

In spite of Europe's Obamania, the transatlantic relationship remains tricky



For all the public enthusiasm in Europe over Barack Obama's arrival in the White House, **Werner Weidenfeld** sees doubts and difficulties persisting on both sides of the Atlantic

Barack Obama's election win encouraged Europeans to dream of a new era in transatlantic relations and an end to years of misunderstanding and alienation. Obamania quickly became the symbol of a new messianic movement, even though it was one that carried within it the danger of creating expectations that would be too high. For never before had an American President been confronted with so many complex challenges, and never before had the eyes of the world been focused so intensively on the White House.

Obama is a political pop star, combining political vision with political leadership. And in these times of radical social change and economic gloom, when we are confronted with both a lack of political orientation and an absence of solutions to the dark side of globalisation, many people seem to be in search of the impossible; they long for

a return to stability by way of change and renewal. From the early days of his election, Barack Obama knew how to play this card, not only with American voters, but with European allies too. And so it was that he became a universal saint on whom everybody seemed able to project his or her hopes. Even we Europeans fell in love with almost this version of an American civil religion, with the result that President Obama is unlikely to do other than disappoint.

Obama's election was undoubtedly an historic event. The broad support his campaign gained was clear evidence of the vitality of American society, and even reflected the general optimism with which Americans see the future despite the greatest economic crisis for decades.

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be the legacy of the Bush Administration's eight years in power. Domestic policy issues of course dominated last year's election campaign, and thus swung voters to him, and Obama will have to focus on economic issues as his first priority. But the big opportunity for Europe is already apparent in the new tone that President Obama has brought to U.S. foreign policy. By refusing to adopt an absolutist approach to negotiations with Hamas or the Islamic regime in Tehran, he's made it very clear he prefers a much more pragmatic line than his predecessor. It's also a reflection of his legacy of America's huge current account and trade deficits, the unfinished financial crisis and the deepening recession of the U.S. economy. Because it will be difficult to find solutions that satisfy everybody, pragmatism will be Obama's best choice. For Europe, this means being asked to cooperate in finding solutions to the most urgent international problems facing the United States, notably reviving the Middle East peace process, defusing the nuclear dispute with Iran, addressing weapons proliferation issues and pursuing more proactive development policies in central Africa.

All this is creating the conditions for a vitally important renewal of transatlantic political relations, providing the spirit of change can be grasped by Europe too. Opinion polls suggest that European citizens, too, long for a charismatic politician like Barack Obama because of the political vision he offers. But while Obama has no difficulty in conveying a grand strategic approach to back up his vision, Europe's leaders still seem bogged down in detailed technocratic aspects of the policy debate. In Prague this spring, Obama drew a picture of the world without nuclear weapons, while the European Union's focus

COMMENTARY

By Patrick Stephenson

Of course Obama is no Messiah, but at least he's a good listener

First, full disclosure: I voted for Obama and was also part of a group that held two fundraisers for him in Brussels. But I never believed that he was either the Messiah or a political pop star, and certainly not a universal saint.

It didn't hurt that he's young and charismatic, or that he can belt out a damn fine speech. But what impressed me and so many others like me was the open-minded and practical nature of his discourse. When he spoke about issues, he seemed to have some idea of what he was talking about, and he appeared willing to listen to other viewpoints. In the wake of economic mismanagement driven by free-market orthodoxy, the call from the masses seemed to be "Shut up and fix the damn mess". Obama answered that call, and his promise was less post-racial than post-ideological, a resurrection of the old ideal of America as a practical, can-do nation. It was his pragmatism that earned him my vote.

This "hooray-he's-not-an-idiot" theory of Obamamania does not fit with the narrative of Obama as a hybrid of vapid celebrity and alien religiosity that some Republican strategists used to suggest that he is somehow frivolous, different, foreign, unholy, even – dare one say it – un-American. And it is this narrative that leads Werner Weidenfeld to overestimate

was still on the future of the Lisbon treaty, even though so many of the EU's citizens still don't understand it and therefore remain lukewarm in their support.

Barack Obama's first 100 days nevertheless showed that the strong symbolism he conveys has not yet led to fundamental change. The idea of a world without nukes "global zero" has in fact been around in Washington DC for quite some time, so that wasn't really very new. The secret talks with Syria and with the Taliban too in fact began some months before. So although Obama now represents a greater sense of commitment in Afghanistan and is willing to get much tougher with European allies in NATO about their contribution to the military effort there, the major difference between him and George W. Bush seems to be of style and tone of voice.

