

## **President of the world**

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The day Barack Obama was inaugurated revealed many things about the US. The joy Americans take in their civic events was brought home by the Washington subway announcer who suggested the passengers on our crowded train should "rub up against each other: a little rubbin' never hurt no one".

The raucous capitalism of the memorabilia hawkers suggested the free market is not finished and that Barack Obama is good for business. The continuing visceral anger at George W. Bush was evident in the boo that echoed around the National Mall when he was introduced and the cheer that erupted when the presidential helicopter ascended to start his journey home to Texas. The darker implications of elected office in the US were reflected in the bulletproof glass (or transparent armour, to use Secret Service speak) wrapped around the podium, not to mention the 20 cm thick doors of the new President's limousine and the bullet-resistant clothing on his back.

Most importantly, of course, the inauguration of a black man on the gleaming white steps of the US Capitol, a building raised by slaves, reminded us of the country's ability to confound its critics and surprise even its most ardent friends. Until recently, it was the received wisdom, in Australia as well as the US, that the country was not ready to elect an African-American to its highest office.

That view badly misjudged and underestimated the American people. It is not just its great wealth and military power that drives the world's fascination with the US: it is the idea of America, democratic and meritocratic. The inauguration of Obama played directly to this theme.

Australians are hardly immune from Obamamania. According to the 2008 Lowy Institute poll, we favoured his election over John McCain by a ratio of four or five to one. But if Australians wanted him in the White House, how will we feel the effects? What does Obama mean for Australia? Often we shrink this question down to very narrow dimensions. We fret about a few hot-button policies, such as trade and the perennial issue of personnel: who's up, who's down and how well we know them.

Connections are certainly important in the transactional political and diplomatic atmosphere within the Beltway. Personal links are likely to be especially valuable during the next few years: Washington will present the most competitive diplomatic environment since the days of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, as all quarters of the globe reach out to the new President and his administration. But good ideas are at least as important as old connections.

Australia has the potential to influence global debates so long as we take a broad view of our interests, and we have high-quality ideas to contribute. The risk of getting lost in the Washington crush is greater if we play on the margins, focusing only on issues within our immediate purview.

Kevin Rudd has no lack of foreign policy ambition. His instinct is to engage with the Obama administration right across the global agenda from climate change to international financial architecture, and on this point he is correct. The US has a stake in all the great issues of the day. None of the biggest problems facing the world can be solved without the Americans. And because of the closeness of the Australia-US alliance, because our fortunes are, to some degree at least, attached to America's, we are doubly affected by the decisions it takes.

So to work out what Obama means for Australia, we need to try to divine his global strategy. This is no easy task. Indeed, when it comes to presidents, all predictions are brave. Eight years ago, for instance, candidate Bush promised a "humble" foreign policy. Yet little humility

was evident in his actions as president. From his first days in office, he was the Charles Atlas of international relations, kicking sand in the faces of puny Europeans, ripping up multilateral agreements and eventually invading Iraq without the cover of a UN Security Council resolution.

Furthermore, and partly as a consequence of Bush's mistakes, Obama faces a far more challenging international environment than his predecessor did: bloody conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea; persistent terrorist networks; newly assertive US competitors; a broken Middle East peace process; a financial meltdown; a cooling economy and a warming planet. The choices that Obama makes will be important, but so will the constraints within which he makes those choices.

Notwithstanding these caveats, however, we can venture some observations. The claim that Obama will make few changes to US foreign policy already looks shaky. Shortly after his inauguration, he instructed the US military to draw up a plan for the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq and set in train the closure of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration will bring a new approach to Afghanistan, end America's macabre dance of climate change denial, scepticism and delay, engage directly with US adversaries, interact strategically rather than tactically with the UN, sever Bush's link between freedom and force and do all this with global goodwill rather than opprobrium.

Will the US decommission its army and adopt a foreign policy that is appropriate for, say, a small Scandinavian country? No. But compared with most historical precedents this is most definitely change we can believe in.

There are clues to Obama's likely foreign policies in his political make-up and his writings. If you were to sequence Obama's political genome, as David Mendell attempts to do in *Obama: From Promise to Power* (HarperCollins), you would certainly find the gene for pragmatism. One does not get from the Illinois State Senate to the Oval Office in four years without an instinctive attraction to things that work.

The signature theme of Obama's campaign book, *The Audacity of Hope* (Text), is not hope so much as balance. The chapter on foreign policy is mainly devoid of ideological content. He concurs with Bush's argument about freedom's universal appeal, for instance, but then quickly raises caveats against its imposition abroad and suggests that people are looking less for an "electocracy" than for the basic elements that define a decent life and the ability to make their way through life without having to endure corruption, violence or arbitrary power.

