

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Entering a Post-Bush / Post-Katrina Era?

The Bush era is over. The election of Barack Obama has spelled the undeniable downfall of neo-conservatism as a legitimate ideological position, shattering its ready access to apparatuses of the U.S. government and economy. The systemic failure of de-regulated privatization, the defeat of key political strategists in the John McCain camp, the faltering of American military and economic power in the Middle East and the near collapse of a hegemonic, American-centric global economic system have all contributed to an almost palpable sense that these are changing times.

But is this truly a post-Bush era? And if so, exactly what does that mean for Americans, the U.S. and, just as importantly, the world?

People have been proclaiming the end of the Bush era for years. While the Bush administration has long been ridiculed by the Left, broad-scale opinion turned on the White House not because of an aggressive foreign policy or failing economic ideologies, but because of its response to a domestic disaster. Specifically, the Bush administration's handling of a Gulf Coast ravaged by Hurricane Katrina spurred journalists and the public into asking tough questions about how George W. Bush was running the nation, and the way he had "streamlined" the national bureaucracy. In the first weeks of September, 2005, just after Katrina cut its swath of destruction through the Gulf Coast, the *Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne Jr. somewhat famously proclaimed:

The Bush era is over. The sooner politicians in both parties realize that, the better for them – and the country... Recent months, and especially the past two weeks, have brought home to a steadily growing majority of Americans the truth that President Bush's government doesn't work... The Bush era did not begin when he took office, or even with the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. It began on Sept. 14, 2001, when Bush declared at the World Trade Center site: "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." Bush was, indeed, skilled in identifying enemies and rallying a nation already disposed to action. He failed to realize after Sept. 11 that it was not *we* who were lucky to have him as a leader, but he who was lucky to be president of a great country that understood the importance of standing together in the face of a grave foreign threat. Very nearly all of us rallied behind him... If Bush had understood that his central task was to forge national unity, as he seemed to shortly after Sept. 11, the country would never have become so polarized.¹

Writing from inside the U.S. with an eye to the question of national unity, Dionne proposed that Bush's failure to meet his promise to protect Americans, his failure to provide a consolidated response to Katrina, and his failure to follow through on a promise – made on the rubble of the World Trade Towers – to unite the country, meant that one could truly say that America had moved past the divisive political style of Bush. Katrina was, then, the embryonic moment for a larger movement of the national consciousness away from the thinking, ideology and policy that had guided the Bush Administration and its almost singular focus on protecting America from terrorism.

In the narrative that has developed leading up to and following the election of Obama, Katrina has

continued to play a central role in explaining how the country moved beyond Bush. The aftermath of the storm has come to represent both the climax and turning-point of a parable that illustrates the perils of fragmenting of the nation into rivaling partisan and sectarian factions, democrats and republicans, religious and secular, rich and poor, local and national. But if the flooding of New Orleans serves as the culmination of a divided America, one could say that the election of Obama, and the campaign that inspired a nation and the world, represents a sort of comic relief to what might have otherwise been a tragic take on the American national story.

It is this connection that NeoAmericanist explores in this latest issue. Treated on their own the Katrina installation pieces, by Ed Salo and C. Van West, Jesse Znavich and Ara Basmadjian, explore how the debate and real fight over historic preservation has revealed serious shortcomings in assumptions about government and its relationship to historic sites and cultures. Immediately after Znavich's first piece landed on my desk, I knew this focused work was the tip of a larger thematic iceberg, for which the journal solicited a series of works to flesh this larger salience out. On one hand, Znavich's piece takes a close look at how grassroots organizations have been forced to pick up the slack in emergency response left by a weak national plan. But more than a story of the local versus an enfeebled national, his work is a revelation of how national policy and organizations can continue to play a central role in basic, on-the-ground decisions, even when there is monumental weakness and indecisiveness at the federal level. Important questions that ought to be asked – such as which historic buildings should be saved, who has the authority to make such a call, the connection between communities and the act of preservation, and the very real consequences of policies determinant of whom gets money to save buildings and how it is distributed to organizations across various levels of government – have been all but buried under the weight of needing to simply rebuild.

So, on the other hand, the debate about preservation is an important route of inquiry, for those of us who study how the U.S. can be used as a case study for larger prescient questions about identity, culture, memory, memorialization, history and narrative. For example, disasters like Katrina might be seen as disasters because, in addition to the human suffering they create, they represent – borrowing from the language of Gayatri Spivak – an epistemological interruption of the socio-political consciousness. Faced with the cataclysmic effects of such a disastrous moment, Americans seemed to realign the national narrative used to explain the politics and social policies of the Bush era. What came out was a discussion that seemed to position Katrina as an alarming and tragic “blank-slate” that lay bare the multiplicity of visions of America and that exist in the country at a given moment. Katrina offered a moment of transparent rupture in the social fabric. Neo-liberal and conservative reformers battled with progressives, local coalitions rejected federal authority, and the battle to remake the region exposed that even the most basic decisions possessed ideological as well as material considerations. The rise of Charter Schools, the systemic destruction of historic low-income housing, the rebuilding of the city to meet more “modern” standards, and – as Salo, Van West and Znavich touch on – the fight to preserve particular historic sites, have put preservationists, activists and citizens (as Basmadjian explores) alike in what could easily be seen as a microcosm of a larger culture war in American and global society. As Salo and Van West's piece highlights, this was a position and debate for which preservationists were not entirely prepared.

