

Election Unleashes a Flood of Hope Worldwide

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PARIS – From the front lines of Iraq to more genteel spots like Harry's Bar in Paris, the election of Barack Obama unlocked a floodgate of hope that a new American leader will redeem promises of change, rewrite the political script and, perhaps as important as anything else, provide a kind of leadership that will erase the bitterness of the Bush years.

Whether it was because of Mr. Obama's youth, his race, his message or his manner, some European leaders abandoned diplomatic niceties to compete for extravagance in their praise, while others outside the United States – fascinated by an election that had been scrutinized around the globe – reached for their most telling comparisons.

"There is the feeling that for the first time since Kennedy, America has a different kind of leader," said Alejandro Saks, an Argentine script writer in Buenos Aires. Or, as Ersin Kalaycioglu, a professor of political science in Istanbul, put it, "The U.S. needs a facelift and he's the one who can give it."

There were some glaring departures from the feel-good mood. One in particular illustrated the challenges that will test the president-elect: President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia chose the day to lambaste the United States and threaten new missile deployments.

The final moments of the election were covered in obsessive detail far from America. In Australia, radio stations interrupted their shows to broadcast the Obama acceptance speech. In Berlin, newspapers printed special editions.

Perhaps one of the most poignant accolades came from Nelson Mandela, South Africa's former president, who said in a letter to Mr. Obama: "Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place."

Significantly, though, among American troops in Iraq, the hope seemed tinged with skepticism that change in the White House would not automatically mean change in American doctrines that have meant deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It's not like even if Obama is elected we'll up and leave," said Specialist James Real, 31, of Butte, Montana, as soldiers watched the returns on television at Forward Operating Base Falcon in Iraq.

Indeed, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said Iraq itself did not "expect that

much change in the American policies toward Iraq. Any changes won't be made in one night."

In Afghanistan, where American troops are also deployed in an increasingly bitter war, the election brought a rebuke .

"Our demand is to have no civilian casualties in Afghanistan. The fight against terrorism cannot be won by the bombardment of our villages," said President Hamid Karzai, referring to a string of coalition airstrikes that have caused civilian casualties.

For many outsiders, Mr. Obama's victory raised expectations that a new administration would seek new relationships across the globe.

"I think he can restore the image of America around the world, especially after Bush got us into two wars," said David Charlot, 28, a lawyer with French and American citizenship who was among a throng of expatriate revelers outside Harry's Bar in Paris.

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, said something on similar lines. "Your election raises in France, in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, an immense hope," he said in a message that called Mr. Obama's victory "brilliant" and his campaign "exceptional." Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany called his victory "historic" and invited Mr. Obama to return to Berlin, where he addressed a huge rally during his campaign.

Even in lands whose leaders are no friends of Washington -- such as Venezuela and Iran -- the election outcome cut through official propaganda to touch some people.

"It's kind of nice to feel good about the United States again," said Armando Díaz, 24, a bookkeeper in Caracas, Venezuela, where Enrique Cisneros, a storekeeper summed it up like this: "A few hours ago, the world felt like a different place." In Iran, too, some said the American example should persuade politicians closer to home to adopt similar political ways.

"His election can be a lesson for the dictators of the Middle East," said Badr-al-sadat Mofidi, the deputy editor of the daily Kargozaran newspaper.

Some in Iran focused on their hopes for a change in American attitudes towards their country. "The nightmare of war with the United States will fade with Obama's election," said Nehmat Ahmadi, a lawyer.

Indeed, for many who had watched this campaign from afar, there was a sense that the election was not just an American affair but something that touched people around the world, whatever their origin. "I want Obama to win with 99 percent, like Saddam Hussein," said Hanin Abu Ayash, who works at a television station in Dubai and monitored early returns on his computer. "I swear if he

doesn't win, I'm going to take it personally."

In Berlin, Anna Lemme, a 29-year-old architect, said she did not usually hurry to catch the news first thing in the morning. "But this morning I jumped to the radio first thing at 5 a.m.," she said.

There was little doubt that for some, Mr. Obama's skin color made his victory all the more exhilarating.

"The United States is choosing a black man as its president. Maybe we can share a bit in this happiness," Mr. Cisneros said in Caracas.

The Afghan president, Mr. Karzai, said the election had shown the American people overcoming distinctions "of race and color while electing their president" and thereby helping to bring "the same values to the rest of the world sooner or later."