Unlike Bush, Obama does not dwell on the role that good and evil play in the affairs of humankind. His pragmatism was apparent in his 2002 speech against the invasion of Iraq, which was not the standard critique but rather a nuanced argument against "a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences". He has advocated a "clear-eyed view of how the world works" and "tough, thoughtful, realistic diplomacy".

That is not to say Obama will be a Kissingerian realist, however, moving the geopolitical chess pieces around the board with a cold indifference to the human costs of his strategy. Realistic, yes, but not a realist as understood in university faculties of international relations. To be a realist you need to have ice in your veins, and it's not clear that Obama does, or that any Democratic administration would display the kind of steely devotion to the national interest that the term implies. Obama's administration is staffed by Democrats and animated partly by Democratic values such as a commitment to human rights; it will be influenced not only by foreign policy professionals but by the US Congress, trade unions, activists and the "netroots", which will maintain a constant pressure on its Left flank.

If an administration's foreign policy reflects, to some degree, the temper of its leader, then we can expect this administration to be disciplined and deliberate. Intimates describe Obama as a measured problem-solver who rarely rushes to judgment. Even in his days as president of the *Harvard Law Review* and as an Illinois legislator, Obama was known as a listener and a conciliator. Gideon Rose, managing editor of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, has observed that

Obama's presidential campaign "was characterised above all by disciplined intelligence. From his painstaking organisation during the primaries, to his selection and management of highly capable subordinates, to his sobriety and judiciousness throughout, he displayed precisely the qualities the Bush administration has lacked". He also demonstrated toughness, for example, when he stuck to his policy of meeting with the leaders of US adversaries even when most of the Washington foreign policy establishment came out against it. The manner in which he conducted his transition to office only underscored these qualities.

If he is a strong leader, though, he is also likely to be a cautious commander-in-chief. More than 180,000 troops are serving in the two wars that Obama mentioned in his inaugural address, "one that needs to be ended responsibly, one that needs to be waged wisely". He will have to square his promise of a phased withdrawal of combat brigades from Iraq during the next 16 months with the imperative not to squander recent progress. At the same time, he needs to manage the tension between his elevation of the Afghanistan war to particular prominence and the pessimism in Washington about the prospects of winning it.

Even if these two wars were not sufficient to constrain military adventurism elsewhere (as they were for Bush), Obama's instincts seem to point in the same direction. He is always careful to say he "will not hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests whenever we are attacked or imminently threatened". However, he also sent signals during the campaign that Washington needs to move away from an overreliance on the use of force. In November 2007, he asserted: "for most of our history our crises have come from using force when we shouldn't, not by failing to use force". In a national security speech in July 2008, he said: "Instead of pushing the entire burden of our foreign policy on to the brave men and women of our military, I want to use all elements of American power to keep us safe, and prosperous, and free."

Obama has appointed his chief rival for the Democratic nomination, Hillary Clinton, a figure with her own prestige and following, as Secretary of State. On his second day in office, he made a symbolic commute to State Department headquarters to emphasise the centrality of diplomacy in his approach. He appointed two high-powered special envoys, George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke, to work on Arab-Israeli issues and Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Obama is no pacifist, as we saw when he vowed to use force against terrorist targets in Pakistan, even without Islamabad's consent. Other centre-Left heads of government, notably former British prime minister Tony Blair, became more hawkish on assuming office. Some insiders suggest, in fact, that the international community's "responsibility to protect" civilian populations from mass atrocity crimes may prove to be a theme of Obama's presidency. Some of the people around him, including his ambassador to the UN, former Brookings scholar Susan Rice, have strong views on humanitarian intervention. Obama has said that genocide is "a stain on our souls"; in the second presidential debate, he remarked that if "we stand idly by, that diminishes us".

It is hard to predict how he would balance the impulse to prevent such crimes against the widespread aversion to military intervention in the aftermath of Iraq. The odds surely favour caution, however.

Obama sits in the mainstream of post-World War II American thinking on international institutions, viewing the UN as imperfect but essential. He states that "our immediate safety can't be held hostage to the desire for international consensus" and reserves the right "to act unilaterally to protect our interests". But he also believes the US is stronger when it works through institutions to project US power. In *The Audacity of Hope* he writes that:

*nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international "rules of the road". We can't win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone but us. When the world's sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following.*

There is no way on earth that Bush would ever have used such language.

