

**The
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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

**Who Woulda Thought?
Left Margin
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Just a small group of brothers sitting around at my place watching the Oakland Raiders lose again. During a commercial break, the subject of the next week's election came up. "Seriously, would you have ever thought, in your wildest imagination, that an African American could be elected President in your lifetime?" Around the room: no, too much racism for that to happen. Then I asked one of the other gathered black seniors how he thought his 40 year old son would answer the question. "He probably wouldn't think Obama being black would matter that much." I was recalling that conversation Tuesday night as the returns came in and I thought: we'd better get a better grip on things. Not because our reactions and expectations might be stuck in the past (although there's some of that). No, but because we'd best take an objective look at what has happened if we are to wrap our minds tighter around where to we go from here. Otherwise, we will see neither the challenges nor the opportunities.

Columnist Leonard Pitts put it quite well in the *Miami Herald*: "What this election tells us is that the nation has changed in ways that would have been unthinkable, unimaginable, flat-out preposterous, just 40 years ago. And that we, black, white and otherwise, better recalibrate our sense of the possible."

The country has changed. That became apparent Tuesday night. Ours remains a country steeped in racism; the election of the first black president hasn't changed that. But attitudes have change and with that the political configuration. The rightwing has suffered humiliating setback. A look at the election map shows that the power and influence of reactionary political forces has shrunk numerically and geographically. More significantly, there's been a major generational shift. Through the Obama campaign, literally millions of young people - white and of color - found their voice and displayed

their disgust with the war in Iraq and politics as usual, in their activism and balloting.

The Obama victory in the "battleground states" is highly significant. It was there, in the minds of the Republican strategists, that the candidacy was to founder. They tried to cover it up with charges that Obama was elitist and out of touch but they were really banking on racism in white working class communities. To the extent that such didn't pan out owes a great deal to the stance taken by organized labor. Union activists by the thousands work tirelessly over the summer and into the fall to swing Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan into the Obama camp.

Equally important was the outpouring of support for Obama amongst Latinos, who played a big role in the victories in Florida and the Southwest. One of my football mates said Wednesday morning a key task now is to "keep that unity together as we move forward."

The challenge now is how to seize the moment and build the kind of coalitions that is indispensable for addressing the needs of the moment and realizing the aspirations of the voters. Comparisons are repeatedly made to the New Deal coalition of the 1930s. History does not repeat itself and conditions are not the same in the age of globalization as they were in 1929. Still, the urgency of the moment is the same.

In his remarkable acceptance speech Tuesday night, President-elect Barack Obama stressed that "the election is not about me, it's about you" and issued a stirring call for civic activism. He is correct that the important thing now is what the people do, but it is equally true that much is expected of him.

Over and over, Obama told voters if they stuck with him "we will change this country and change the world," wrote *Associated Press* White House Correspondent Jennifer Loven. "They did, and now their expectations for him to deliver are firmly planted on his shoulders.

"Many supporters greeted his victory with euphoria. Impatient for a new American era and overcome by a black man's historic ascension to the White House, they took his achievement for their own - weeping, dancing in the streets, blaring happy horns into Wednesday morning," wrote Loven. "But campaign rhetoric soon collides with the gritty duties of governing, and hard realities stand in Obama's way."

One of those realities is that it is not just the people in the U.S. that have placed so much expectation in the Obama Presidency. People and governments across the planet have expressed the hope that the election will usher in a new era of international cooperation and coordination in the face of serious of global challenges. Most foreign leaders were circumspect in expressing these thought, before Tuesday but that has changed.

On Wednesday, a letter was made public from the first black president of South Africa to the first black president-elect of the U.S. "Your victory has demonstrated that no person anywhere in the world should not dare to dream of wanting to change the world for a better place," wrote the revered Mandela. "We wish you strength and fortitude in the challenging days and years that lie ahead," continued Mandela. "We are sure you will ultimately achieve your dream (of) making the United States of America a full

partner in a community of nations committed to peace and prosperity for all.”

Then, there was Argentina’s President Cristina Fernández expressing hope for a new era in U.S. Latin American relations. “We have the opportunity to eradicate poverty and discrimination, and, without doubt, to create more dialogue between our countries and leaders,” she wrote. “Know that we are counting on you.”

The rightwing Heritage Foundation was out bright and early Wednesday morning with this fund-raising message: “The Left is sure to claim a mandate to impose its radical agenda on America-from the economy to energy to the war on terror, from the Supreme Court to taxes, health care and education.” Nonsense. The real Left does indeed have a radical agenda but it goes quite a bit beyond these measures (which, of course, it fully supports). Doing something meaningful about stopping the foreclosures on the homes of working people, extending and improving unemployment benefits, ending the war in Iraq, guaranteeing a woman’s right to choose, enacting meaningful healthcare reform, radically renovating the country’s failing educational system and taking global warming seriously are not the demands of just us Leftists. They are the demands of the millions who voted Tuesday for “change.” Politicians from the White House to the Congress to the state house would best be paying attention because if they don’t there could be - and should be - political hell to pay.

This Sunday, the old guys will gather again in front of the television. At some point one of them will probably bring up the election and say, “Who woulda thought.” Then we will discuss what it all means, what we expect and what we should be doing about it all. And, the San Francisco Forty-Niners might just win. You never know these days.

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

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[Home](#)

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