Barack Obama; the Economy, Race and the American Presidency 2012: A Perspective.

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FRAMING THE ISSUE

The issues of the 21st century’s global society are numerous. Issues involving war, regional conflicts, the environment, the economy, education, healthcare, nutrition, political systems, valuing and accepting diversity within society, social structures, infra-structure repair and development and the effects of globalization are but some that are in need of resolve.

The current global economic crisis, cultural differences and the political discourse have created a reality that the world’s leading economies must face. Factors such as rising income inequality, increasing poverty, the decreasing size of the modern middle class, unsustainable governmental obligations, political restructuring, widespread erosion of the public trust and that of its institutions have led various policy makers, in some countries, to borrow from the future on a massive scale with the hope of addressing the current crisis.

From an American-centric viewpoint, the effects of globalization, the economic rise of China and India, the nation’s chronic deficits and America’s pattern of excessive consumption spell out what the United States needs to address to attain the restoration of the American dream and the preservation of American global leadership. This period of expansive business globalization and the residue of the toxic recession of 2008 have left the United States in tatters, on its heels, and in search of resolutions.

THE ECONOMY 2012

The new tipping point would suggest that borrowing from the future by way of deficit spending places enormous pressures on American society, and its citizens, not only in terms of defining the proper approach to the country’s asset allocation but to determining the moral direction of the country.

For example, in his 2005 paper, “Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness,” Martin Gilens, a political scientist at Princeton University, examined the influence that different classes of Americans exert on federal government action. Sifting through detailed survey data on public support for thousands of proposed policy changes from 1981 through 2002, he found that, in essence, the government is responsive only to the wishes of the rich. Gilens compared popular support for different initiatives at various income levels and concluded that, on many issues, poor, middle-class and rich Americans held similar views.

When the rich and poor disagreed about an issue, policy was closely geared to the preferences of the rich and was wholly unrelated to the preferences of the poor. The same was true, more or less, when the opinions of the rich differed from those of median-income Americans. When middle-class preference for any given policy flipped from strong opposition to strong support, the probability of government action rose by only 6 percent, on average, if the rich remained opposed. By contrast, when the rich supported an issue that the middle class opposed, the chances of government action rose by 30 percent.

Whether or not elected officials and other decision makers care about middle-class Americans, Gilens concluded, “influence over actual policy out-comes appears to be reserved almost exclusively for those at the top of the income distribution.”

If we are to learn from history, recent history at that, social tensions begin to develop and are typically strongest not just among the most marginalized groups of society, but among the newly marginalized, that is to say, those whose status and self-image have collapsed most abruptly or are in the greatest danger of doing so. In America, that describes a large part of
the middle class. Therefore, income inequality is the cause for the cultural separation that is taking place currently in American society and I project that it will be even more corrosive over time.

Robert Samuelson weighs in on the issue by putting forth an argument that focuses on a more economic structure by stating, “we live in a world of broken models” and, as such, broken institutions. As Samuelson puts it, “world leaders can’t fix the sputtering global economy, you have to realize that the economic models on which the United States, Europe and China relied are collapsing. The models differ, but the breakdowns are occurring simultaneously and feed on each other. The result is that the global recovery flags, while pessimism and uncertainty mount.”

Samuelson further states that “The United States economic model is consumer-led growth. From the early 1980s until the mid-2000, what propelled the economy was rising wealth, stocks, bonds, real estate, that encouraged households to spend and borrow. Most could afford or aspire to some form of luxury, and businesses responded by investing in more malls, restaurants, hotels, factories and start-up’s.”

However, as history has proven, unfortunately, once the economic model is broken, it’s not easy to fix or to build a new one; a new one that in real time could be of benefit to the current generation. The obstacles are not just economic, though; they are economic, social and political. The same thing is occurring in Europe.

In contrast, the Chinese situation seems less dire as it has instituted an export-led growth model supported by periodic government stimulus programs. The issue is that sluggish economies in the United States and Europe, two major markets for the Chinese, have reduced demand for Chinese goods and have fueled political opposition to allegedly subsidized imports.

Altogether, the United States, Europe and China represent about half of the world’s economy. Their situations are not isolated, as are Brazil, India and some of the other major countries that are also discovering that their economic policies need to be examined and are, at the least, in need of restructuring.

The above now leads me to make a comment on what I have had an interest in of late and that’s Dova Seidman’s theory of “situational values” and “sustainable values,” which explores how values plays out individually, in business, in society, government and in the development of policy. Dov Seidman is the CEO of LRN and the author of several books, his most recent being HOW. Seidman’s theory is based in part on the relationships propelled by situational values. Says Seidman, values involve calculations about what is available in the here and now. “They are all about exploiting short-term opportunities rather than consistently living the principles that create long-term success.” In effect, these values are about what we can and cannot do in any given situation that may impact a sustainable system.

“Sustainable values,” by contrast, are “about what we should and should not do in situations.” As such, sustainable values are values that literally sustain relationships over the long term. Sustainable values, according to Seidman, are the values that connect us deeply as humans with such traits as transparency, integrity, honesty, truth, shared responsibility and hope. Situational values push us toward the strategy of becoming too big to fail. Sustainable values inspire us to pursue a strategy of becoming too sustainable to fail by, in part, building enduring relationships and, thus, institutions.

