

A New Beginning

Last week, the nation and the world witnessed the election of Senator Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States. For the first time in the 232-year history of our republic, a Black American will occupy the highest office in our land. It is a remarkable achievement for a nation that once condoned the enslavement of Africans and codified discrimination against Black Americans. Coming four decades after the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, the election of Senator Obama as president is an incredible achievement against the backdrop of our nation's history.

Crisis Times

However, as we anticipate President-elect Obama's inauguration on January 20 of next year, we should be mindful that despite the historic nature of his election, he faces significant challenges in the days and months ahead. The new president will be confronted by an economic and financial crisis that rivals that of the Great Depression even while confronting huge budget deficits. He will also have to contend with two wars that are diverting precious resources from our nation that could be used more constructively to address domestic priorities here at home.

But at least the New York delegation in the House and Senate is well positioned to play a leadership role in support of progressive legislation that will address the needs of the working poor. As the new Congress convenes in January, there will be opportunities to work with Congress and the new administration on issues concerning the working poor and urban poverty that have been ignored for quite some time. On the state level, we have seen takeover of the Senate that has produced one party control of the Legislature and the governor's office. This could provide opportunities to move the agenda for low-income New Yorkers that has been traditionally stalled in a dysfunctional legislature.

But the election of a Black president may, in an ironic twist, make it more difficult to fund programs to help the urban poor – our constituency – comprised of large numbers of people of color who are long-term jobless, disconnected youth, and the formerly incarcerated. Already we see articles, like the one last week in the Wall Street Journal, calling for the end of affirmative action programs and moving “toward a new era of color-blind opportunity for all” now that a Black man has attained the presidency. Would that it was true that America has become a color-blind nation.

Confronting Poverty

The fact is that urban poverty, which exists to a degree in every large city in the country, is found overwhelmingly in communities of color. Helping those in poverty to a better, more constructive life – through better job benefits, education and training, mentoring, and a resurgent union movement – is not only right. By providing opportunities for the most vulnerable among us, we will be strengthening the nation.

Even in the best of times, this is not an easy sell. But in a time of economic turbulence not seen in America since the 1930's, the problems are compounded. The race to cut back has already started.

Mayor Bloomberg, confronting a large budget deficit, spoke recently about “tough times for everybody.” But we know from grim experience that tough times means further hardships for the working poor. Cuts in services are likely to trump tax increases on the very wealthy in order to balance state and city budgets. The state announced that it is ending substance abuse programs for ex-convicts, even though these types of programs reduce recidivism. Mayor Nutter in Philadelphia is closing libraries and laying off city workers.

We've seen it all before: senior center closings, transit fare hikes, closing of libraries and science labs in overcrowded public schools, layoffs of city workers – and that's just the public sector response to the crisis. Job losses in the private sector are increasing, especially of low-wage workers in small businesses that have been hit hard by the economic turndown and the credit crunch.

There is a position growing in the country that says that the economy is in such bad shape that President Obama should postpone his proposals to expand health care coverage and provide a stimulus package for jobs.

Yet Paul Krugman, a Princeton economist, wrote three days after the election in *The New York Times*, “Helping the neediest in a time of crisis, through expanded health and unemployment benefits, is the morally right thing to do; it's also a far more effective form of economic stimulus than cutting the capital gains tax. Providing aid to beleaguered state and local governments, so that they can sustain essential services, is important for those who depend on those services; it's also a way to avoid job losses and limit the depth of the economy's slump.”

For all the euphoria we are experiencing now, the reality is that our country is facing challenges of epic proportions. It is a tall task for any president, but even more so for one who enters the Oval Office with such great expectations. Still, the programs and policies that lift people out of poverty are good for all Americans. We must make this case not only to the new administration and our representatives, but also to the larger electorate, whose support President Obama must have if he is to move forward to bring real change to America.

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