Preservation is, by its very nature, an act of capturing and naming the past. Preservationists, like public historians and academics generally, play an imperative role in the act of manufacturing memory by choosing what will be remembered in public spaces. The buildings and spaces chosen for preservation

serve as monuments as much to a past we would *like* to remember as the past that actually *was*. Seen in this light, preservation is not only an academic debate but also a deeply political one. It inevitably informs the shape and style of everyday life by sculpting our lived space and our exposure to a particular historical consciousness that underwrites a way of seeing the world and acting in it. The politics of preservation in the post-Katrina era drives to the heart of a deeper battle being fought over policy and ideology around poverty, class, public space, education and the very legal processes that determine whose voice is heard and whose can be legitimately ignored.

This connection between place, the individual and socio-political consciousness has not been lost on those involved on the ground in the rebuilding of New Orleans. Sean Deskin's first-person short story offers a powerful look at the double-bind implicit in narrative construction after a disaster. Deskin's piece reveals how the atmosphere of post-Katrina New Orleans allowed for the emotions and orientations of belonging and alienation, hope and desperation, regional and national to all work simultaneously at the level of the individual. But, as Deskin explores through a personal account, navigating the pressures of abstract ideas and everyday concerns does not necessarily mean making a decision about what camps one falls into.

As I alluded to earlier, Katrina is only one part of the theme that runs through this issue and it is only one part of the story that history books will almost surely tell. The other key element to the national-centric narrative will be the unifying force of Obama. Pundits and even traditionally "un-political" parts of American society recognized early on that Obama and his brand of "healing rhetoric" were desperately needed by a nation so thoroughly divided in the Bush years.

But, perhaps more interestingly, Obama's language of a newly revitalized national unity has reached beyond the national imaginary of the United States. Perhaps it was the sense of a need to move past the divisive foreign policy of the Bush administration, or maybe it was the desire to see a reinvigorated conversation in the international arena, but Obama seemed to fire the passions of the world—a world that seemed to want to redeem the idea of America as much as Americans themselves. While Katrina represented a domestic watershed marking the turn away from the tactics and ideology of the Bush era, it appeared that the campaign and election of Obama represented a turning point in world opinion about the U.S.

Taking this idea on, this issue of the journal features an audio installation of a pre-election panel featuring Canadian and American journalists and academics debating the election and what challenges the president-elect would have to face. In a scene that likely repeated itself in cities and post-secondary institutions across the world, this well-attended panel revealed that Canadians and the international community found the possibility of an Obama win inspiring and motivating. But, as the panelists observed, Obama faces an unprecedented set of national and international challenges as he enters the Office of the President. A massive economic recession, war in two foreign countries, deteriorating urban infrastructure, a rising environmental movement, and a failing social security and health system are only the *national* problems that Americans will look to Obama to cure. Facing such a monumental series of domestic challenges, commentators are already comparing the president-elect with Franklin Roosevelt for using a message of unity and economic mobilization as part of what *Time* has called "The New Liberal Order" that seeks to bring about a new way of thinking about American society.²

But this is to say nothing of the expectations that the international community has for Obama. A simple Google search turns up a plethora of praise and hope for the incoming president and what his

election means for world order. While historians may compare Obama to Roosevelt nationally, the international hope held for Obama, who has been called as much as a messiah by some, is more than a little reminiscent of the support that Woodrow Wilson received after delivering his Fourteen-Points Address in the closing days of World War One. Compare, for example, these two quotations. The first is from an article in the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel*:

They celebrated on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and so did the black kids in the city's suburbs. There were parties in cities on all continents, and they even celebrated in the Gaza Strip where, normally, the only good Americans are considered to be dead Americans. Obama is the world's president, at least for a few days, weeks, months of euphoria and idealism and belief in decency that President George W. Bush had almost beaten out of the world. Tristram Hunt, a British historian, said that Obama "brings the narrative that everyone wants to return to – that America is the land of extraordinary opportunity and possibility, where miracles happen." And miracles are what people of all skin colors are wishing for, especially people from those parts of the earth where miracles are not as reliable an occurrence.³

Compare this with the following quote from H.G. Well's post-Versailles assessment of expectations for Wilson in the peace process.

For a brief interval, Wilson stood alone for mankind. Or at least he seemed to stand for mankind. And in that brief interval there was a very extraordinary and significant wave of response to him throughout the earth. So eager was the situation that all humanity leapt to accept and glorify Wilson – for a phrase, for a gesture. It seized upon him as its symbol. He was transfigured in the eyes of men. He ceased to be a common statesman; he became a messiah. Millions believed him as the bringer of untold blessings; thousands would gladly have died for him. That response was one of the most illuminating events in the early twentieth century. Manifestly the World-state had been conceived then, and now it stirred in the womb. It was alive.⁴

Canadians, and the majority of the world, appear to be celebrating in Obama, as they did in Wilson almost a hundred years ago, the return of the possibility for a liberal moment, an internationalism led by the example of American liberals and progressives. But can the narrative of "healing, hope and unity" that seems to be working on the fissures in identity and vision exposed by Katrina carry over into the international sphere? Will we see in Obama a move beyond the Bush era's retrenchment into the politics and economies of nationalism? Or will it simply reconstitute nationalism as the bedrock for an international order? Does this solve the problem of what shape "world order" will take in the post Cold War world? Will we see, then, a turn to revitalizing internationalism through a return to the narrative of American exceptionalism? If the answer to the latter is that we can not have internationalism without American exceptionalism, or that we can not have international unity without a return to American domestic and foreign hegemony, can we truly say that we have moved beyond the Bush era? Can we truly say, at least in terms of international order, that there even was a distinct Bush Era?

ENDNOTES

- 1 E.J. Dionne Jr., "End of the Bush era," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2005.
- 2 Peter Beinart, "The New Liberal Order," *Time*, November 13, 2008.
- 3 Spiegel Staff, "Great Expectations for Project Obama," *Der Spiegel Online*, November 11, 2008 (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,druck-589816,00.html>) Accessed December 5, 2008.
- 4 H.G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to come*, quoted in Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.