



President Obama and the New Paradigm:

The Leader who reconciles

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Barack Hussein Obama is on record as stating that he represents a New Paradigm, that is a novel pattern of thinking and conceiving. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether this is “new”, it is certainly “the road less travelled”, taken by some of the world’s greatest leaders, but as yet not well understood.

In order to understand this paradigm I have taken excerpts from his November 5th acceptance speech in Chicago where his electoral victory was celebrated and I examine closely what is said, not said, inferred and communicated both explicitly and in code. But running through the whole speech as I shall demonstrate is *the structure of reconciliation* in which seemingly opposed positives are fused and integrated. In part these are suited to his recent victory. It is the time to reach out and embrace even those who voted for his opponents, to be a President of all the people, to be magnanimous in victory. Even Mrs Thatcher quoted St Francis of Assisi in her moment of victory but most of Obama’s speech is essentially a mark of new paradigm thinking, the capacity to grasp that “opposed” ideas are reconcilable, that it is possible to heal a nation and perhaps a world. Obama grasps that in the words of William Blake, “contraries are positives”. It is possible to take contrasting concepts and create from these a new integrity. Let me take the speech piece by piece and comment on it.

“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”

Note they are all gathered together to cheer *him*, but he immediately turns it around. His victory is a tribute not to *his* greatness but the greatness of the country. He is but a grateful symbol of that greatness. He has reconciled a great country with an aspiring leader seeking to be worthy of that country.

“It’s the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen, by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different, that their voices could be that difference.”



Again he has turned the praise around. This feat was made possible by the audience that has gathered before him. It is not just *his* victory it is *theirs*, especially theirs. It is because they *participated* that he can now *lead*.

“It’s the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black and white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. Americans have sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states.

We are, and always will be, the United States of America.”

No one is outside this unity. It comes straight from the insignia of the USA itself *e-pluribus unum*, “out of the many one.” He also qualifies what has become the American disease, unbridled individualism and relentless self-interest. We are more than this. We are responsible for each other. What makes America more than a mere collection is the unity of its diversity. Great Americans have always grasped that run-away self-interest must be qualified. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country” was JFK’s inaugural message. Nixon missed the point and mocked him with the rejoinder. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for yourself.” Like Mrs Thatcher the very concept of society was doubted. We were a collection of individualists.

“It’s the answer that led those who’ve been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this date in this election at this defining moment change has come to America.”

Here he takes the concept of history as an inexorable train of events and shows it can be shaped by the persons before him in the reconciliation of history with self-determination. More voted on this occasion than before, overcoming fear, doubt and cynicism about the democratic process. It is this process that provides *continuity* in the midst of *change*.

“A little bit earlier this evening, I received an extraordinarily gracious call from Sen. McCain who fought long and hard in this campaign. And he’s fought even longer and harder for the country that he loves. He has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine. We are better off for the service rendered by this brave selfless leader. I congratulate him. I congratulate Gov. Palin for all they’ve achieved. And I look forward to working with them to renew this nation’s promise in the months ahead.”



Obama is, of course, being extraordinarily gracious to Sen. McCain, but he lets us infer this and speaks of McCain's graciousness to him. Very cleverly he goes on to praise the qualities of self-sacrifice and patriotism which he will soon be seeking from Americans and attributes these to his Republican opponents. He seeks to *cooperate* with former *opponents*

The speech goes on to thank Joe Biden and to describe his wife Michelle as his "best friend", a sentiment pleasing to advocates of equal rights. Then he says of his two daughters.

"Sasha and Malia I love you both more than you can imagine. And you have earned the new puppy that's coming with us to the new White House."

I am interested in this passage because it suggests that Obama learns from *everyone* including in this case Richard Nixon and his notorious "Checkers" speech. Adlai Stevenson had flagged a secret slush fund which Nixon had received and demanded it be repaid. Nixon replied that what his family *had* received from this particular donor was a puppy for Tricia she had named "Checkers"! The implication was that Adlai sought to tear the puppy from the arms of his weeping daughter. Of course, Obama's puppy passage is a bit maudlin in the eyes of many Europeans, but America is a big, lonely, mobile country, where people increasingly telegraph their emotions and seek "quality time" with intimates.

He goes on to thank his just deceased grandmother and say she is "watching" (a sop to evangelicals?) He thanks his family, his campaign manager David Nouffe and his chief strategist David Axelrod. He attributes his success...

"To the best campaign team ever assembled in the history of politics you made this happen, and I am forever grateful for what you have sacrificed to get it done. But above all, I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to. It belongs to you. It belongs to you."

I was never the likeliest candidate for this office. We didn't start with much money or many endorsements. Our campaign was not hatched in the halls of Washington. It began in the backyards of Des Moines and the living rooms of Concord and the front porches of Charleston. It was built by working men and women who dug into what little savings they had to give \$5 and \$10 and \$20 to the cause.