As the collapse of major Wall Street banks such as Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers has demonstrated, what makes an institution sustainable is not the scale and size it reaches but how it does its business, how it relates to its employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, the environment, society and to future generations. The drift from sustainable to situational values helped to trigger America’s worst economic crisis since the Great Depression; is greed really that good?

Yet, the adoption of situational values has done something worse. It has, by creating the widest gap of economic, social and political disparities in recent times, further delayed the arrival of the promise of America’s trans-racial society and has enabled the new racism, a racism that is more firmly rooted in social and economic inferiorly.

As such, the new racism is based, in part, on the perception of less than; less than being intelligent, as in not possessing the ability to navigate America’s system of opportunity. After all, one must on the individual level be defective not to be, as it is said, on the shut-out. This is America; go figure how to be a productive member of society.
Bakari Kitwana, editor of the Crisis Magazine, once stated, “The African American political movement has long been America’s moral conscience, reminding our country to live up to its promise.”

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States of America seemed to many to promise a political renewal that would transcend the divisive behaviors of the past and bring the country together into a more hopeful future.

After nearly four years of Barack Obama as president, the question that is before many is: is White America still uneasy with a black man in the white house?

Based in part on an article by John Farmer, a white reporter for the Star-Ledger, New Jersey largest newspaper, a conversation was held on the matter and was documented by John Farmer. According to Farmer, the conversation regarding President Obama occurred in a slightly upscale suburban middle-class community just outside of one of New Jersey’s big cities. As Farmer put it “a pretty typical place.” Just for the record, New Jersey is one of the nation’s swing states for the 2012 election.

As Farmer describes the setting, the gathering was made up of neighbors or friends or acquaintances who had been to these parties many times. All were white, mostly businessmen and their wives, some were engineers who work or once worked in the nearby defense industries.

As was reported by Farmer, the post dinner conversation was the usual topics, who’s moving in, who’s moving out, and it was at the point that the conversation edged toward the touchy subject of politics that one fellow, a bit of a curmudgeon, given Farmer’s account, asked if anybody thought President Obama had not been born in America. For a moment no one said a thing, reported Farmer. People looked at one another. Then a lady who had moved to the area from Virginia raised her hand, indicating that she believed that President Obama had not been born in the United States. One by one, other hands were raised until it was clear most of the guests were in agreement. Farmer reported that nobody said anything that nobody had too, so the verdict was clear; remember these are educated people, engineers, and business people in a suburban middle-class community.

The questioner pressed on, reported Farmer. “Does anyone think President Obama is a Muslim?” By now, reported Farmer, it was evident that the questions made some guests uncomfortable. The same question was posed again; “Does anybody think that Barack Obama is a Muslim?” And again, most of those present, says Farmer, raised their hands. This upscale community in New Jersey was convinced that the President of the United States was both a Muslim and was not born in the U.S.

The person posing the questions went further, says Farmer. “How do you know that’s true? Where did you learn that the president was both a Muslim and born outside of America?” “Fox News,” somebody said. A few others nodded in agreement. “Read it somewhere,” another said. Farmer reported that the atmosphere in the room, in the house, so genial moments before, was now becoming tense.

Another question was posed. “Is anyone here uncomfortable with the fact that the president of the United States is an African American? That the guy in the Oval Office isn’t white?” Farmer reports that there was a lot of looking around at one another. Nobody, it seemed, wanted to tackle that one.

Finally, as reported by Farmer, a young woman finally voiced her opinion. And around the room there were nods of silent agreement; not one dissent. All agreed with the young woman that they were uncomfortable with the fact that the president was an African American. When pressed, the young woman who acknowledged she was “uncomfortable” with the idea of an African-American president found it hard to explain why she felt that way, as did the others at the gathering. But the issue wasn’t Obama’s policies, as reported by Farmer, it was his race.

Now scholars tell us that racism can mean different things to different people and can spring from widely different origins and upbringing; for example, parental leanings, early adult lifestyles and peer pressure, as well as regional biases, political and economic motives and educational levels. There is no one size that fits all of the perceptions of racism.
Let’s use another one of Farmer’s examples. He compared the results of a study of two states, West Virginia and Mississippi. Few states differ so starkly, as presented by Farmer. West Virginia, with one of the smallest African American populations in the nation, has the highest index of racism, followed closely by Mississippi with one of the largest percentages of black citizens. What the two states have in common besides a high racism index are poverty and low levels of education.

Leonard Zeskind, head of the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, catalogued various groups that make up what he labeled the “anti-Obama opposition.” Zeskind came up with the following factors:

- Anti-tax tea partiers
- Christian right activists
- Anti-immigrant nativists
- Birchers who profess to believe Obama wasn’t born in this country
- National socialists

Each has found a reason to oppose the president, if only because he represents a sea change in the life of the nation that they can’t accept, at least not yet. In fact, this change has not only made them uncomfortable but also angry at the fact that the President is willing to take initiative, confront certain abuses and make change possible.

This dramatic and to some indigestible reality may have profound implications for the Office of The American Presidency for years to come and for President Obama’s re-election prospects. It also narrows the acceptance of the talent base for future presidents until this situation changes. The prospect that President Obama will receive the degree of election support from many of the middle-class whites is up in the air. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that he will receive the kind of support he obtained four years ago.

REFERENCES