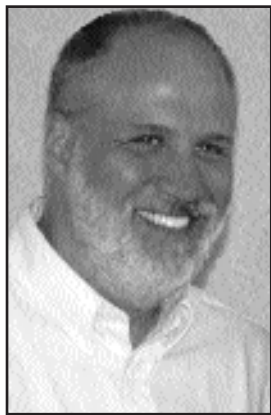


A chance for change

By Dave Robinson



In his acceptance speech, President-elect Obama reminded us all that "this victory alone is not the change we seek; it is only the chance for us to make that change." As we all move ahead to face the daunting challenges of this moment—ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, breaking our addiction to fossil fuels and the violence that attends that addiction, bringing justice to working families and overcoming poverty, and engaging in a real national conversation on race and privilege, we will remain a movement of faithful Catholics, grounded in a commitment to nonviolence, guided by prayer and animated in our efforts by the wisdom of Catholic social teaching.

The breakthrough election of America's first African-American president has confirmed the power of hope to overcome fear and division. That hope must now empower us all to act. While we take hope in a nation transformed by November's historic outcome, we remain humbled by the truth that although a great barrier was breached, the racism that built that barrier remains a pernicious reality. Our work over the past 10 years to transform Pax Christi USA into an anti-racist, multicultural movement for justice and peace offers us a glimpse of the beloved community to which Dr. King called us. In the coming years, that glimpse must deepen into a clarity and vision of how nonviolence—right relationship—can build our movement into an even greater force for justice and peace.

Pax Christi USA's efforts during the Presidential campaign to challenge war and racism will continue now as we redouble our efforts to bring fundamental changes to U.S. policy in the new Administration and Congress. As always, these efforts will rely on our Pax Christi community of peacemakers to raise a prophetic voice and witness. As disciples of the non-violent Jesus, we welcome the opportunities that the hope and energy unleashed in our nation now offer us in these efforts.

Looking ahead, the challenges are indeed formidable. The economic crisis that has deepened since the election will, of course, take center stage in the initial months of the new Administration and Congress. Our role as peacemakers and justice-seekers is to ensure that the approach to the economic crisis be measured in its affect on the least among us—children, people struggling in poverty (well before the current crisis), the sick, the elderly, the disabled and the abandoned. A massive "bailout" of state and local budgets would

go a long way to shoring up the present system of supports for our most vulnerable neighbors. But the change we need is much more profound than that. Our health care and education systems are broken and in dire need of new approaches. Only through a focused reappraisal and reformation of both will we be able to begin to make a dent in the poverty and hopelessness that affects millions. Moreover, our smokestack economy must be transformed into a truly 21st century economy rooted in both the production and use of sustainable energy. Any job creation stimulus package should focus on supporting and encouraging job creation in this critical arena.

The occupation of Iraq must end. U.S. troops must be withdrawn and the network of U.S. bases, intended to be permanent under the Bush Administration, must be dismantled. The benchmarks that Congress adopted requiring unfettered access to Iraqi oil by Western oil giants must be abandoned. A complete re-evaluation of the more than 100 edicts implemented by Viceroy Paul Bremer must be undertaken. The Iraqi government must be allowed to make fundamental changes that reflect their interests and needs rather than be tied to the vision of U.S. control that formed the foundation of those edicts in the months after the 2003 invasion.

The war in Afghanistan must not be allowed to follow the same path that led to the fracturing and civil violence in Iraq. To repeat the failures of Iraq in Afghanistan would be nothing short of a crime against humanity. Rather than another surge of troops and payoffs to combatants, a true diplomatic and humanitarian surge should guide the next months of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Similarly, our relationship with the new Pakistani government must be based on the overwhelming development needs in Pakistan, not the narrow military interests the U.S. claims in Afghanistan.

Palestine remains under siege. The new Administration and Congress must address the horrific offensive now taking place in Gaza as well as the humanitarian disaster and engage the Palestinian leadership as partners in a process that leads to a comprehensive solution. This can only happen if the U.S. is finally willing to hold the Israelis accountable to the international community's longstanding determination that it withdraw from the Occupied Territories and abandon the Likud Party's vision of a greater Israel.

