

Sent: Mon, 16 May 2011 08:47:37 -0400
From: "Kumar, Aditya" <aditya_kumar@ovp.eop.gov>
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Fwd: Fw: Obamagram #55: "Reading Obama"

P6/b(6)

Will you be at Rahm's inaug? I will be there, w/ VP.

Adi Kumar

P6/b(6)

From: Judy Wise [REDACTED]
To: Marvin Zonis [REDACTED] Lucy Salenger [REDACTED] Don Levine
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<margot_strom@facing.org>; Jeff Jorve [REDACTED] Kumar, Aditya; Colvin, Nicholas M.
Sent: Sun May 15 23:17:25 2011
Subject: Fwd: Fw: Obamagram #55: "Reading Obama"

P6/b(6)

I found this really interesting. I think you will too.

From: "Charles A. Lewis" <calewis@lewisbringingff.org>
To: "Wise, Judy" <judy@facing.org>
Date: 05/15/2011 04:35 PM
Subject: Obamagram #55: "Reading Obama"

Hello Everyone,

When Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign in January 2007, I started to write these commentaries in order to introduce him to those of you who didn't already know him.

Now that President Obama has announced his re-election campaign, I thought it fitting to take another step in trying to understand him more deeply.

This is particularly relevant in light of the President's remarkable display of self-control two weeks ago. On Friday, April 29, he gives instructions to draft the order to raid Osama bin Laden's compound. The following evening, the President is hilarious in roasting Donald Trump at the White House Correspondents Dinner. On Sunday, the raid succeeds and bin Laden is dead. Few could manage that combination.

In an article in the New York Times yesterday about the turmoil across North Africa and the

Middle East, President Obama's national security adviser described him as deeply immersed in all the Arab countries undergoing political upheaval. "The President, in each of these cases, has really been the central intellectual force in these decisions..." [emphasis added]

A relatively recent and still obscure book helps us to more fully understand the intellect, temperament and worldview that enables this president to deal with the endless complexity he has faced throughout his tenure. A friend of mine, who had the reviewed early manuscripts of it, sent me a copy.

Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Political Tradition was written by Prof. James T. Kloppenberg, a specialist in the field of intellectual history and chair of the History Department at Harvard. It was published by the Princeton University Press earlier this year. Unlike the President's own best-selling books, it is not surprising to learn that this scholarly analysis of his intellectual development recently ranked 120,726th in sales at the Kindle on-line store. Nonetheless, it is an important book.

In this limited space – and with my limited knowledge – I cannot do justice to Prof. Kloppenberg's sweeping analysis. So, my purpose here is to offer a sampling of that analysis to encourage you to delve into this informative book for yourself. (All of the following sections which are indented or are in quotation marks are taken from the book. I have supplied the underlines.)

According to a summary of this work in the New York Times, in preparing to write about...the influences that shaped President Obama's view of the world, Prof. Kloppenberg interviewed the president's former professors and classmates, combed through his books, essays, and speeches, and even read every article published during the three years Mr. Obama was involved with the Harvard Law Review...Prof. Kloppenberg [concludes] that President Obama is a true intellectual – a word that is frequently considered an epithet among populists...Prof. Kloppenberg...sees Mr. Obama as a kind of philosopher president, a rare breed that can be found only a handful of times in American history...[limited to] John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison...John Quincy Adams... Abraham Lincoln, and...Woodrow Wilson.

Reading Obama is not a biography or a political commentary. It is a book solely about Barack Obama as a man of ideas as seen through the lenses of an intellectual historian. Contrary to the opinion of populists and other critics, I am thankful that we have an intellectual President, who has the capacity and studied perspective to cope with a myriad of complex problems.

Product of Three Developments

Barack Obama is the product of three distinct developments...the history of American democracy...; the philosophy of pragmatism originated in the writings of William James and John Dewey...; and the intellectual upheavals ...on American campuses during the decades [Obama] spent studying at Occidental College, Columbia University, and the Harvard Law School, and teaching...at the University of Chicago Law School.

Thinkers Who Have Influenced Obama

[In college and law school] Obama encountered a wide range of thinkers. Among Americans he was exposed to the ideas of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and some of the Anti-Federalists who opposed the U.S. Constitution; Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; antebellum reformers including Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln; assorted populists, progressives, and New Dealers; Protestant theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr [about whose influence on Obama I've written earlier]; and leading figures in the civil rights movement and radicals of the 1960s. On the European side, Obama encountered Greek and Roman political philosophy and the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jurgen Habermas, complex thinkers who probed the possibilities and the limits of politics.

Philosophical Pragmatism

The heart of Prof. Kloppenberg's argument is that President Obama is a "philosophical pragmatist", not simply a "vulgar pragmatist" or expedient political compromiser, as some would have it. In short, "philosophical pragmatism...challenges the claims of [universalists and] absolutists...and...embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation."

