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Obama calls for unity, service stir hope in Washington

by Thomas P. Melady

Washington

The atmosphere in the nation's capital one week into the new administration is one of hope. Following years of rancor, there are signs of a return to the recognition of the ideals of a pluralistic society, one in which the opposition simply represents a differing perspective, not the mantra of an enemy.

The new president is adamant in his calls for unity, and his plan for national service has drawn applause from all sides. President Obama's desire to double the volunteer activity around the country is ambitious, and initial planning calls for a quantum leap in the size of the volunteer force.

President George W. Bush frequently referred to these assemblies as "armies of compassion" and the interest in undertaking such service is clearly present in the people. Obama's stalwart commitment to this goal could very well result in the influx of massive numbers of both paid and unpaid citizens, serving on a cost effective basis, who are dedicated to ameliorating the social problems of our country.

Every administration requires a team and Obama's cabinet appointments have been generally well received. While the issue of the war in Iraq has been overshadowed by the financial emergency, the President's decisions to invite Robert Gates, a Republican, to remain in his post as the Secretary of Defense, and to appoint General James Jones, an Independent, as his National Security Advisor have been applauded by both Democrats and Republicans alike. While former First Lady Hilary Clinton had many fierce opponents on domestic issues, her selection as Secretary of State received strong bi-partisan support. Obama's cabinet is clearly a centrist-pragmatic one. Only time will reveal its effectiveness.

While political parties should remain faithful to their beliefs and advocate them energetically, we must do this, remembering that we are citizens of a society that holds free speech to be a fundamental right.

A good example of this occurred on January, two days after the inaugural. During his campaign, Senator

Obama promised to remove the ban on U.S. funding for international aid groups that perform abortions or counsel the termination of pregnancies.

It was expected that he would lift the ban, just as President Clinton did in 1993. While regrettably this was the case, there is something to be said about the different style he employed in doing so. Thousands of Catholics and others opposed to abortion were in Washington for the "Right to Life March" on Thursday, January 22nd. Obama elected not to sign the order into effect that day, choosing a different course than that of his Democratic predecessor 16 years earlier. Instead he waited until the evening of the following Friday, so that the spirit of that day might not be "clouded".

It was signed into effect without any media present; there were no reporters, photographers or camera crews, as there were the day before when Obama announced his decision to close the prison in Guantanamo Bay.

It can be seen both in this recent action, as well as in his efforts to reach out to both the political and religious opposition during the transition period, that his style is a conciliatory one. These actions are indicative of Obama's commitment to cooperating with ideological differences within the framework of civility, and should give us an increased assurance of his willingness to do so.

The monumental nature of the value changes taking place in the United States and the world are matched by the very serious economic challenges confronting President Obama and the nation. It is clear that America is moving from a recession to a depression. The Obama administration assumed office with over 11 million unemployed, a number which swells daily. Some predict that our current jobless rate which hovers around 7.2 percent could reach the 10 percent marker by the spring.

While the seriousness of the financial crisis has aided the President in gaining Congressional cooperation for his economic stimulus plan, a cloud of concern still looms over the leader of our nation. Is the plan sufficient?

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Before assuming his responsibilities, Obama recognized the social problem of the growing divide between the rich and the poor. The country, which, since the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt has witnessed the rise of a formidable middle class, has faced for the past few years the growth of the percentage of its citizens living below the poverty line. However, Obama's campaign pledge to strengthen the middle class will likely have to be delayed until our current economic crisis begins to dissipate.

While recognizing the challenges facing a country fighting two wars, and rocked by a financial crisis, the energy and good will being generated by our new President is reinforcing the American spirit, that no matter what obstacles we encounter, the answer to the question of our overcoming them is: "Yes We Can!?"

Dr. Melady, former ambassador to the Vatican, has served in the administrations of three Republican Presidents.

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