The refugee situation in the Middle East has become a festering disaster. Jordan, Syria and Iran have absorbed more than 2 million Iraqi refugees, placing untenable pressures on these nations and creating even more swamps of despair that breed violence and terror. A regional solution to the refugee crisis and humanitarian catastrophe in the Middle East is desperately needed. President-elect Obama can

make great progress on a range of issues in the Middle East if he personally takes on the leadership to address the lingering despair of these forgotten casualties of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

When Senator Obama was elected President, the whole world was watching. All eyes remain on this man, dubbed a "transformational leader" in whose election so much of the world rejoiced and took great hope. During the campaign, Senator Obama said that "it is not enough to end the war in Iraq. We must end the mindset that led to that war." That mindset is the idea that the United States can act alone with unprecedented violence to further its own (corporate) interests in any region of the world, whenever it wants.

Nothing symbolizes that mindset more than the U.S. nuclear weapons complex and the central role that nuclear weapons continue to play in U.S. defense strategy. With a supportive Congress, and as per his campaign pledges, President-elect Obama is positioned to make fundamental changes to U.S. nuclear weapons policy that can open a new era of U.S. leadership toward a nuclear weapons-free world. Two important actions can and must be taken immediately: End the decades-old alert posture that keeps U.S. nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. These two actions would send a critical signal to the world that the U.S.—under this transformational leader—is truly committed to transformation. It will show, in concrete terms, that the U.S. is ready to return to a commitment to international law and to its commitments under the Nonproliferation Treaty. These actions alone will not be nearly enough, but they are fundamental to any other progress.

This is but a short list of the truly daunting challenges and urgent actions facing the new Administration and Congress. Clearly, the expectations on this man are unprecedented. It is almost violent to place so much, of such importance to so many, on the shoulders of one man. Our prayers for him must be accompanied with continued action. The faith-based social justice movement must play a critical role in the coming months to ensure that the agenda moves forward while keeping a critical eye on how that agenda is both shaped and implemented. No political leader can bring transformation by themselves. What we must hope for and work for, is leadership that places U.S. policy on the side of human, global progress, rather than in its way.

This is the chance for us to realize the change we have long sought. Let our efforts reflect our commitment to that change and let each one of us nurture a seed of hope that can ensure that change takes root in the soil of a nation ready to be transformed.

Dave Robinson is the Executive Director of Pax Christi USA and the editor-in-chief of The Catholic Peace Voice.

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ABORTION AND THE VOTER

In his "Conscientious Election," a moral guide for Catholics entering the voting booth (published in America Magazine, Oct. 13, 2008), Rev. Bransfield states that a Catholic may vote for an abortion rights candidate as long as the voter's intent is not to support that position. But he insists that such an occurrence "should be exceedingly rare," and that "grave moral reasons to vote for such a candidate must be overwhelming."

This narrow logic allows him to draw only two melancholic choices of 1) "not voting for any candidate" or 2) voting for the "candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position. We have learned from recent history the tragic consequences of national leadership resulting from such a single issue formulation.

The U.S. Bishops' document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility," maintains and expands upon Bransfield's arguments, but with one remarkable difference. Paragraph 32 of the document opens the window to a bit of fresh air. It addresses the difficulty of functioning under a morally flawed law by suggesting the use of prudential judgment and the 'art of the possible' in finding ways to diminish the harm done by that law.

This is precisely Barack Obama's approach to the problem. His pro-choice-but-against-abortion formulation laid out in the 2008 Democratic Platform is a 'consistent ethic of life' which reduces the need for abortion by providing prenatal care, maternity funding, income support and greater access to adoption. This significantly reduces the incidence of abortion by 30 to 40 percent according to a 20-year scientific study reported by Catholics in Alliance.

By contrast the 2008 GOP Platform has been characterized by the conservative Douglas Kmiec as "all slogan, no personal commitment, blame for 'actionist judges' and deliberate removal of language calling for the reduction in the incidence of abortion."

Is there any question which platform is more worthy of receiving the Catholic vote and the support of religious leadership?

Thomas French-Corbett

SPEAKING OUT ON ALL LIFE ISSUES

I found an article in my local diocesan newspaper ("Society chooses death, church chooses life") very disturbing when it listed abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and embryonic stem cell research and not one mention of the unjust and immoral Iraq War. The words of Pope John Paul II (on the Iraq War) were not heeded: "unjust, immoral, illegal!"

Since when does life live in immoral wars? This does not count the billions costing the American taxpayer, plus millions of refugees, thousands of Iraqis killed or maimed, not counting our brave soldiers killed and thousands more maimed physically and mentally. Nobody wants illegal wars but too many Christians have been far too silent on this catastrophe; little is done to promote diplomacy and peace.

Why isn't there more outrage over this immoral war? Where is the Christian conscience? Where are the clergy voices speaking out?

Ruth Von Bramer
Timonium, Maryland

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