

## **US ELECTIONS BRIEFING**

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The following is a summary of briefing-presentation made by Mr Makris, at a Research Seminar which has been organized by the Department of European Studies and International Relations, University of Nicosia, on November 19, 2008

Was there anyone who DIDN'T feel elation the morning of November 5? The feeling that something remarkable had occurred? And it wasn't the typical joy – that this thing was finally OVER - that is the normal feeling at the end of a typical 24-month US presidential campaign. It was a sense of history, a defining moment regardless of one's political orientation or feelings, positive or negative, for the United States.

As a member of the US diplomatic service, it was obvious, that this election belonged not only to the United States, but to the world. And it's no revelation to state that Cypriots and third-country citizens were favoring Barack Obama by at least 10 to one. And they were pleased by the results that awaited them on November 5. Will they be as pleased in six months or a year, when the legend of Obama the icon fades and is replaced by Obama the workaday president? The first time he has to commit troops to battle, take positions that further US interests and not the wider worlds?

Looking more closely at the election itself one has to bear in mind that in the US federal system, the President is not the man who wins the most votes on Election Day, or even the most states. Al Gore, after all, won more votes in 2000 and lost, and John McCain won more states this time round. Rather, the race is to win the most electoral votes, or states' representative.

Normally, if a candidate wins the popular vote in a particular state, he wins that state's entire slate of electors. More populous states have more electors. So winning California counts more than winning the entire Rocky Mt region, and Texas more than the plains states. Also worth keeping in mind – of the fifty US states plus DC, no more than a dozen are really up for grabs in any

particular election, owing to deep-seated tendencies to vote one way or the other. So, except in true landslide victories – Nixon in 72, for example, or Reagan in 84, the battle comes down to so called swing states.

The northeast states – immigrant populated, liberal in thinking, have gone Democrat back to Reagan's day. Same for the California, Oregon and Wyoming in the west, and Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota in the center.

In the Republican basket traditionally are the states from Virginia southward, including populous Florida and Texas, plus most of the plains and Rocky Mountain States. This pattern held largely true in 2000 and 2004, elections won by George W. Bush. And the key states in his victory were the swing states, Florida and Ohio respectively.

Senator Barack Obama managed to do what most pollsters said was unthinkable. Not only to win the key swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Florida. But also to tally victories in previous Republican bastions like Virginia and North Carolina, which hadn't voted Democratic in decades.

How did he do it? In summary, he did it by running a campaign which both his supporters and detractors called nearly flawless.

It had to be, in order to overcome obstacles that no other candidate faced. Here was a man named Barack Hussein Obama. A black man with an exotic past – he grew up in Indonesia – whom many voters erroneously believed was Muslim – not exactly the best pedigree for an electorate that generally tilts to the conservative. Let's also remember that the road to the nomination was blocked initially by a formidable front-runner named Hillary Clinton – well-known, well-financed, the darling of the Democratic Party.

The Obama campaign needed a compelling, clear strategy to win both the nomination and the election. It had to be seen as sticking to the plan – no waffling here – and could make few, if any mistakes. Remarkably, it suffered not a single staff reorganization – unthinkable.

Not that the team was not blessed with a few advantages of its own. A McCain strategist said it best in calling Obama a «once in a generation orator». A good debator who benefited from favorable media coverage. And ice-cold disciplined about the campaign message. Which was Change.

One of the first challenges for Obama to overcome in the campaign was obvious: his race. A key tenet was to avoid the discussion altogether – to win, it was important to define the candidacy in inclusive, not race-oriented terms. He would be no Jesse Jackson.

The team made one of its few errors in not identifying Obama's former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who regularly delivered incendiary, white-baiting speeches. Such a scandal may have torpedoed a lesser candidate. With Obama, however, it only spurred a quick tack change and an almost Martin Luther King-like speech on race that the candidate delivered.

Back to Hillary Clinton. In the Fall of 2007, she held a significant lead in the polls. In response, the team laid out a day-by-day plan to paint Clinton not as the candidate of change, but as a Washington insider, which was helped by some of Clinton's own missteps.

The team also planned for a lengthy battle, where as Clinton's camp planned for knockout blow on Super Tuesday, which of course never materialized. They also targeted states which utilized caucuses, or smaller political conventions, rather than primary elections. In these states, Obama's advantage in volunteer support and fundraising gave him great advantage.

They also set about to erase the public perception that Obama, despite his color and funny name, was the candidate of the elite, while Clinton was the champion of the working class. So we saw the candidate on the popular TV show Saturday Night Live, or in jeans and boots touring farms and factories.