It grew strength from the young people who rejected the myth of their generation's apathy, who left their homes and their families for jobs that offered little pay and less sleep."

Here Obama reconciles the *individual* with *team* that champions the same cause, reminds us that *victory* involves *self-sacrifice*, that he is an *outsider* in the process of becoming an *insider* as in the famous film *Mr Smith goes to Washington*. Whenever in the campaign he was accused of *inexperience* he asked whether intensive *experience* of Washington politics was an advantage! It is well known that he raised and



spent vast sums, so he reminds us that these were small donations from hundreds of thousands of people donating over the Internet. Of his campaign he said...

“It drew strength from the not-so-young people who braved the bitter cold and scorching heat to knock on doors of perfect strangers, and from the millions of Americans who volunteered and organized and proved that more than two centuries later a government of the people, by the people, and for the people has not perished from the Earth.”

This is your victory.”

Once again he turns around the praise converging upon him, but does so in a way that evokes Abraham Lincoln, the Republican from Illinois where he is speaking, the man who freed the slaves. The values of republicanism, democracy, slavery-become-freedom, the battle of Gettysburg and the victory of the Union are all invoked. Great orators speak in codes. They never know quite how much their audience knows, how alert and intelligent are the people out there.

If they spell things out specifically, there is a danger of insulting your audiences' intelligence. There is also the risk of stirring up new divisions if everyone knows you are referring to a battle. “A government by the people, for the people...shall not perish” is, of course, the Gettysburg address by Lincoln but there is a palpable thrill in knowing this, as if Obama was speaking to you personally in a language you both understand.

Coded language is often abused. “Are you thinking what I am thinking?” makes bigots believe they are not alone. The speaker hates those people too, but an audience can only *participate* in a speech if its *discernment* is appreciated. It was James McGregor Burns, who spoke of FDR as a *transformational* leader, who *transformed* and *was transformed* by those who responded to him. Can Obama restore America as FDR once did?

“And I know you didn't do this just to win an election. And I know you didn't do it for me.

You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime – two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century.

Even as we stand here tonight, we know there are brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan to risk their lives for us. There are mothers and fathers who will lie awake after the children fall asleep and wonder how they'll make the mortgage or pay their doctors' bills or save enough for their child's college education.

There's new energy to harness, new jobs to be created, new schools to build, and threats to meet, alliances to repair.



The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even in one term. But, America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there.

I promise you, we as a people will get there.”

Here Obama contrasts the *ebullience* of victory with the *enormity* of the task which he and the audience face, the *celebration* vs. the *challenge*. His *opposition* to the Iraq war is well-known but this in no way lessens the gratitude and *loyalty* he feels for fighting men and women. They sacrifice themselves for the nation, whether the war is right or wrong, much as parents may sacrifice themselves for their children, occasionally in vain.

Once again his message is coded. If he referred directly to Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights struggle he would turn off the millions of southern whites who opposed the marches and were televised doing so! Instead he uses excerpts from the speech King made the night before his assassination. Those of his audience who are black or liberal know this prescient speech word-for-word. If white southerners miss the reference, all the better! He cares deeply and is speaking to and for the caring. MLK said:

*“Some of you worry about what might happen to me, because of our sick, white brothers. But I’m not bothered about that now. You see He’s taken me to the Mountain Top and I’ve **seen** the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I know that we as a people **will** get to the Promised Land. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”*

Obama was, with great subtlety, reminding some members of his audience of that speech. It takes a lot to reduce Jesse Jackson to tears but he was weeping for all of us to see. Obama was not directly involved in the Civil Rights struggle, but he understood it very well. “We will get there” is a coded reference to a struggle of two hundred years.

“There will be setbacks and false starts. There are many who won’t agree with every decision or policy I make as president. And we know the government can’t solve every problem.

But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you, especially when we disagree. And, above all, I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation, the only way it’s been done in America for 221 years – block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand. What began 21 months ago in the depths of winter cannot end on this autumn night.

This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It can’t happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice.

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other.”



Here again he reconciles *setbacks*, false starts and learning from these with *progress*, what governments can do and what people must do for themselves, *listening* is reconciled with *disagreement*, making the campaign work with making the nation work as a whole, *victory* with opportunity to take on greater *challenges*, *patriotism* (the stand-by of conservatives) with needed *change*, the need to look after *others* and the need to look after *ourselves*.

“Let us remember that, if this financial crisis taught us anything, it’s that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers.

In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people. Let’s resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long.

Let’s remember that it was a man from this state who first carried the banner of the Republican Party to the White House, a party founded on the values of self-reliance and individual liberty and national unity.

Those are values that we all share. And while the Democratic Party has won a great victory tonight, we do so with a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress.

As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, we are not enemies but friends. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

In this passage he knits together the finances which Wall Street manages with the funds that Main Street needs. The banks must start lending again. He makes an oblique attack on the way Americans have been polarised. “You are either with us or the terrorists” was Bush’s mantra. You had to agree to imprisonment without trial and to torture or side with the killers!

