

If a “turning point” is a period or moment in history when significant change takes place, then the swearing in of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States earlier this week must surely rank among the most extraordinary turning points in American history. 146 years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery, and 46 years after Martin Luther King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech summoning the nation to the struggle for racial equality, the United States finally has its first black president. It was the veteran Senator Ted Kennedy who spoke most passionately about the historical magnitude of the Obama victory in the wake of last November’s election. “We elected a ... president,” Kennedy said, “who, by virtue of his race, could have been legally owned by the first 16 presidents of the United States. But “we judged him, as Martin Luther King said, not by the colour of his skin, but by the content of his character and the capacity of his leadership.”

Mr. Obama’s character and capacity for leadership were certainly on display on Wednesday morning, Australian time, when he delivered his powerful Inaugural Address before a record crowd at Washington DC’s historic National Mall. Though standing on stones that were laid by slaves, not far from the old “auction blocks” where black people were once bought and sold, the new President eschewed references to the cultural and historical implications of his own success. There was little mention of America’s tortured racial history, not even a nod to those 1960s civil rights activists who faced violent mobs and police to secure legal equality for African Americans and make Mr. Obama’s story possible. To be fair, the new President has already acknowledged his debt to the civil rights movement, so his silence about the racial past was hardly offensive. Suitably, Mr. Obama instead used his Inaugural Address to point to the *American* past as a cause for hope, seeking imagine a future when the Great Republic would shine brightly again.

That a nation which enslaved blacks for centuries and, thereafter, subjected them to 100 years of second-class citizenship, has now chosen an African American to be the most powerful human being on earth is truly stunning – a “turning point in history” that no-one could seriously have predicted 40 years ago when Martin Luther King was tragically gunned down. Perhaps it is a sign that in 2008/09 America’s democratic principles have at last moved beyond the tribalism of race? Although racial inequality certainly persists in the United States, one cannot help but be optimistic about the nation’s racial future when a broad and multicultural bloc of the electorate votes for a black man for President. And the response of black youth to Obama provides further grounds for optimism. “I’ve come to realise that I shouldn’t set limits on myself,” one 18 year old African American recently remarked. “I should believe in my dreams and really fight to accomplish them.” Indeed!

But, of course, Mr. Obama’s Presidency represents much more than a turning point in the history of American race relations, and much more than a vehicle for contemporary American racial healing. His Presidency also has the *potential* to be a major turning point in world history. Mr. Obama replaces the deeply unpopular George W. Bush, whose name will be forever linked – internationally and at home – with ignorance, incompetence, greed, egotism and violence. It is an understatement to say that Mr. Bush has bequeathed the new President a testing set of problems. These problems are daunting in their complexity and seemingly insurmountable, at least in the short term. Not only does Mr. Obama inherit an economy in ruins, with a budget

deficit in the vicinity of \$US 1.2 trillion, he also assumes responsibility for two directionless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that require immediate focus and, eventually, skillful resolution. And as he sets about rebuilding America's damaged reputation in the world by discarding the unilateralist "Bush Doctrine" and committing the nation to a new multilateral agenda, Mr. Obama will need to recognise that there will be "false starts and setbacks, frustrations and disappointments." The Middle East springs automatically to mind, but there are other theatres of conflict around the world in need of crisis management that will also test the new President's resolve.

Unfortunately, those who believe that Barack Obama is a messiah-like figure who will magically cure all global ills are destined to be disappointed with him. Mr. Obama is no messiah. But he is an intelligent man, open to alternative views, willing to learn from his mistakes and generally curious about the world he inhabits. All these qualities make the new President strikingly different from his predecessor and suggest that decision-making based on evidence is about to make a welcome return to the international arena.

In his Inaugural Address, Mr. Obama did not shy away from the myriad problems he and his Cabinet now face. "Only a handful of times in our history has a generation been confronted with challenges so vast," he said. "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America." Cynics might view this call to arms as intellectually shallow and far too vague to really mean anything in practical policy terms. I would disagree with any such assessment. Although mindful of the limitations of individual actors like Mr. Obama in the face of deep structural crises, effective political leadership still represents a sizeable part of the solution to many of the world's problems. In pledging to re-engage the international community, rejecting the free-wheeling capitalism of the Bush era and signalling his intention to harness government for the massive task of rebuilding the American economy, Mr. Obama has surely foreshadowed a positive turning point in contemporary international politics.

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