Barack Obama: History’s high note

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by: DAYAN JAYATILLEKA "…change this country, and change the world!" – Barack Obama"He is a transformational figure coming onto the world stage"- Colin Powell History sometimes hits a high note, sweet and soaring, clean and clear, as if from Satchmo’s horn. The most intelligent, interesting and inspirational of contemporary political personalities is about to be the President of the most powerful nation on the planet. Things will never be the same again. Obama will "electrify the world" predicted Colin Powell. Obama’s achievement, in and of itself, already changes the world; is a step forward in socio-political achievement. No country however idiosyncratic or culturally narcissistic can live outside the stream of world history. This is more so in the Information Age— the era of "interconnectivity", as Obama terms it. The Obama Effect will be globalized, albeit unevenly. We shall all feel its push and pull factor.

Here is a rare leader: a deeply reflective intellectual, also able to identify with people and inspire them, not by appealing to what divides them but what unifies them while recognizing their diversity. ("White, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, men and women, rich, poor, red state and blue state, straight and gay, disabled and not disabled"). Will he be a successful leader? Yes, because he understands. He "gets it", as his wife Michelle says. He understands because of what he is – multicultural, reflective of the world, with roots ranging from rural Kansas through Hawaii to Kenya and Indonesia (a family gathering at Christmas is like a mini-UN General Assembly, he says) — and even more so, because of all the traits that he has already revealed. The most outstanding of these being an acute intelligence which already has amassed an armory of ideas, and the tendency to attract the best available American minds but not be dominated by any of them. Reading ObamaThe publisher’s notes on the back cover of his second book sketch him with bare adequacy: "A Senator and a lawyer, a professor and a father, a Christian and a skeptic…" By his words, ye shall know him. To understand him, you have to encounter his words, written and spoken. Three layers of Barack Obama are revealed almost archeologically or geologically in his two books and recent speeches. The first book written in his mid-thirties is the most brilliant in literary terms. An existential search for himself, it covers the USA, Asia and Africa in a journey both outwards and inwards, through ideas and cultures, stages of growth and states of mind, chronicling an evolution of a personality with unflinching transparency. He does so with a grasp of writing that makes his personal passage an exciting odyssey for the reader. Clearly here is a young man who could have been a great American author but chose the vicissitudes of public service and political life instead.His second book picks up at a point where he has evolved and matured, settled but not stagnated. Though it has been called his second autobiography, it is only partly and secondarily so. Like the first book, it is also a story of a journey; the chronicle of a traveler. This is an aspect of Obama that will remain part of his spirit even when he has entered the White House, and I expect it to be noted in the diaries he will keep and the post-Presidential autobiography he will write, which will be such as that of no other. His chosen Biblical quotation to adorn his first book Dreams from My Father captures this quality: "For we are strangers before them, and sojourners, as were all our fathers."(1 Chronicles 29:15) This second book, the better known The Audacity of Hope, a work written when he has come home, found his centre, is a book of ideas, the evolution of a political program and philosophy through personal encounter, political experience and intellectual reflection. His literary gift remains, surer if less scintillating. The chapter in which he discusses the troubled question of ensuring growth with equity, exploring but eschewing antinomies of a low growth welfare statism and high growth capitalist cannibalism, and charting the contours of a New Deal for a new century (and a new crisis), is book-ended by a description of how comfortable it is to ride on a private jet – a privilege of US Senators— and a realization of the stories, the social and human perspective, you miss while doing so. Barack Obama President- elect of the United States The book picks up from where he left off in the first, tells us of his experiences as a Senator, reflects on the deeply flawed nature of contemporary American political life, discusses the broad thematic issues and problems from abortion to race and religion that confront and divide the USA, explains his late and lucid conversion to Christianity despite his atheist father (born a Muslim), skeptic mother and non-religious grandparents, and sets out his distinctive views on world affairs and national security strategy. (He studied international relations at Columbia). Obama has a capacity which he has honed into a technique, of slipping inside the skin of an idea or a person, working it through to its conclusion, reliving its strengths, seeing its weakness or opposite side especially when taken to an extreme, acknowledging and contextualizing that too, and then offering up his own third position which is a synthesis when possible and a middle path when not. He does so while being able to combine the styles of higher journalism with political thinking. In the midst of one chapter, he has roughly 15 pages reconstituting the spirit of the Founding Fathers and the Constitution and ending with Lincoln and the anti-secessionist war, which is the best text of political thought I’ve read in recent times. In The Audacity of Hope, this self-confessed student of political philosophy (and self-censored poet) has produced a model of political writing, a progressive democratic manifesto and charter for America but of relevance also for the world. The third layer of Obama is the most visible and audible one: his spoken word and style, in speeches, TV appearances and at public forums. In him, George Washington meets Denzel Washington. He has been compared with John F Kennedy, but to me, he is more reminiscent of Bobby Kennedy in 1968 (perhaps refracted through the prism of a Poitier performance), with his ability to reach across race and class, to inspire passion for change yet calm the passion for destruction. He also combines a searching self with self confidence, and that self confidence with off beat self-deprecatory humor. On David Letterman’s show I think it was, he said that in high school he was voted "the Barackiest". At the traditional Alfred E Smith dinner at which the main candidates make satirical speeches, Obama deadpanned: "contrary to what you may have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was born on the planet Krypton, and was sent by my father Jor-El to save the world". Obama as Leader"Better is not good enough" opines Obama. Can Barack Obama be a great President? Yes, he can. The main problem he will face is the contradiction that he has referred to in passing in his writing, that between