He once again invokes Lincoln, who joined *liberty* with *unity* and tried his best to heal the nation before he was himself assassinated. *Victory* must be tempered by *humility*, so great is the responsibility. Lincoln’s phrase was, “A house divided cannot stand” but then most of his audience has learned this and he is speaking from a great height to equals.

“And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn, I may not have won your vote tonight, but I hear your voices. I need your help. And I will be your president, too.”

With great artistry he blames himself, not Republicans, for voting against him. He has yet to earn their help and trust and plans to do so. He will be a President of all the people, not the leader of an insurgent faction.



“And to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces, to those who are huddles around radios in the forgotten corners of the world, our stories are singular but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand.

To those – to those who would tear the world down: We will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security: We support you. And to all those who have wondered if America’s beacon still burns as bright: Tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope.

That’s the true genius of America: that America can change. Our union can be perfected. What we’ve already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”

There is a world out there from which his father comes. It is very diverse, highly singular, yet able to share tonight’s victorious unity. America may have forfeited world leadership for the last eight years but it is ready to hold the beacon aloft once more. Obama seeks not the “hard power” of bribes and bombs, but the “soft power” of education, entertainment, democracy, ideals and hope. The lesson is that even a nation of two hundred million plus can change, can find redemption and renewal.

Obama finally places this single celebration, this night of victory in the context of history, of the long struggle by Americans for democracy, and for freedom against great odds.

“This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that’s on my mind tonight’s about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She’s a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn’t vote for two reasons – because she was a woman and because of the colour of her skin. And tonight, I think about all that she’s seen throughout her century in America – the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can’t, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can.

At a time when women’s voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes we can. When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs, a new sense of common purpose. Yes we can.

When the bombs fell on our harbour and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can.

She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that “We Shall Overcome”. Yes we can.



A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination.

And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.

Yes we can."

You can be black and be included. You can be female and be respected. You can be old and acclaimed for your very age. He cleverly invokes the Great Depression and indirectly the three-term Democratic president who led America through it and away from fascism, to its conquest in World War II. "We Shall Overcome" becomes the watchword of the present hour. "Yes we can" becomes the shouted answer of congregations which has spread from black Southern Baptists to all Americans. Even the lilt of his voice conjures up the "soul power" of the Sixties, the moral strength of non-violence.

"America we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves – if our children should live to see the next century, if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made? This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment.

This is our time, to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that, out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people. Yes, we can.

Thank you. God bless you. And may God bless the United States of America."

It could be legitimately objected that all these is but words, making ideas seem compatible when they are fiercely polarised is simply the craft of a word smith. But amongst those compatibilities are words and deeds, ideals that become realities as they have before. When King in his march on Washington said "I have a Dream" has this not now arrived fully awoken amongst us all? When he dreamed that "little black boys and girls would play with little white boys and girls" did he dream that this would happen at the White House and the little black girls would be the hostesses? Some realities are even better than the dreams that gave rise to them.

Obama, with little experience behind him has already shown that he can lead what must be the best organised election campaign and the most disciplined army of multi-ethnic volunteers in American history.

The man is clearly more than words. Will he continue as he has begun?



There are two distinct forms of political appeal, used by Republicans and Obama Democrats respectively. The first **polarises**. It says in effect, “We are the forces of Law and Order –they are odd-balls, subversives, liberals and dissenters.” “We are the Individualists who place no limits on the accumulation of wealth – they are “socialists” that seek to tax and redistribute in the name of community. We believe in Specifics and fundamentals, 100% Americanism, Prayer in Public Schools, the Flag, the strict and literal interpretation of the Constitution, no abortion which is “murder” – they are vague, wishy-washy, lovey-dovey, permissive, sexually promiscuous etc. (We can do this with all the seven dimensions.)

What Obama does is reconcile, so that he has made major inroads into conservative “red” states. He is for Law and Order *and* for those who are exceptional and beyond the mainstream. He praises individual courage and persistence (yes we can!) *and* believes that this will elevate communities and heal the nation. In no way does his opposition to the Iraq war diminish his gratitude to brave soldiers. If anything we owe them more. He takes strong specific decisions but tries to include in dialogue and relationship even those who disagree with him, thus joining the specific to the diffuse.

It remains to be seen if combining values is more appealing than polarising them.

The philosophy and associated conceptual framework of this analysis is based on the approaches developed by Trompenaars Hampden-Turner Consulting for helping client organizations.

In order to become a sustainable success as an organization the dilemmas between the various stakeholders need to be reconciled. It is the Servant Leader that has the capability to do so. Since essentially innovation could be defined as combining values that are not easily joined essentially this process is created by and leads to innovation. It is the innovative capability of organizations, from process to product, from R&D to HR that will make an organization sustainable. And it is far more than just Corporate Social Responsibility.