

# Playing innocent abroad

**R**adical optimism is America's contribution to the world. The early settlers thought America's founding would bring God's kingdom to earth. John Adams thought America would emancipate "the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush preached their own gospels of world democracy.

Barack Obama is certainly a true American. In the first major foreign policy speech of his campaign, delivered in Chicago last year, he vowed a comprehensive initiative to "ensure that every child, everywhere, is taught to build and not to destroy." America, he said, must promote dignity across the world, not just democracy. It must "lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good."

In Berlin on Thursday, it was more of the same. Speaking before a vast throng (and a surprising number of Yankees hats), he vowed to help "remake the world." He offered hope that a history-drenched European continent could "choose its own tomorrow free from the shadows of yesterday." He envisioned "a new dawn in the Middle East."

Obama's tone was serious. But he pulled out his "this is our moment" rhetoric and offered visions of a world transformed. Obama speeches almost always have the same narrative arc. Some problem threatens. The odds are against the forces of righteousness. But then people of good faith unite and walls come tumbling down. Obama used the word "wall" 16 times in the Berlin speech, and in 11 of those cases, he was talking about walls coming down.

The Berlin blockade was thwarted because people came together. Apartheid ended because people came together and walls tumbled. Winning the Cold War was the same: "People of the world," Obama declared, "look at Berlin, where a wall came down, a continent came together and history proved there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one."

When I first heard this sort of radically optimistic speech in Iowa, I have to confess my American soul was stirred. It seemed like the overture for a new yet quintessentially American campaign.

But now it is more than half a year on, and the post-partisanship of Iowa

has given way to the post-nationalism of Berlin, and it turns out that the vague overture is the entire symphony. The golden rhetoric impresses less, the evasion of hard choices strikes one more.

When John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan went to Berlin, their rhetoric soared, but their optimism was ground-

---

## Politics and power dare not speak their name in Obama's lofty peroration.

---

ded in the reality of politics, conflict and hard choices. Kennedy didn't dream of the universal brotherhood of man. He drew lines that reflected hard realities: "There are some who say, in Europe and elsewhere, we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin." Reagan didn't call for a kumbaya moment. He cited tough policies that sparked harsh political disagreements — the deployment of U.S. missiles in response to the Soviet SS-20s — but still worked.

In Berlin, Obama made exactly one point with which it was possible to disagree. In the best paragraph of the speech, Obama called on Germans to send more troops to Afghanistan.

The argument will probably fall on deaf ears. The vast majority of Germans oppose that policy. But at least Obama made an argument.

Much of the rest of the speech fed the illusion that we Americans could solve our problems if only people mystically come together. We should help Israelis and Palestinians unite. We should unite to prevent genocide in Darfur. We should unite so the Iranians won't develop nukes. Or as Obama put it: "The walls between races and tribes, natives and immigrants, Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down."

The great illusion of the 1990s was that we were entering an era of global convergence in which politics and power didn't matter. What Obama offered in Berlin flowed right out of this mind-set. This was the end of history on acid.

Since then, autocracies have arisen,

the competition for resources has grown fiercer, Russia has clamped down, Iran is on the march. It will take politics and power to address these challenges, the two factors that dare not speak their name in Obama's lofty peroration.

The odd thing is that Obama doesn't really think this way. When he gets down to specific cases, he can be hard-headed. Last year, he spoke about his affinity for Reinhold Niebuhr, and their shared awareness that history is tragic and ironic and every political choice is tainted in some way.

But he has grown accustomed to putting on this sort of saccharine show for the rock concert masses, and in Berlin his act jumped the shark. His words drift far from reality, and not only when talking about the Senate Banking Committee. His Berlin Victory Column treacle would have made Niebuhr sick to his stomach.

Obama has benefited from a week of good images. But substantively, optimism without reality isn't eloquence. It's just Disney.

HP LaserJet 3050

## Fax Call Report

C.SIMITIS  
2103616527  
28-Jul-2008 10:21AM

Job	Date	Time	Type	Identification	Duration	Pages	Result
725	28/ 7/2008	10:19:12AM	Send	0049617425259	2:40	2	OK

ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ ΣΗΜΙΤΗΣ

ΣΥΝΟΔΕΥΤΙΚΗ ΣΕΛΙΔΑ

ΠΡΟΣ: ΚΑΘΗΓ. Κ. ΣΠ. ΣΗΜΙΤΗ ΑΠΟ:

ΑΡΙΘΜΟΣ ΦΑΞ:  
0049 617425259

ΑΡΙΘΜΟΣ ΣΕΛΙΔΩΝ: 1+1

ΗΜΕΡΟΜΗΝΙΑ: 28 ΙΟΥΛΙΟΥ 2008

ΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΕΙΣ/ΕΧΟΛΙΑ:

ΑΚΑΔΗΜΙΑΣ 35, 106 72 ΑΘΗΝΑ  
ΤΗΛ. 210 3643530, 210 3602078, 210 3607762  
FAX: 210 3616527, e-mail: [csimitis@otenet.gr](mailto:csimitis@otenet.gr)

Να το στείλει με  
γάζαο δωρο