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It's easier to criticize those who govern, than to govern yourself

*By Diether Haenicke
January 28, 2009*

Friends have been asking me for my own Barack Obama column.

Ever since preparations for the inauguration began, newspapers and electronic media started gushing exuberant welcomes and hosannas for the new president as if announcing the Second Coming. But politics and religious rapture need to be separated, and I decided to wait. Here now are some of my views:

I am most happy with the election of Obama. I see my African-American friends' excitement and jubilation at this milestone in American history that few of them believed they would reach in their lifetimes. Like them, I, too, am moved to see the first black president elected with a comfortable margin, which makes it very clear that this is not a man heaved into office by a combination of racial minorities, but by a broad cross-section of Americans of all backgrounds.

The fact that a black man was elected did not surprise me as much as many others. I thought that we had a good chance before to elect a black president, namely Colin Powell, if only he had decided to run. Here was a person of unquestioned integrity, a war hero, highly competent and experienced in international diplomacy as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, national security adviser and secretary of state in the service of several Republican presidents.

Powell appealed broadly to American voters. It is sheer speculation, I know, but I sense that he could have become our first black president had he given voters a chance. Toni Morrison's dictum that Bill Clinton was "our first black president" is now widely considered for what it always was: Friendly, gushing, well-meant, but nonsensical hyperbole.

Obama is change. He is the new face, the fresh approach for which America was hungry. Things had not been going right for a long time. Although I detested some of the unhinged attacks on the last president, it became obvious to me that a sea of change was occurring before our eyes, sweeping the old insiders aside and bringing promise, hope, and a new start. Joe Biden, old establishment par excellence, is the only survivor of that group of perennial insiders. We'll see how he fares.

I was initially very skeptical because of Obama's unquestionable inexperience in any executive capacity. His first actions as an executive, however, leave me impressed. He surrounds himself with solid, experienced people. His first public utterances are measured and extremely thoughtful. In spite of the understandable jubilation of black America during his inauguration, he does not play the race card at all. One faint hint at race in the inaugural address -- that is all. This is no Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson. Barack Obama seems to live miles apart from them. Whether this is shrewd politics or just an entirely different attitude, is hard to determine. But nevertheless, it is helpful, reassuring, and the new way to lead America.

Perhaps the difference between the generation of Sharpton and Obama also has to do with Obama's particular life experience. Not born the descendant of former slaves, as most black Americans are, raised largely by white grandparents, and clearly a child of educational privilege with Columbia and Harvard in his background, Obama is black without the deep psychological scars of most African-Americans.

Some of my friends suspect many whites voted for Obama to prove to themselves how progressive and open-minded they are. I rather think that most voters were swayed by this man's youth, energy, intelligence, rhetoric, stamina and promise. I like what I see and hear when he speaks, and I like to see his attractive and charming family in the White House. We are well represented by all of them.

Of course, all tests still lie ahead. We all know that it is much easier to criticize those who govern than to govern yourself. The difference is between sitting on the 50-yard line and telling the quarterback how to throw the ball and throwing the perfect pass yourself. Now Obama has left the stands and is on the field himself, ball in hand. Soon adulation will turn into criticism. I pray that we shall see many breathtaking passes and very few interceptions.

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