

---

# OBAMA, THE NEW AMERICA and SRI LANKA TOMORROW

Tuesday, 11 November 2008

Last Updated Tuesday, 11 November 2008

By Dayan Jayatilleke Watching the live coverage of the US elections on as many channels as possible—but mainly on Al Jazeera International—I discovered I had mixed emotions, corresponding perhaps to the various aspects of my identity. I was delighted as an individual, a political analyst and academic, a friend of the United States (though a critic of its foreign policy) and a citizen of the world. Some of these were for political and ideological reasons, reasons of values, others for egoistic ones. Former US Asst Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca, now US ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament here in Geneva refers to me jokingly as a “registered Democrat”. This much is true: I have always known that had I been a US citizen, I would have been one, just as I would have been a Labour voter or Social Democrat, had I been European or Australian. In 2004, I wrote in support of John Kerry, whatever the implications of a Kerry win for Sri Lanka. (When in Australia, I supported Kevin Rudd even before he took over the Labour Party). So in terms of ideas, I was inspired by Obama just as my father had been by JFK. I mourned at morning prayer with the rest of my school when JFK died, and shed a tear in a Belgrade hotel when Bobby was shot in 1968.

Prediction My ego also came into play in celebrating Obama’s historic victory. I had stuck my neck out here in Geneva among my more experienced ambassadorial colleagues many months ago, predicting an Obama win even before his nomination as the Democratic candidate. My positive references to him, over a dozen on the record, date back to March 2007 (in a Daily News interview) and resume in March 2008 (at the HRC in Geneva), when Hillary was still the front runner and John McCain was ahead nationwide, having sewed up his nomination early. All this was well before the financial crisis hit. Barack Obama President-elect of the United States Historically, Barack Obama is a grandson of Nelson Mandela and son of Dr. Martin Luther King. His values, ideas and personality resonate with my wife and me, just as we warm to his wonderful family. He is to me what JFK was to my father. However, my purely Sri Lankan side is anxious and sad. I am as happy for the USA as I am sad for Sri Lanka; sad at the contrast between the quality of politics, political discourse, and social dynamics between the US and my country. Sad at the dangerous distance we must travel to approximate anything like the plane of political and social evolution that the US has arrived at. It wasn’t always so. When I was a boy, my father’s generation and social stratum admired John F. Kennedy, but there was a sense of superiority because of the scenes in Alabama, where Dr. King’s protests against segregation were met with fire hoses and Alsatian dogs. But that was then, this is now. How far the US has come since that time, and how far back we Sri Lankans have gone. Changes in an interlinked domain H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka, Sri Lanka’s Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the UN Geneva remind myself that all those Sri Lankan personalities, Sinhala and Tamil, who were bridge builders and who could have been transitional to the Obama age and standards, were murdered by the extremists of North and South, by the LTTE and the JVP. These range from Lakshman Kadigamar and Neelan Tiruchelvam to Vijaya Kumaratunga and Ranasinghe Premadasa. I tell myself that this war is the chief evil we must overcome. It is the test of the day, the challenge faced by my generation, a condition sine qua non for any social advance, just as winning the US Civil war against the Secessionist South was the precondition for everything the US has achieved, right up to the election of Barack Obama. That reminder doesn’t work all the time and takes me only part of the way. The war didn’t spring out of nowhere. We must win the war, but remove also the policies and attitudes that brought it about, and install those policies and attitudes that will let us catch up with the world or at least the rest of Asia in this 21st century. These changes have to take place in two interlinked domains: the construction of identity, and the content of education. “Main Street” and “Wall Street” Let’s face the truth, which is twofold: Barack Obama will fight Al Qaeda and the Taliban because they attacked the USA, just as he would have fought any attempt at secession, as did his great hero Abraham Lincoln. He is no Jimmy Carter, a Democratic “dove”. We Sri Lankans are fully justified in fighting a war to defeat Tiger terrorism and separatism at the hands of which we have suffered many 9/11s, big and small. Furthermore of Sri Lanka’s two main political parties, one is elitist, affiliated itself with the Republicans, adheres to and practiced economic neo-liberalism and has a leader who is a personal friend of President Bush and Senator McCain—and that ain’t the SLFP and Mahinda Rajapaksa. Therefore, the cosmopolitans of Colombo have no moral right to misrepresent and misuse the Obama win, preach their policies of appeasement and pacifism, practice their social elitism and continue to tail behind the UNP. Obama is different: a former community organizer who stands for “Main Street not Wall Street”, for the middle classes, and as he said in his victory speech in Chicago, for “patriotism” and “the working people”. But that’s only one side of the truth. The other side is that the US has rejected and defeated precisely those attitudes that led us into our war and are still very audible and visible in Sri Lankan society today. There is a strong symmetry between the views of the right wing or conservative Religious Right of the defeated Republican Party—a lobby that captured and wrecked the Republicans—and those of the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist parties and pressure groups in politics, the media and civil society. The American people have decisively endorsed Obama’s message that “there are no real Americans and fake Americans, no areas of the country that are more patriotic than others”. The American spirit, unlike the Sri Lankan, is one that is not trapped by the past but reaches out to forge and fashion the future. The American identity is one that celebrates unity in diversity, one that is broad and inclusive, open to change. Fitting larger dreams As Barack Obama said in a speech and essay on Lincoln in 2005: “...in all this we see a fundamental element of the American character, a belief that we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams”. To me the key words here are “constantly”, “remake” and “larger”. These are the open secrets that have made the USA the superpower that it is. The definition of the American nation is a broad one, pluralist, generous; one which is not straitjacketed; does not insist that any single culture be recognized as dominant. What is the definition of the Sri Lankan nation, of the Sri

---

Lankan identity? Will it remain narrowly defined and unequal, mired in a version of the past? We either stagnate or remake ourselves to fit not the larger but the narrower dreams (and definitions) of the more ungenerous, ill-educated, fanatical and raucous. In clinging to "us" and "them" (in ethnic, ethno-religious or majority-minority terms) there emerges no common "we". In clinging to our yesterdays we blight our today and forfeit our tomorrows. The Lankan version Here's another bitter truth which made me sad as I watched the Obama triumph, applauded as it was by the rest of the world. Barack Obama writes that his values were those of the Democratic Party. Sri Lanka never had one, nor did it have the equivalent of British Labour or European Social democracy. What we have had are two versions of the US Republicans or the British Conservatives: one party taking over the mantle of national security, the war on terror and cultural conservatism, and the other the manifesto of economic neo-liberalism. One formation was partial to religious fundamentalism, the other to free market fundamentalism. Even the exceptions couldn't really break the mould: Mr. Premadasa was more sympathetic to John Major than to Bill Clinton and Chandrika Kumaratunga talked about it, but for 12 years, never got around to tapping her excellent contacts with the Clintons and French socialist leaders to affiliate the SLFP either with the US Democrats or the European democratic Left. The only man who might have, Vijaya Kumaratunga was shot dead on his doorstep in view of his little children, by a JVP gunman who emptied a full banana clip into his chest and face. We know what's right about the USA. We must figure what's wrong with us. And what we are going to do about it. I shan't be entering a debate in print on this. I just think we should start a conversation. The American people responded to Barack Obama's slogan "Yes, we can" and now proudly claim "Yes, we did." The question before Sri Lanka is: "Can we?" (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). (Courtesy : Daily Mirror )