By late spring, it had become obvious that Obama's plan was working, but the long, drawn out race – especially so in comparison to John McCain's – was taking its toll. It was vital to begin focusing on general election and the Republicans.

The convention proved a key moment, when Obama finally got the ringing endorsement from Hillary – and Bill – Clinton. And support among black, youth, and minority voters was looking so strong that a couple of long Republican states looked in play, like Virginia.

But how to convince the mainstream – read, white voters – who were still suspicious?

By tackling the suspicions straight on. Advisers, who worked with focus groups heavily, said the best way to talk to the people was to face them directly on camera – a characteristic of his best political spots. When he told them his story and what he wanted to do, people believed him.

Now, to avoid making the campaign a referendum on him, he had to run attack ads, especially those linking McCain to an unpopular Bush. And in a truly key moment of the campaign, he broke a pledge to accept public financing of the campaign, which he had originally made to show he was a candidate not indebted to special interest.

It was risky, but it paid off, allowing him to fundraise at unheard of rates, and spend the Republican into oblivion – it's normally the Reps that have an edge in money. The last major challenge the campaign faced was in Sarah Palin. How to respond to McCain's pick of this complete unknown.

They smartly avoided the easy way – attacking her experience – since Obama had little more. Mainly, they just waited, even as Palin brought McCain much needed bounce in August. Eventually, Palin's star sunk, especially after a couple of atrocious interviews and a lampooning on Saturday Night Live. And with the financial crisis and the resulting further plunge in Bush's and and Republicans' popularity, the question became not if Obama would win, but by how much.

This election has truly rewritten the rules on how successful campaigns are run in America. And since campaign strategists are one of our few remaining exports, perhaps for the world. It changed outreach to formerly marginalized groups: efforts by Democrats to register and turn out to vote many blacks, Hispanics, and young voters could have long lasting effects – that map showing traditional Red and Blue states could need a rewrite, for example.

It changed the preferred medium of reaching the people, from TV to the internet. From top-down to bottom-up – the bloggers, the informal TV directors and producers using You Tube – Obama harnessed them like no one before. You Tube didn't even exist in 2004, but Obama's team learned it fast.

The internet was not only revolutionary in winning hearts and minds, but also wallets. Remember, Obama gave up public financing, which freed him from fundraising and spending limits. But he mainly kept to his no-lobbyist and no-big money donations, which meant he had to reach the most, not the richest, donors.

Most pundits believe he killed public financing overall, since the numbers are now so high. The next Republican challenger will likely require \$ 1 billion in funds to wage a campaign, and must also overcome the Dems' technological lead.

They call it "microtargeting" which actually was pioneered by Republican strategist Karl Rove – finding and appealing to the smallest groups of voters. We also saw the internet break down the newscycle, what with the bloggers and such. This is both more democratic and problematic – while we have more control over content, we also lack the fact-checking that is prevalent in the traditional media.

Some still doubt whether these changes ever would have occurred without an iconic candidate like Barack Obama. In January he will inherit problems of historic proportions. Probably not since Franklin Roosevelt was elected during the Depression in 1933 has a new American leader had to confront such challenges. Revive an economy currently in shock. End the war in Iraq and defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. Change the country and its politics.

"The road ahead will be long," he said. "Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America – I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there."

Obama has a mandate at home, winning by the largest margin of any Democrat since Lyndon Johnson in 1964. His margins in the House and Senate, while not veto-proof, are sizable. But his ability to manage relationships, both with Democratic and Republican congressional leaders, will be tested early.

Many believe that Obama's mandate was more personal than ideological. That he won because he was not George W. Bush, and that the electorate is not ready to see America become Sweden or France. IE – no socialized medicine or mandatory electric cars.

Rahm Emmanuel, Barack's soon to be chief of staff, said just weeks ago – «we should let no crisis go to waste». In other words, the country's problems could be equally seen as opportunities for positive, long-lasting change. He cautioned about trying to do everything at once.

Obama's advisers also claim they are serious about governing in a bi-partisan fashion. We have seen cabinet appointments which are unexpected, some say brave. This was an area where Bush, frankly, failed.

And then he'll have to confront the problems of the budget. Years of overspending and tax cuts, added to the slowdown of the economy affecting revenues, mean the deficit could reach \$1 trillion in 2009 – a truly frightening picture.

The United States political system allows a president to change certain policies unilaterally, via Executive Orders. I predict we'll see a lot of that early on, which will help transmit the impression of rapid change.

