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United States

Barack Obama's Dual Mandate

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MILLIONS OF AMERICANS see the election of Barack Obama as a referendum on white supremacy and today we join in their celebration. The racist campaigns launched against Obama, conducted sometimes in coded language and other times in inflammatory accusations, turned out to be amazingly unsuccessful.

[http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L325xH244/Coburn_and_Obama_discuss_S._2590-ad584.jpg]
] **Barack Obama with Republican senator Tom Coburn** Image: Wikimedia

Yet the 2008 election also represents a dual reality that is important for socialists and activists for peace and social justice to grasp.

For tens of millions of Black Americans, seeing a United States president-elect who's Black - and even more important, for their children to see a Black president - is a huge symbolic stride towards full citizenship and liberation. Perhaps no event since that legendary night in 1938, when Joe Louis knocked out Max Schmeling, has there been such a magic moment of celebration for the Black community; only in this case they weren't simply spectators but participants in the victory.

It's not only Black Americans who feel like "our long national nightmare is over." Young people and working-class Americans, including tens of millions of white people, Latinos, Asian Americans, American Indians, and people of Middle Eastern origin feel the same way. You need only know that Barack Obama carried suburban Macomb County, Michigan - the archetype homeland of "the Reagan Democrats" - to understand how much the political tide has turned. After the decade of Republican domination, a huge majority of Americans are disillusioned with the country's political direction and its visible economic decay.

George W. Bush goes down (in more ways than one) in history. He's the first president to serve two full terms without being legitimately elected even once. He's not the first president to launch a war on the basis of a lie, but he is the first one to cut taxes in wartime, pretending it didn't have to be paid for. His administration was an eight-year continuing criminal enterprise, breaking all of Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's records for abuse of power. Ultimately, his economic policies broke the bank - literally - helping to drag down the U.S. and world economy, along with his own political party.

But all that is precisely why Barack Obama's election and mandate didn't come only "from below," from Black and Latino and working class and young Americans. It also came "from above," from the elites of corporate America. As much as they enjoy the benefits of two major capitalist parties scrambling for power while they carry on the business-as-usual of globalization, lean production and squeezing maximum profits from our labor, they know that the Republican administration has become a disaster for their system and for U.S. imperial power.

Under Bush, U.S. prestige in the world has collapsed. Iraq has been a catastrophe. Afghanistan and Pakistan are becoming a debacle. Latin America is in revolt against neoliberalism and U.S. domination. Barack Obama's election is bringing enormous international enthusiasm and instant credibility, whereas the election of McCain and Palin would have been greeted with "they've got to be kidding." And a third consecutive election stolen by Republican vote-suppression tactics and electronic vote-switching fraud could have created a massive "legitimacy crisis."

Whose mandate will direct Obama's course? The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue; an Obama administration promises to expand the "War on Terror" in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the mainstream media may celebrate "the end of racism," one million Black men remain locked in prison, wealth disparities grow, and the crisis of foreclosures and factory shutdowns hits communities of color the hardest. In a time of great crisis Obama's intention

of "reaching across the aisle" suggests the most cosmetic of reforms.

Never has race and racism been as openly discussed in mainstream political conversations. Nonetheless Obama's Philadelphia speech about racism repeated the mandatory "common sense" distortion of the country's history: America is a land of opportunity, perhaps sometimes marred by a failure to live up to its great ideals. The history begins with the genocide of Native Peoples, the slavery of African Americans and the theft of land and attempted destruction of Mexican and Indian culture. The violent suppression of communities of color and imperial expansion reveal a nation in which institutional racism is deeply embedded. Jim Crow may be gone, but the forces that perpetuate discrimination exist in housing, education and jobs. The subprime crisis represents the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in modern U.S. history. A Black family in the White House, built by slaves, can impact the negative stereotypes deeply rooted in American culture - but ending discrimination requires far more.

The undemocratic two-party monopoly mainly allows voters an opportunity to "throw the bums out" - and throw them out they did. That's a long way, however, from forcing through a "rescue package" for people rather than Wall Street institutions - a ban on foreclosures, a rewriting of mortgages to reflect their real rather than fictitious value, instituting universal single-payer health insurance system we desperately need, a massive jobs program to build an environmentally sustainable economy, an end to the wars, occupations and secret torture prisons, and a drastic downsizing of the imperial military budget.

The Democratic Party, which will fully control Congress and the White House, has the power to set the legislative agenda. Those who expect this party to respond to the desire for change so vividly shown in the November 2008 election will soon begin to be disappointed - more and more so as the new administration shows its loyalty to corporate interests.

Highlighting the "reality gap" between the hopes for peace and justice and the reality of the Democratic Party agenda is an urgent, immediate task. Millions of people responded to calls for "change;" hundreds of thousands gained organizing skills in working for Obama. In the months and years ahead, the responsibility of the Left is working to re-ignite social movements independent of the Democratic Party's dictates.