

July 2nd, 2010

Obama at 18 Months

By Leonard Fein

Messiahs come, messiahs go. Sometimes they are self-proclaimed, sometimes they are the collective fantasy of others. The longing for a messiah is, one way or another, a universal: Why not imagine the arrival of one, of The One, who will finally bring peace, justice, forgiveness and all manner of good thing to humankind? Indeed, how do we repress the urge? Even those of us who are not given to supernatural visions can and do sing the *Ani Ma'amin*, that statement of absolute faith that “no matter how long he tarries, we shall yet with perfect faith await his coming.”

What prompts these thoughts is the growing disappointment with Barack Obama. In our innocence, many of us chose to impute messianic capabilities to him. Of course we did not suppose he could walk on water, but we did believe he could wade in quite deep and there, if need be, do battle with the sharks and defeat them. His campaign gave rise to such belief. “Yes, we can!” was so bracing, especially in the wake of Bush/Cheney. And the eloquence and charm aside, there was also the magic of race, the impossible dream that a black man could actually become our president.

I wrote, early on, that Obama was peculiarly non-neurotic, that he was a fully grown man, shockingly smart and therefore, all the wrenching challenges he faced notwithstanding, likely to bring about a real change in our national political culture.

While I do not share the sharp disappointment of which we read, it is plain that Obama is neither a messiah nor a magician nor a miracle-worker and that a real change in our political culture will take not months but years.

In one major respect, Obama is genuinely puzzling: Here we have a man capable of majestic speech. Go back and re-read his speech to the Democratic convention in 2004, as absorbing, as intimate, as thoughtful as any save Lincoln's two inaugural addresses ("the better angels of our nature" and so forth). There have been others since, most notably his talk on race during the campaign. And it is plain, from the campaign, that he knows how to work a crowd, how to inspire, how to engage, how to breathe new life into the politics of hope.

Yet this same gifted man seems to have abandoned his rhetorical and political skills on entering the White House. He lectures at us, and even those speeches that contain elegant turns of phrase fail to produce the lift we'd expected. Too much teleprompter? Perhaps. Too much defensiveness, too much craft, too much restraint? Perhaps. There's only one small element of which I am quite certain: Obama's consistency in referring to "my" secretary of defense, "my" Cabinet, "my" this and "my" that, rather than using "our" as the appropriate possessive, is an ongoing irritation. It is off-putting. It is harder to invoke the great public "we" if you are stuck in first person singular. An erstwhile community organizer should know that.

But the Obama presidency does not hinge principally on the quality of the Obama rhetoric. It hinges on Obama's policies, his programs, and the specific challenges before us.

There, the record is mixed — not nearly so empty as some now complain, not nearly as successful as we'd hoped. A gallant if still uncertain rescue from the brink of financial collapse; a health care bill that is too much a pastiche, a tourniquet here, a Band-Aid there, no public option, but withal an unexpected victory that includes some meaningful corrective surgery; a serious focus on nuclear nonproliferation; a genuine concern for a new energy policy, albeit one so far inadequately detailed and arguably far too reliant on cap-and-trade as its centerpiece; some serious mistakes in the early going on the Israel/Palestine conflict, but at least some signs of determination to see the matter through; a major step forward regarding Iran with the forging of an international coalition that may yet help tame that trouble-making nation; a most likely futile war in Afghanistan, the promise of an early withdrawal ever-harder to believe; some serious advances in civil liberties, civil rights and human rights, some odd and unexpected turns away from these; reform of the financial system, still pending. A mixed record. Not shabby, in many respects exciting, in some others disappointing, in many too early to tell.

All this against the background of a Republican Party determined to withhold its consent even from policies with which it in the main agrees, and against the background of a campaign of vilification that, while not unprecedented, is surely in both its breadth and its passion a departure from recent political history. We'd hoped that Obama's even temper and reasonableness might cause Rush Limbaugh to disappear; instead, we now have Glenn Beck as well.

No one can yet say what the nation's verdict on these first two years will be come election time in November. A victory for venom cannot be discounted, nor therefore a further poisoning of the body politic. The only near-certainty is that no messiah will arrive between now and November. And if one does, or perhaps especially if one does not, then best to remember the cautionary words of T.E. Lawrence:

We lived many lives in those swirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves any good or evil; yet when we had achieved, and the new world dawned, the old men came out again, and took from us our victory, and remade it in the likeness of the former world they knew, Youth could win, but had not learned to keep, and was pitifully weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven, a new earth, and they thanked us kindly, and made their peace.