For many in Africa – and in Kenya in particular – his election evoked a deepening of pride. As President Mwai Kibaki said in a message to Mr. Obama, "your victory is not only an inspiration to millions of people all over the world, but it has special resonance with us here in Kenya" – the birthplace of Mr. Obama's father and paternal grandparents.

That sense of association may also encourage some to believe that Mr. Obama will give Africa special attention. "We express the hope that poverty and underdevelopment in Africa, which remains a challenge for humanity, will indeed continue to receive a greater attention of the focus of the new administration," said Kgalema Motlanthe, the South African president.

Many outside Africa competed for his attention, too.

In a statement, the 27-nation European Union said it saw "the promise of a reinforced trans-Atlantic relationship" in Mr. Obama's election. Even big business joined in.

"From a business perspective, I'm very happy that the economic issue was at the top of the agenda in the campaign," said Lakshmi Mittal, the head of the world's biggest steel-maker, "and we're very positive that we'll see more measures to address the economic crisis with his election."

On momentous occasions, politicians reach for big words. The French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, for instance, said that "American democracy has just lived through a marvelous moment, one of those major turning points that periodically demonstrates its vitality, its belief in the future and its trust in the values on which it was founded over two centuries."

In Parliament in London on Wednesday, members of Britain's three major political parties lavished praise on Mr. Obama. Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that Mr. Obama had run "an inspirational campaign, energizing politics with progressive values and his vision for the future."

Mr. Brown mentioned several times that he planned to work closely with the new

administration, said he had spoken to Mr. Obama "on many occasions," called him a "true friend of Britain" and said: "I know Barack Obama and we share many values."

But politicians also peer through the prism of self-interest.

In South Korea, some pondered the destiny of a free-trade agreement negotiated by the Bush administration and criticized by Mr. Obama. Lee Hae-min, South Korea's top trade negotiator, warned that any change in the deal could undermine South Korea's support for the deal and "open a Pandora's box".

In the Middle East, the focus of much tension that has drawn in successive American administrations, Saeb Erakat, an aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, urged Mr. Obama to transform the proposal for a two-state solution in the Palestine-Israel conflict "to a realistic track immediately."

At the Vatican, a statement urged Mr. Obama to show "respect of human life" and expressed the hope that "God should illuminate the way" for him in his "great responsibility."

Some saw a chance to patch up old feuds.

Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who displeased Washington when he withdrew Spain's troops from Iraq in 2004, said Mr. Obama's victory "demonstrated the vitality of this great country, and of democracy and the unstoppable force of the ballot to bring about change."

"I am confident this opens a horizon of promise for relations between the United States and Spain," he told a press conference in Madrid.

But even in the moment of triumph, some in Europe questioned whether Mr. Obama would really make a break with his George W. Bush, the least popular American president among Europeans in recent history.

"When Obama takes office on January 20," the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung said in an editorial, "we will see whether the Europeans – and especially the Germans – really just had a problem with Bush's presidency or with America itself."

Others were less cynical. "The margin of victory was emphatic and, whatever else follows, today the world changed," said an editorial in The Times of London, and The Guardian newspaper proclaimed: "They did it. They really did it. So often crudely caricatured by others, the American people yesterday stood in they eye of history and made an emphatic choice for change for themselves and the world."

That was not a universal view in Moscow where one analyst, Mikhail Delyagin, compared Mr. Obama to Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who is often blamed in Russia for destroying the Soviet Union.

"Not having large-scale management experience, he has greater chances to

disorganize America, to destabilize America, out of the very best intentions, as Gorbachev once did."

But the supporters generally outnumbered the skeptics.. "We were all hoping that he would win," said Carla Saggiolo, a retired architect in Rome. "And the fact that he did with such a large margin is a sign of real change _ at least let's hope so."

The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, called Mr. Obama's election a "historic opportunity" for a stronger working relationship with the United States.

"He values highly the resolution of all the conflict issues through dialogue," Mr. Ban said. "He has expressed publicly that he is willing to meet anybody, any country, so that will provide good opportunity not only for the United States, but also the United Nations as a whole to resolve all issues through dialogue."

Mr. Ban said he had met Mr. Obama by chance last year on a plane flight. "He was very engaging and he knew a lot about the United Nations," Mr. Ban said, "and I was very much encouraged."

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