
The Obama Generation Takes the Helm - Politics



An introduction to GOOD's State of the Planet 2009 issue by Jeffrey Sachs

Barack Obama will come to office in the midst of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. This will be a difficult time, but it will also mark an opportunity for generational change, a new direction for the country after three decades of Me-First politics and neglect of every major challenge confronting us, nationally and globally. The Obama generation—the legions of young people who helped elect him—now must rise to the occasion.

The financial crisis is not only a cause of our national malaise, but also a symptom of the deeper wrong turn that America made decades ago, when Ronald Reagan declared that government had to get out of the way to restore the national economy. After a wild decade of high inflation and soaring energy prices in the 1970s, Reagan made government the enemy. From that point on, the name of the game was to cut taxes, shrink government, and allow the magic of the market to deliver the goods.

There was never much validity to Reagan's viewpoint. The antigovernment view had no basis in fact—rather, it was a convenient way for the rich to say they had no responsibilities to the poor (especially if the poor were the fabled black welfare

queens who Reagan invented in his fervid movie-land imagination). It also gave a green light to the greed and corner-cutting that laid the base for reckless financial deregulation and the wheeling and dealing that has now brought the economy to its knees.

But, most important, it undermined Americans' sense of community, both as citizens within the United States and as citizens of the world. There were no longer shared goals, only individual attainment. The idea of a U.S. community disappeared, and heated red state–blue state divisions replaced it. The idea of a global community in search of solutions to disease, hunger, and poverty became a target of sneering rather than a call to action. We lost all sense of reverence for the future; environmental sustainability was mocked, and we've wasted 30 years now by not addressing the climate-change challenge that has been casting an ever-darkening shadow.

We will now enter a new era, in which practical problem solving will be key, and in which we will understand our problems not mainly as individuals, but as members of a generation confronted with unique challenges. I'm sure that in the coming years, the Obama generation will feel like the Kennedy generation of the 1960s, the one that JFK boldly addressed in his inaugural address when he said, «I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.»

The Obama generation confronts challenges dif-

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ferent from the Cold War of the Kennedy era, and certainly different from the so-called war on terror of recent years. This generation's over-arching challenge is sustainable development, the ability to live together peacefully, prosperously, and sustainably on a crowded planet of nearly 7 billion people (a number rising to perhaps 9 billion by mid-century). The challenge is global, not local. It requires a perspective of decades, not years. It is a shared task, not the efforts of individuals interested only in getting ahead of the pack and the rest be damned.

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This generation has the online tools it has invented, which can help to meet the challenge. Social networking elected Barack Obama, raising the money, energy, and volunteers to succeed. Now social networking needs to reach out globally, to forge new alliances across countries, so that the world as a whole can fight poverty, can convert to a green economy, and can overcome deep divisions born more from ignorance than from real differences.

At Columbia University, we are hosting a global classroom that brings together more than a dozen campuses around the world for a weekly online discussion. From New York to Beijing, with students in Sussex, England; Paris; Ibadan, Nigeria; Delhi, India; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and more, we engage in direct discussions on food production, energy systems, and global ethics that underscore the communality of our world's challenges. Yet this is only the start of a new global politics and society. The coming years can multiply these efforts in unimaginable ways.

The U.S. recovery will come through increased social efforts-including spending on community infrastructure and green technologies-that will not only restore employment and hope, but will create a sustainable basis for future economic development. We will view taxes once again not as the greatest evil, the dreaded «socialism» so mockingly derided

by John McCain, but as the price we pay for civilization, as explained last century by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. We'll have little choice, with budget deficits pushing toward \$1 trillion.

We will stop ignoring the fight against poverty elsewhere, in places like Afghanistan or the Horn and the Sahel in Africa, realizing that it's the only way to bolster our security. Armies cannot subdue hungry people or stabilize poverty-stricken regions. Just ask the generals-not the neoconservative of the Bush era who sent the troops into harm's way.

The global problems are larger than before, but our generation's capacity to meet them is larger still. But government will not be done the old way, as a simply top-down exercise. The greatest strengths are achieved when global goals are linked to local energies and national financing. The problem-solving of the future will involve government, community organizations, private businesses, scientists and engineers, and volunteers. Cities will have the chance, and the need, to reinvent themselves with more sustainable and healthy strategies and designs.

Rural areas can pick themselves up following the example of the Millennium Villages in Africa, which are breaking the poverty trap through community-based investments. National governments will pick up part of the bill, but much of the creativity and work on the ground will be mobilized locally, in cities and rural communities.

The economy is frightening, to be sure, but the potential is also exhilarating. Let's remember that we reached the new millennium with more powerful technologies, open-source creativity, and better networking than ever before. The global problems are larger than before, but our capacity to meet them is larger still. The election marks not just a change of government, but a change of direction. The era of sustainable development has arrived, and the Obama generation is ready for the challenge.

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