

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



Hope and Change...or Just a Beer Summit?

by Doug Stout

In Iowa, home of the first real test of Presidential timber, we pay attention to what Presidential candidates campaign about. President Obama ran his campaign on “hope and change.” He called for a new hope for the future and a change from the old tired ways of the past. In response, I think he unquestionably struck a chord in the young people in Iowa. We had more young people than ever take part in the Iowa caucuses.¹ Iowa also had the largest percentage of its young people vote in the general election last November of any state in the country, followed by Minnesota. The turnout by Iowans in the 18-24 year old age group was 63%, compared to only 49% of young people for the United States as a whole.² We should be proud of that fact. Our young Iowans clearly care about the future and are taking an active role in the political process.

The question becomes...how transparent were the policies behind the hope and change in the President’s campaign? Also, how much of his support was because of the themes he was espousing and how does that translate into the massive policy changes he is trying to implement in record time, in the midst of our worst economic downturn since World War II?

It has been my observation that in politics, with youth comes enthusi-

astic idealism and with age comes wary experience. However, it can be a brutal trade-off, and I don’t really commend one over the other. For the young people who rallied to the cause of hope...I can only offer my understanding and my support for their ambitious view of a better country and a better world. I offer no cautions or reservations.

It is the role of the young to envision reinventing the world in a better image. It is an old adage among grizzled political types that you need at least one voice in any council that does not “know” “what can’t be done.” Because times change, things change, and there has to be a new voice and a new vision and a belief by someone that the “impossible” is really just the “unlikely” and that it has not been tried the “right way,” with the “right approach,” and with sufficient energy. In politics, if not in every human endeavor, there is always at least a portion of truth in that sentiment.

It is a typical attribute of both the older American and the conservative American to distrust change. They tend to see change as a dangerous thing and a disruptive force. It is a barrier that must be overcome to rally the youth of America to the cause of conservative values. I do not believe you will ever be able to harness the idealism of the young to the cause of the “status quo,” nor

should we try. The most recent time that the young of America rose to the banner of conservative causes was the Reagan Revolution.

President Ronald Reagan, a man old enough to be their grandfather, rallied the campuses of America behind the cause of conservative values and causes. However, he did not do so by asking them to “fear change” or rally behind the solid wall of the status quo. He rallied them behind a call for a dramatic change. He called for remaking the world in the image of freedom and democracy. He called for a dramatic change in ridding America of the malaise and self-doubt brought on by the years of President Carter and before that the disgrace of Watergate and our disappointment and disillusionment following the Vietnam War. He called for a renewal of spirit and optimism. He evoked images of the “shining city on the hill,” he compared Washington D.C. to a modern day Camelot, evoking much of the same imagery that John F. Kennedy did in his 1960 inaugural address. In both cases they proudly, boldly, and confidently proclaimed that America’s best days are ahead, and the American spirit and ideals have not faded into pastels, but are bold and bright and worth fighting for at home and abroad. He called for unleashing the human spirit in fresh renewal of both hope and optimism.

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In the 1980's there was a branch of the conservative movement in America that was labeled the "movement conservatives." They were not conservatives in the sense they wanted to keep everything the way it was; they wanted to reinvent the world using free markets and the explosion of freedom, individual liberty, and equal opportunity for all Americans to reach their full potential...and in doing so to help America reach its unlimited potential and once again be a shining beacon, leading the way by example and forging a path for the world to follow, not because they had to...but because they wanted to...

Americans often have a limited view of how the world sees us, or a distorted view based on polling or based on how the world responds to our actions at a given point in time. I think the most accurate view of how the world tends to see the United States is that they believe we are arrogant and naïve. They also believe that when those two characteristics are combined with the enormous economic and military power our nation still possesses, they make our actions unpredictable and dangerous and they believe our influence is too great.

But that is only one side of the coin. They also know that America is still the real land of opportunity. It is still the best environment to be able to reach your full potential in a country where the rule of law is paramount, and where efforts to end discrimination, while still a work in progress, are striding forward. We should realize that no nation on earth has taken our level of racial and ethnic and religious diversity and made it work in a cohesive unit the way that we have done. We are a country that has always looked to the future and which has always been an example of how to overcome obstacles in our path. We must not shy away from being that example and most in

the world would not want us to...for the vast majority...their concerns are not in our example, but in the fear we may seek to impose our vision on those who do not share it.

When our racial and ethnic tensions center on a "Beer Summit" on the White House lawn between a President of the United States, who is a member of a racial minority in our country, an esteemed college professor, and a respected police officer...and the central issue concerns a heated exchange of words over differing perceptions...we should stop a moment to consider how fortunate we are that this is the race problem, legitimate as it may be, that we are talking about.

Widespread ethnic and racial violence is unheard of in the United States of the 21st Century. In the past year there have been deadly clashes between differing races and religions in dozens of countries in the world. In dozens of others, there is systematic discrimination between races and religions. Even in developed nations where violence is rare and discrimination is more subtle, how many of them have elected national leaders who are members of a minority race or religion?

So my first point is that we should reflect this summer on how fortunate we are to be Americans and truly believe that our current economic difficulties are a challenge we will meet and overcome. My second point is that while "change" is necessary and should not be feared...and while a renewal of hope is a great thing for America...It matters very much what those "changes" really are...and I have only heard the rhetoric and seen few policy moves by the Obama Administration that give me cause for the renewal of hope that was the hallmark of his campaign speeches.