The reality is that Obama is not calling for a global peace movement, nor is he willing in any way to act against U.S. interests. This is something Europe's citizens have yet to grasp, and seem surprised about. The result is that the first signs of disappointment can now be observed on both sides. Because President Obama can be seen to act primarily in defence of American interests, whatever the nature of the global challenge, there are already signs of European concern. As for the U.S., Obama's honeymoon period failed to generate the hoped-for levels of European support on the Iran nuclear dispute or an increased presence of European NATO members in the Afghanistan theatre of operations.

American misgivings about the renewal of the transatlantic partnership are being prompted by Europe's failure to respond

COMMENTARY

Patrick Stephenson

Obama's appeal, and then to drag this invented Messiah down from the heavens when his feet were on the ground all the time.

Dr Weidenfeld writes that Europeans will be disappointed when Obama does not lead a "global peace movement" or does not act against U.S. interests. Yet, I have not met any Europeans who believed he would. Most know very well that Obama is an American President. Then Weidenfeld brings the hammer down on their alleged fantasies saying that "the major difference between him and George W. Bush seems to be of style and tone of voice." It is true that aspects of U.S. foreign policy will continue from one Administration to another, but this goes too far.

There was always a strain of Bush Administration thinking that believed American power to be legitimate because it was American, and that saw dependence on permanent alliances such as NATO as a dilution of U.S. power. By contrast, the Obama Administration appears to believe that power is legitimate if it is justified, whether it is American or not; that only legitimate power can be applied effectively; and that alliances like NATO, and international co-operation more broadly, provide a measure of legitimacy that helps achieve U.S. foreign policy goals. This is a fundamental not trivial difference.

The controversy over the Iranian nuclear programme is a case in point. Obama's overtures to Tehran may come to nothing, but it is important that they were made. These overtures, combined with his declared desire for a nuclear-free world, have given the Western position a degree of legitimacy it didn't enjoy before. Confronted by a sincere interlocutor

to Obama's aura of change. His team of heavy-hitters has yet to be matched by the emergence of comparable new talent in Europe. Meanwhile, Robert Gates is the first Republican politician since Robert McNamara to serve as Secretary of Defense under a Democrat president, and is flanked by NATO's former supreme allied commander General Jim Jones as National Security Advisor, with Richard Holbrooke as envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan and Senator George Mitchell as Middle East envoy. This line-up of top talent makes it abundantly clear that key issues for Obama have shifted to central Asia as well as the Middle East, and that U.S. involvement in Afghanistan means that it believes it has no choice but to think strategically.

Obama's Washington expects its partners in Europe to adapt to this strategic way of dealing with "hot button issues", and do likewise. The transatlantic relationship has thus shifted to a global relationship in which the U.S. and the EU still share the same values and the same idea of the global order, but are still less than united in terms of practical politics. A major problem will continue to be EU member states' lack of coherence when responding to American commitment around the world. That said, European governments know that they have to develop a much stronger pan-European security concept, while the U.S. is well aware that Europe is key to reaching an understanding with Russia. Providing that Russia is willing to engage, EU-U.S. relations could develop on the basis of a new deal with Moscow into a much more global strategic partnership. □

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COMMENTARY

Patrick Stephenson

they are unable to vilify, conservative mullahs have reacted with confusion and cracks in Iran's ruling regime have been exposed. Perhaps this will lead to an agreement; perhaps not. But whatever the result, Obama will be able to say that he tried, and this will make the crafting of a coherent U.S. and European response far easier.

The willingness to listen is an underestimated virtue, but now Europeans have a listener in the Oval Office. This is lucky because over the course of the coming year NATO will hold a public debate on the alliance's next Strategic Concept, a document that will likely prove a foundation stone for U.S.-European relations during the coming decade. There is much work to do on Afghanistan, on relations with Russia, on climate change and the "comprehensive approach" to conflict resolution. Barack Obama is sensitive to the concerns of NATO allies and no doubt awaits a European leadership willing to engage with him on these issues. Perhaps it is time for all of us to shut up and fix the damn mess. □

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