George Bush also used this tactic, most famously on issues regarding abortion rights, a hot-button issue in the United States. Specifically, he prohibited US funding for NGOs overseas that provided abortion counselling. Obama is expected to overturn this decision shortly after taking office.

Among other executive decisions, the new administration is expected to return huge tracts of federal land in the West to protected status. Approve human embryonic stem cell research in the hopes of spurring new treatment for disease. Direct more money to Detroit automakers to jolt production of more environmentally friendly vehicles. In general, to undo much of the policies of the Bush years.

While most US presidential races – this one being no exception – are won on domestic policy issues, foreign policy matters too, and here, the US public also deemed Obama's visions superior to McCain's.

One conclusion one might draw from the electoral results is that the American public wants a move from unilateralism to multilateralism – less talk about the one great superpower, and more on how the world's free nations can leverage their efforts.

No one, however, should expect a conflict-free presidency. Look at Bill Clinton – he got Somalia shortly after taking office, and the Balkans just after. American presidents enter or get drawn into conflicts – will that mean the end to his global honeymoon?

I've laid out eight foreign policy changes for the Barack Obama administration, although eighty is probably a better number.

1. **Iraq.** No surprise there – he claims he tell his commanders to redefine the mission as “successfully ending the war, responsibly.” But how? Will there be truly a 16 month countdown to remove most? And what forces will remain?

2. **Afghanistan** – probably his greatest challenge, on which he based much of his for policy command. Can he improve the performance of the Afghan army? Convince NATO countries to contribute more and end caveats? Bring Pakistan in line and get them to police the tribal areas?

3. **The War on Terror** – will it continue to dominate our foreign agenda in the future, despite what some feel it has done to our international reputation. A continued ban on CIA torture? The closure of Guantanamo? And whither the inmates?

4. **Iran.** Much depends on the Ahmadinejad regime, of course. Will it continue to thwart calls from the UN and international community to end its enrichment program? Will Obama's pledge to engage without preconditions really materialize?

5. **Israel / Palestine** – It doesn't appear that President Bush will secure a deal by the end of his time. So Obama will have to determine at what level to engage. The results of Israeli general elections in February likely will help determine the course he follows.



6. **Russia** – Recent events in Georgia have precipitated the worst crisis in bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. And we cannot have another Cold War – we need Moscow too much in places like Korea, Iran, Pakistan. To counter nuclear proliferation, organized crime, etc. How will the new team look at further NATO expansion eastward, which Moscow calls a provocation. And the missile system – Obama is hinting at a re-look.

7. **North Korea** – Here, we've seen a bit of progress of late in the six-party talks. The Country has agreed on procedures to verify its halting of its nuclear program. But we've seen lots of broken promises in the past. And what is the health of Kim Jong-Il? I'd hate to think of a mysterious presidential succession in that country.

8. **China** - How to manage the rise of this great power will comprise a huge challenge for Obama. And hopefully an opportunity, as a future China could be a partner, not an enemy, for the United States.

Let's call Cyprus challenge number nine, although I'm not sure exactly where it falls on the newcomers' lists. Encouraging words from Greek Cypriot leaders have already been stated, and perhaps some consternation from Turkish Cypriots or Turks.

Most has to do with Obama's choice of a running mate, Senator Joseph Biden from Delaware. Biden has been quite supportive in the past of the Greek and Armenian lobby in the US, both potent domestic political groups. And Obama's policy statement on Cyprus apparently showed him tilting more favorably toward Greek Cypriots than any presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter.

For the first time, I'm told, the terms "Turkish invasion and occupation" were used. Does this imply some sort of policy shift? Renewed and/or increased pressure on Turkey to settle the conflict, "or else."

Simple answer at this point is "it remains to be seen." Foreign policy has a tendency not to change quickly in the US, or the world, for that matter. As if somehow it transcended party politics – and it does.

Moreover, I can think of few countries that present the US with a more complex picture than does Turkey – geopolitically it is vitally important, on matters ranging from counter-terrorism to energy security to interfaith dialogue. So any prospective changes to US policy there will be deliberated very carefully.

I have no crystal ball and thus cannot say for sure, but I wouldn't expect major deviations from current US policy on Cyprus/Turkey. We'll still back the UN's efforts, the "Cypriot Solution for a Cyprus Problem, and continue to offer our good offices to help the process in any way the two sides agree to. But one should not expect an "Obama Plan" anytime soon.