President Obama called for a new spirit of bipartisanship, but he has clearly not governed that way. He seems to see bipartisanship as merely

a matter of style. The first step in bipartisanship is to start respecting divergent views from the other political party; he personally may have taken a small step toward greater civility in our politics. He must do more (although I am afraid that the polarizing figures in both political parties and the political opportunism on all sides will make that difficult) and not abandon the effort entirely due to frustration. However, bipartisanship means much more than just being civil and respectful of the other party's positions. It requires seriously trying to find common ground and moving forward in unison, and there has been little evidence that there have been many efforts in that regard. Also, to be fair to both sides, some strongly held legitimate beliefs do not easily lend themselves to a compromise solution, even with honorable intentions.

Some do not trust the President's agenda; some support it as necessary and proper. Others believe he has the best interests of the nation in mind, but is mistaken or misguided as to what the end result of his changes will be on the future of American society. I fall into the last category. I want this President to be successful in restoring hope and confidence and economic vitality to our nation and continuing and expanding America's role as a beacon of light for the future of humanity, a paragon of individual human rights and liberties, and the epitome of the expressed desire of men and women of all backgrounds to have the opportunity to successfully pursue their hopes, dreams, and aspirations, free from oppression and fear.

It does not appear that the path my President has chosen... (and for the next three and one-half years, he is my President), will lead us to that result. I hope all our elected officials respect the Office of the President, but use their judgment and the judgment of their constituents in

choosing the right path on matters of policy.

There are signs that the policies being pursued and the style of the pursuit are not consistent with what the American people believed they were getting in November of 2008. The results of Gallup Polls taken six months into the Presidency of every Administration since 1943 were published in the *USA Today* on July 21. It showed that President Obama's approval rating has fallen to 55%, which places him tenth among the twelve Presidents since 1943.³ He finishes ahead of only Bill Clinton, who had won only a plurality of the electorate because of the presence of Ross Perot on the ballot, and ahead of Gerald Ford, who had made the highly unpopular move of pardoning ex-President Richard Nixon. Our current President ran on the promise of changing Washington and changing the political climate in Washington, D.C. Instead, he seems more intent on changing the economic structure of our society, which has led to our prosperity and personal freedoms expanding, certainly since World War II... and in some aspects since the very founding of our nation.

There have been plenty of mistakes over the past sixty years, and I have no doubt there will be many more over the next sixty years in the United States. How you view the mistakes and how you apportion the blame is an attribute of your life, your family, your politics, your profession... and many other factors that come together to form your perspective. It is not possible and probably not even productive to spend too much energy on "blame." What is important is our current situation and the policy changes we must make which will determine the path of our future.

The current health care debate will impact every American, and the health care industry constitutes

as much as 17% of our economy. The vast majority of Americans believe the industry needs reform, but will a partisan plan to revamp the entire system at a cost approaching two trillion dollars improve our future? Did a "stimulus plan" costing almost a trillion dollars and based on temporary government spending stop unemployment from climbing to near 10%? Will the "Cap and Trade" bill dealing with emissions, which passed the House with almost only Democratic votes, cripple our economy even further and have little impact on world emissions if China and India do not adopt similar legislation? (And they have indicated they will not.) Is providing \$4,500 as "cash for clunkers" and \$8,000 government payments for new houses to upper-middle-class families (with money coming from future tax revenues already spent) a productive way to stimulate an economy in the long term? Will a focus on these new initiatives and new spending push the need to save the Medicare and Social Security systems which are on the verge of bankruptcy to the back of the agenda? Will the unprecedented expenditure of federal government funds driving us ever more steeply into the depths of debt, be a hole that we will be unable as a society to pull ourselves out of in our children's lifetimes?

Why do our President and Vice-President feel that a beer drinking summit outside the oval office with two obscure Americans merits their time, but no summit has been called to deal with the impending doom of a collapse of the Medicare and Social Security systems if action is not taken soon? Why does their choice of beer get front page coverage, while the fact that for the first time in American history in 2016 the Social Security Administration is expected to pay out more than it takes in, which means rather than helping to obscure the actual public

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debt, it will require more borrowing to pay back the trust fund, escape the public notice?⁴

Our nation desperately needs transparency...and hope and change. But what we really need is statesmanship. We need political leaders that will spell out the real challenges that face America and spell out the very real policy alternatives from which we have to choose. We also need to know the risks and consequences that come from each and where our leaders stand and why they chose those alternatives. We do not need more rhetoric about how the other side is intent on destroying our nation. It is my fervent hope that both sides are wrong on that claim...because it is my belief...that either both sides are wrong on that claim... or that the net result of the demonization of our opponents... is that in the end both sides will prove to be entirely right in their accusation.

In that case, the sad legacy of our current crop of political leaders will

be that the best days of America will be read about only in our history books and the “American century” will be looked back upon as a “better time.” Like the Roman Empire before us and the days when the sun never set on the British Empire...we will fade into history and into mythology. The “Shining City on the Hill” of Ronald Reagan will be no more real than the Camelot of King Arthur... and the “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country” of John F. Kennedy will be long forgotten and ridiculed as naïve.

Instead the ominous prediction and warning of President Abraham Lincoln will ring true across the ages: “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”⁵

Every generation of Americans has managed to find among them the statesmen or women from their ranks who could unite us and lead us down

a common path. It is incumbent upon the current crop of “would be leaders” that those men and women step forward and put the interests of the Republic ahead of their own short-term political ambitions. America deserves no less of them, and Americans deserve a transparent view of their progress on every step of the way.

(Endnotes)

¹ Ed Tibbets, “Iowa brings out the ’08 youth vote,” *Quad City Times*, July 21, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ “From Truman to Obama,” *USA Today*, July 21, 2009.

⁴ Jeanne Sahadi, “Recession hits Social Security hard,” *CNN Money.com*, May 13, 2009, http://money.cnn.com/2009/05/12/news/economy/SocSec_Medicare_trustees_report/index.htm (August 4, 2009).

⁵ Abraham Lincoln Quotes, *Brainy Quotes*, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/abraham_lincoln.html (August 4, 2009).