorist schemes in order to entrap otherwise innocent people; and away from the warrantless surveillance of thousands of Americans. In other words, the second-term Obama should show himself publicly in opposition to Bush-era crimes dressed up as laws.

–Finally, specific to the Middle East, President Obama can: a) get out of the way of Palestinian efforts to achieve more meaningful membership status at the UN and b) he can pardon the Holy Land Foundation leaders who have been unfairly convicted of supporting terrorism in one of the 21st Century’s most outrageous miscarriages of justice.

Will the Barack Obama who shows up for the second term fight for any of these things? My own guess is that what efforts there are in these directions will be lukewarm at best. They will be watered down by incessant compromise.

Not because that is the way politics must be played (certainly the Republicans haven’t met anyone halfway this side of the Tea Party), but because that is the way the real Barack Obama wants to play politics.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest; America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood; and Islamic Fundamentalism.