"power and principle" or as Yale University’s new book by my former teacher John Kane calls it, "Between Virtue and Power: The Persistent Moral Dilemma of US Foreign policy". This will be the issue in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan. In wrestling with this complex conflict, the US will be greatly helped by the politico-military confluence of a superb mind with an extremely good one: President and Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama with the new head of CENTCOM, General David Petraeus, PhD (from Princeton, where he had been a student of my friend Professor Richard Falk). Obama’s intellectuality and sensitivity must not obscure his tough mindedness and realism, his "fierce ambition" (inherited from his father, he says) and commitment to "what works", which he identifies in the foreign policy realm as "the marriage of Wilsonian idealism with hard headed realism". In his second book, he re-iterates one thing that makes him tick: every man tries to live up to his father’s expectations or avoid his mistakes. In constituting his final criterion, this motivator will, I believe, be conjoined with his conscience. That is where he will confront his toughest problem: Israel/Palestine, which envenoms America’s relations with the vast Islamic world. If true to himself Barack Obama cannot but wonder whether the Palestinian is the new Black. Yet the resolution of that problem is more in the hands of Israel than in his. H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Sri Lanka’s Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the UN Geneva Will the Israeli electorate follow the example of the US and elect a moderate coalition for change, or will it move in the opposite direction, hoping to offset a liberal American president with a hard Right Israeli Prime Minister? In the final analysis, it is Israel that has to make an existential decision: does it really want a Palestinian counterpart it can make peace with, or does it prefer that there be no viable Palestinian moderate centre so it can tell the whole world it has no partner with whom to implement a peace settlement? It will probably be Barack Obama’s second term before he is confident enough to tackle the problem of Israel/Palestine in a way that is firm, fair and feasible.Obama wants to generate "fundamental change" (as he put it at his final election meetings) in the USA—Michelle Obama calls this goal "a different kind of democracy". He also wants to "change the world" and "heal the planet". Given his multiple roots and experiences, and his understanding of himself, his goal of change cannot but be global. Sitting at the apex of the US power structure he will have the global reach, the instruments with which to make these changes, but he will also learn the constraints which prevent him from doing so. More than anyone else, Barack Obama has the qualities needed to transform the awesome power of the USA into a source and resource for global good rather than for hostility, harm and humiliation. With Obama at the helm, the USA is likely to lead the world through the force of its example and image, inspiration and ideas, and is less likely than at almost any other time, to need to dominate the world through military force. With the elimination of the factors of bad leadership and policy and the substitution of the best possible in both realms, we could see the USA at its best. We shall also see it for what it objectively, systemically, is: with Obama at the helm, if the US fails to change its propensity for world domination while fulfilling its vocation for leadership, then "the old anti-imperialist cant" (as he dismissively dubs it) will stand validated. The global Obama effectLet’s state the obvious. The father of the newly elected leader of the USA was not a citizen of that country. In the most powerful country in the world, a candidate who is atypical, who does not come exclusively from the dominant ethnic group (or religious tendency - he belongs to what he calls the "historically black church", not a white Protestant congregation), who does not even look like the majority of the voting populace, can aspire to and achieve the highest goal on the basis of individual merit and ability. Put differently, the most powerful post in the world has just been won, not on the basis of ethnicity but going against the grain of ethnic majoritarianism, on the basis of excellence. This will simultaneously shed light on and raise the bar of achievement for every single society: can we say the same about ourselves? Can a Barack Obama make it to the top in our country? And why not? How far or high up can he or she get? What would it take to change that? While the walls of Jericho — of parochialism, bigotry and chauvinism — may not crumble at the sounds of Obama’s oratory, ethnic and cultural chauvinists and fundamentalists the world over will find themselves on the wrong side of History. Whether they realize it or not, they are, as Barack Obama said of John McCain and the Republicans, "out of ideas and almost out of time". The world divides up today between those with whom Obama’s victory and his values of inclusionary meritocratic modernity resonate, and those with whom they do not; those who admire and applaud the US for the Obama achievement and those few whom that achievement leaves cold. Obama and History Obama’s education and life experiences acquaint him with a far broader set of concepts and cultures, ideas and theories, situations and voices (some contained within himself) than anyone who has run for the US Presidency in a long time. (How many of them had read Fanon?) His natural tendency will be to be a great teacher, reformer and reconciler on a global scale; to be a planetary ‘change agent’, leaving the world better than he found it. His wife Michelle will be the most educated, intelligent, articulate and progressive-minded First Lady anywhere and is likely to have a global impact herself. If anybody will be speaking "truth to power" in an Obama administration, it will probably be this First Lady – that’s in addition to the inner dialogue going on within Barack Obama.Never in my lifetime has a man with a more highly evolved sensibility been elected to the highest office anywhere in the world, let alone in the most powerful country of all. Eventually, the light breaks through. **********[Dayan Jayatilleka, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Colombo is currently Sri Lanka’s Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva. These are his strictly personal views].(Courtesy : The Island)