Pragmatism in Today's Partisan Environment

If philosophical pragmatism informs Obama's political outlook, the history of pragmatists' engagement in politics also suggests the reasons why pragmatism may be particularly ill-suited to our own cultural moment. At a time when partisans left and right vie to proclaim rival versions of certainty with greater self-righteousness, the pragmatists' critique of absolutism and embrace of open-ended experimentation seems off-key, unsatisfying, perhaps even cowardly.

Political commentators of all stripes are frustrated by this approach. They want President Obama to "lead from the front." I think the bi-partisan agreements on tax-cuts and unemployment insurance during the lame duck session in Congress and on the recently-passed budget are evidence that his patient, philosophically pragmatic approach can work even in

today's contentious times, in keeping with voters' calls for bi-partisanship. The bin Laden raid was anything but cowardly.

A Hybrid of Old and New

Obama's books, his speeches, and his political record make clear that he represents a hybrid of old and new, which explains why he puzzles so many contemporaries – supporters and critics alike – who see him through conventional and thus distorting lenses. Placing him in American intellectual history illuminates both the genuinely novel dimensions of his worldview, which have gone largely unnoticed, and the older traditions he seeks to resurrect. Obama's vision of American history and his understanding of its present condition...reflect the profound changes American culture has undergone in recent decades. If we want to understand him, we must understand how he sees the present in light of the past, and also how he envisions the future in light of his own – and his nation's – place within a global community that has undergone dramatic and unprecedented cultural transformations.

Lessons from Community Organizing

...a master [organizer] takes the time to listen to many comments, rephrases questions, and waits until the individuals in the group begin to see for themselves what they have in common. A skilled organizer then patiently allows the animating principles and the plan of action to emerge from the group itself. That strategy obviously takes more time. It also takes more intelligence, both analytical and emotional.

In 1988, when he was an organizer on Chicago's South Side and a full seven years before he wrote Dreams from My Father, Obama wrote a revealing article "Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City."

This 1988 article testifies powerfully to the different sources of Obama's emerging political sensibility. It shows the roles played both by central themes in American political thought and by Obama's immersion in community organizing.

Intellectual Capacity and Conflict Resolution Shown at Harvard

From the beginning of his time in law school, Obama impressed the faculty – and his fellow students – for two reasons...his exceptional intelligence enabled him to master difficult concepts [and his] striking ability to resolve conflicts...

Obama's Two Important Books

Dreams from My Father [written after law school] and The Audacity of Hope [written when he was in the U.S. Senate] should be acknowledged as the most substantial books written by anyone elected president of the United States since Woodrow Wilson.

Temperament and Worldview

In one of my earliest Obamagrams, I wrote that I was drawn to Obama because of his “intellect, temperament, and worldview,” verified by the extensive “due diligence” I had done on him.

But, Prof. Kloppenberg goes deeper:

[His] self-restraint and self-awareness [and] vaunted poise...derives from something beside his temperament...In order to understand how and why Obama has almost always tried, and has so often succeeded, in resolving disputes, it is necessary to dig deeper into the way he thinks and why. The explanation of his commitment to conciliation lies in his idea of democracy as deliberation, his sure grasp of philosophical pragmatism, his Christian realism, and his sophisticated understanding that history, with all its ambiguities and ironies, provides the best rudder for political navigation.

His worldview was also shaped by the debates that rocked the campuses where he studied and taught, debates about ideas as well as politics. Much as he might need to mask it on the campaign trail, where he demonstrates his impressive skill as a politician, his books make clear that Barack Obama is also very much an intellectual. For example [formatting added]:

- a) Near the end of Dreams from My Father, [Obama] describes the law as the record of “a long-running conversation, a nation arguing with its conscience” ...I am arguing...from Obama’s writings back to the philosophy of pragmatism in order to show the congruence between antifoundationalism, historicism, experimentalism, and democracy in his way of thinking.
- b) [Obama claims that] the animating ideal of [our] nation is “ordered liberty.”
- c) [Obama argued that] the framers set up “a community in which a common culture, a common faith, and a well-developed set of civic virtues” enabled citizens to contain the inevitable “contention and strife” on which democracy depends. By experiencing such struggles... Americans learned that the individual’s “self-interest” is “inextricably linked to the interests of others.”

Reading “Reading Obama”

I hope that this sampling will prompt some of you to read this revealing book. For those who can’t, I hope these excerpts add a modicum of further understanding of how President Obama thinks and, therefore, acts.

Please, as always, pass it on. And, remember that previous Obamagrams are stored on <http://sites.google.com/site/obamagramsbylewis>.

Chuck

Charles Ashby Lewis

P6/b(6)

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Judy Wise
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