

Obamamania: A Dissent

George De Stefano (November 10, 2008)



I voted for him and I'm glad he won. But let's not get carried away, OK?

Tutti pazzi per Obama.



It does seem like everyone is crazy for Barack Obama – Americans, Italians and other Europeans, Africans, Middle Easterners, you name it. The New York Times reported that Maoris, the indigenous people of New Zealand, feel inspired by our President Elect. Though he hasn't yet assumed the presidency, Obama already has achieved iconic status. He's the avatar of a new politics, a healer of racial division, a rock star. Even some Republicans – the less rabidly reactionary ones, of course – are singing his praises.

Watching the election returns on TV Tuesday night, I felt that euphoria when, at 11 p.m., his Electoral College votes put him over the top. It was a stunning moment. My partner Rob and I popped open the bottle of champagne we'd chilled and toasted Obama's victory and the imminent end of eight years of Republican misrule. For the first time since Bush stole the presidency in 2000, we went to bed elated after an election instead of horribly depressed.

For us, though, the euphoria was short-lived indeed. On Wednesday, we learned that four states – California, Arizona, Arkansas and Florida -- had passed anti-gay referenda. The worst news came from California, where voters approved, by 52%, Proposition 8, which amends the California state constitution to ban same-sex marriage. What was particularly galling was the fact that Obama supporters, and especially African Americans, were responsible for the proposition's victory. Whites and Asians opposed the measure, Hispanics favored it by a small margin, but 70% of blacks voted in favor.

The proposition's success made it evident that you could love Obama but still be homophobic. As a headline at the Village Voice's website said on Wednesday morning, "Cheer up GOP. America still hates gays." And make no doubt about it -- the anti-gay propaganda was hateful, full of outrageous lies and distortions about the supposed evils of allowing people of the same sex to enjoy the rights and privileges that every heterosexual takes for granted.

Gays and lesbians were out-organized and outspent by the anti-gay forces, with millions poured into the campaign by the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons. But the proposition's backers hardly concentrated on the magic underwear crowd. Winning the support of the African American religious community was central to their strategy, and it worked. It's no secret that most black churches are homophobic. (This bigotry is often euphemistically termed "cultural conservatism.") Not long ago I heard a gay Jamaican argue against the government giving black churches AIDS funding because those churches were absolutely the worst places for black gays. From their pulpits ministers attack homosexuality and denigrate the very humanity of gay people, even though many of these churches couldn't function without their gay deacons, organists, choir leaders, etc.

What's this got to do with Obama? He did say that he was opposed to Proposition 8. But he paved the way for the measure's success months ago when he declared that he couldn't support same-sex marriage because of "my Christian faith." Proposition Eight organizers made "robocalls" to black voters using recordings of Obama's statement, and the tactic was effective.

Obama's faith-based bullshit was one reason why I never caught the prevalent Obamamania. I'm sick of politicians injecting their religious beliefs into political discourse, a noxious practice which, by the way, began not with a Republican but with Jimmy "Born Again" Carter, a Democrat. Obama, I wanted to say to him, I don't give a damn about your beliefs and I resent your using them as a reason to oppose fairness and equal treatment.

Lest you think I'm some kind of "identity politics" fanatic, let me add that Obama's stance on gay marriage wasn't the only position of his I found objectionable. He angered me when he pandered to the America-Israel Political Affairs Committee, AIPAC, going so far as to say Jerusalem was indisputably Israel's "indivisible" capital. So what if there happens to be another people, the Palestinians, who have a claim to it, and that most feel the city's ultimate status should be negotiated.

The enthusiastic ass-kissing of hardline Zionists wasn't the only instance of Obama's opportunism. Earlier this year he voted in favor of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, FISA, George Bush's sweeping intelligence surveillance law, a bill denounced by many of the same liberal Democrats who backed Obama's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. His vote for this bad bill was a slap



in the face of the Democratic base and a sop to the Bush-McCain right. Democratic senators Christopher Dodd, Russ Feingold, and Patrick Leahy, all liberal stalwarts, opposed FISA; even the Bush-enabling Hillary Clinton voted against it. But for Obama, not appearing “soft on terrorism” was more important than civil liberties.

I certainly don't regret my vote for Obama; the alternative was infinitely worse. As a lifelong leftist who got my first lessons in radical politics from my Sicilian grandfather, I've never voted for a Republican in my life. But the Democrats too often have been a pro-war, pro-corporate party, notwithstanding their populist rhetoric.

I don't see Obama's victory as a harbinger of a new millennium of peace, social justice and all things good and noble. Before the election Rachel Maddow, MSNBC's popular and openly lesbian commentator, observed that though most progressives will vote for Obama, they don't regard him as one of them. He's an extraordinarily talented politician, and in many ways a highly appealing figure. His broad-based support signaled that America may at last be rising above its hideous history of institutionalized and de facto racism.

But Obama's not a savior, though you'd hardly know it from some of the overheated reactions to his victory. Obama himself has acknowledged that he'll inevitably disappoint his supporters. Watch his appointments. I was dismayed that he picked Clinton attack dog Rahm Emanuel for his chief of staff. I'll be more than dismayed if he selects his economic advisers from the pro-corporate wing of the Democratic Party – people like Bill Clinton's Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, for example – rather than from the populist ranks. But it already looks like that's what he has in mind.

So I anticipate the Obama Administration with cautious optimism, but also with a large dose of what I consider healthy skepticism.

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