What about the place of alliances in the Obama world view? It is a gross exaggeration to say, as former Bush administration official John Bolton does, that Obama has "a post-alliance policy". However, Obama is the first President to come of age politically after the end of the Cold War. For generational reasons, then, he may see alliances as less special. During the campaign he sometimes bracketed them with other, less intimate relationships, writing of his intention to rebuild "alliances, partnerships and institutions". In office, however, he will discover that familiar tools still fit the hand well, assuming, that is, that US allies are available for the purpose.

Allies should not just go along with this administration, or any administration, on everything. Where they disagree, they should speak up, but where they agree, they should step up. If allies want Obama to regard America's alliances as valuable, they will need to be valuable allies.

A question that concerns some allies is the new administration's attitude to China, a topic on which Obama has said little. In common with much of Washington, he has indicated that with China's great power comes great responsibility. During the presidential campaign, both Obama and McCain argued for a US strategy that combined engagement with China and balancing against it. However, given his opponent's muscular approach to competitors and his distrust of non-democracies, Obama was certainly closer to the engagement end of the spectrum.

When Obama is asked about US competitors, he does not shrink from criticising their behaviour but it seems that his principal concern is to work with them to solve global problems. In his inaugural address, for instance, he promised to work with "former foes" on climate change and nuclear disarmament. On the other hand, Obama will be susceptible to countervailing pressures from human rights advocates and economic nationalists. How he manages the relationship with Beijing will have very significant implications for Australia.

Competitors and allies alike worry about whether Obama believes in free trade. He is certainly not in the same class as McCain, who boasted he was "the biggest free marketer and free trader you will ever see". During the primary season, Obama labelled the North American Free Trade Agreement a mistake and opposed pending free trade agreements with South Korea and Colombia. Yet the idea that Obama is a protectionist by instinct sits awkwardly with his comfort with globalisation, his preference for multilateralism and his cerebral approach to policy.

His economic appointments are all strictly orthodox, from Tim Geithner at Treasury and Larry Summers at the National Economic Council down to staff picks such as Jason Furman (who once angered fellow Democrats by praising Wal-Mart's contribution to the US economy) and Austan Goolsbee (who caused a brouhaha last year by allegedly briefing Canadian diplomats that Obama's protectionist talk was mere politics).

Optimists comfort themselves that a popular Democratic President is the best person to influence the thinking of the Democratic majorities in both houses of congress, which are the principal redoubts of protectionism in Washington.

The important question, ultimately, is not whether Obama is a free trade purist, but rather this: When his priorities start to bump up against each other, what risks will he take for free trade? The answer will no doubt affect Obama's international popularity, but so far on that score he has nothing to worry about. Most of the world wants Obama to do well. The reasons for this goodwill include a widespread admiration for his gifts, and the pleasure felt especially by those on the margins of international society at the realisation of Martin Luther King's dream. But the other explanation is the multicultural, multinational element of Obama's make-up, described so elegantly in his 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (Text).

Obama is an African-American man but he is also a child of globalisation. He is linked by his father to Africa, by his middle name to the Islamic world, by his Indonesian childhood to Asia. Obama hinted at the broader geopolitical effect of his biography when he told *The New York*

*Times Magazine*: "... if you can tell people, 'We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who's half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian', then they're going to think that he may have a better sense of what's going on in our lives and in our country."

We saw this effect in the rapturous international coverage of Obama's inauguration. Contrary to some predictions, then, Obama's election has not given succour to America's enemies but rather widened its circle of friends. With this crown, however, comes a cross: the risk of dashed expectations on both sides. Such are the stratospheric levels of anticipation of an Obama administration that almost any foreign policy enacted by it – on climate change, Darfur, the Arab-Israeli situation, or whatever – is likely to disappoint great swaths of international opinion. Equally, many Americans may find that public affection for Obama in foreign countries does not translate into a willingness on the part of their governments to share additional burdens and risks with the US.

In the greater scheme of things, these are good problems to have.

On the day of Obama's inauguration, I thought I witnessed a portent of heavenly approval. An hour before Obama laid one hand on Lincoln's bible and took the oath of office, a bald eagle – America's national symbol – soared and swooped in front of the Capitol. My neighbour on the mall, a less idealistic soul, suggested that the eagle was a ring-in. If she was correct, then the episode only demonstrates again the deadly efficiency of the Obama machine. After eight years in which US foreign policy suffered from consistently shoddy execution, that would be promising enough.

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