



Leaders to Follow

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ON THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN A TIME OF FINANCIAL MELTDOWN

By Jarda Tusek

As our President-elect Barack Obama has repeatedly pointed out, the economic and political challenges that lie ahead of the United States are significant: two wars, a planet in ecological peril, and the worst financial crisis in a century are among the most pressing.

Caught between the new realities that face a country that has long taken domestic prosperity and global influence for granted, what can the progressive government (known as “deliberative democracy”) that

Obama is currently establishing do, given the cynicism and doubt of those who say that the US can't find an honorable solution to all its weighty problems?

One answer is surprisingly simple: educate the people so they can take ownership and put their own ingenuity to work.

CHOOSING TO TAKE OWNERSHIP

For the past decades, the process of government has been viewed as dauntingly complex and confusing, in a world of information overload and increasing speed. The average citizen has come to feel, very often, that he or she doesn't have the capability to understand, for example, the puzzling gyrations of the stock market or the technical methods needed to provide full employment for all people who want to work. Without a background in finance, who can grasp the current crisis?



It may seem that only the government that created such an interdependent bureaucracy as the US economic and political system has the necessary background and knowledge to solve our pressing issues.

The average person may believe that elected and appointed officials are the ones who have the expertise and vision to provide

innovative and original solutions to the unprecedented problems of our times. The “man on Main Street” doesn't own the problems or the solutions—he's leaving it all up to the incoming administration to untie the knots which are so severely limiting our current financial institutions and markets.

Here, Obama's message is clear—we ALL own the problems and can only find the best solutions together.

AN EDUCATED POPULACE

The success of democratic societies hinges in large part on the education of its people. When the citizens know about and comprehend their own economic and political systems, they can see what kind of choices there are to be made. They can begin to modify their behaviors and expectations, becoming contributors to the social changes needed to set a new course of economic growth and personal fulfillment.



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As President-elect Obama puts it, “the government should and will respond [to the crisis] with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: “Yes, WE CAN!” Fortunately for the US, Obama is not only well-educated, but has also already clearly demonstrated the all-important quality of being able to unite people, rather than fostering division, making possible the rule of a privileged few. Obama’s beliefs hearken back to President Andrew Jackson, whose political philosophy stressed that “the majority is to govern.”

Yet paradoxically, though the roots of the American political system are purely democratic and egalitarian, history shows that repeatedly Americans get caught in the gears of a stubborn conservatism, one that blinds them to changing world conditions and makes their transitional times more painful than necessary. The isolationism of the US between WWI and WWII comes to mind as an example—by being slow to act when Europe and Asia were in flames, the US unwittingly prolonged human suffering, both in the US and around the world. The US is often perceived by the rest of the world as acting unilaterally, only on its own interests.

One ray of hope in the current financial crisis came this month, in the economic summit held in Washington, D.C. In spite of their own economic woes, all twenty nations attending agreed in principle that protectionist economic policies and trade barriers were not the way to handle the global economic crisis.

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This kind of cooperative action is the best way to solve the current “meltdown” in the world financial markets—working not separately (each for his own benefit), but together.

FACING NEW FEARS

And what shall we say to the grim realities we face, as new bouts of fear grip not only national and international financial markets, but also manufacturers, the retail industry, banking and the rest of the global economy? Our President-elect Obama said it best, in his historic March 18, 2008 speech on race in America:

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

OUR ROLE AS AMERICANS

We all, as citizens and friends of the US, need to play a constructive role in the work of reclaiming the American dream of freedom, opportunity and equality as we reaffirm the fundamental truth that out of many, we are one.

President Abraham Lincoln said in an 1858 speech, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." This statement is no less true today. By taking ownership of our current crisis, and acting as one united people, Americans can join our President-elect in moving towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.