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Is US ready to elect Barack Obama and rewrite history?

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Stefanie Balogh
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FROM slavery to segregation to the struggle for civil rights, America's racially scarred past is now just four days away from the drafting of a new chapter with Barack Obama and his history-defying presidential ambitions.

The son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, he deliberately mass-markets himself as a post-racial candidate - a gifted politician promising change who happens to be African-American.

He promises to lead for all. As he so often says - black, white, Latino, straight, gay, disabled or not, and usher in a new era void of red or Republican states and blue or Democratic states, just the United States.

But can one person really unite competing interests?

Just how the world views the US, and how Americans see themselves now rests with what Obama would do, should he, as polls suggest, maintain his campaign momentum and defeat any last-minute comeback by Republican John McCain to win the White House in the US on Tuesday (Wednesday, Australian time).

America is crippled with an economic crisis, fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and during the past eight years has overspent its global goodwill.

Obama's task would be momentous - he must rebuild a nation.

After the longest and most expensive American presidential campaign yet, Obama has set the bar high, perhaps too high, and he is bound to disappoint some.

The Centre for Responsive Politics estimates that a record-smashing $US2.4 billion has been outlaid on the presidential race with candidates themselves raising more than $US1.5 billion since the start of campaigning in January last year.

The symbolism of Obama's feat cannot be missed.

He accepted the Democratic Party's presidential nomination on the 45th anniversary of the day civil rights icon, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr delivering his seminal "I have a dream" speech.

He also launched his presidential tilt in February 2007 in Springfield, Illinois, the home town of former US president Abraham Lincoln, who helped to end slavery.

Professor Charles Franklin, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, says if Obama is elected, "You've got to take a deep breath and appreciate" the magnitude of his achievement. In a single lifetime the US would go from the segregation in the South and more than half of the population saying they would never vote for a black candidate, to an African-American leader.

"The symbol that George W. Bush has become in the world is one that Obama has the potential to dramatically alter. But who knows ultimately where Obama will take the country," he says. "It will be a moment in which, after having Bush, Clinton, Bush and then the potential for Clinton again, the country has decided to go in a different direction.

"I wouldn't think that almost any of us know what that direction is.

"Is Obama going to be a pragmatic leader? Is he going to turn out to be an ideologue despite the way he has run his campaign? Or maybe turn out to be Jimmy Carter - a newcomer who ends up being well-intentioned but ineffectual. All of these are possibilities and we're not going to know which for a while."

Stanford University Professor of Political Science, Simon Jackman, an Australian, cautions that having an African-American rise to the highest office does not mean the US "has finally thrown off the stain, the guilt, the shame of its long and terrible history with race".

"I think it will be an important symbolic moment, and if Obama is a two-term president, there's going to be African-American kids growing up seeing an African-American president on TV for eight years, you can't understate that.

"But to say this represents a sea change in American political attitudes on race, I think that's getting way ahead of us," he says, commenting that Obama has exceptional political qualities, and the key to his success has been stepping outside the mould of a stereotypical angry black firebrand politician such as the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

"He is winning because he has presented himself as a change candidate who happens to be African-American. Not an African-American candidate bringing change. His African-American identity has been carefully managed."

He says if Obama is inaugurated on January 20 it would be "one of the more emotionally supercharged political events we will witness but then, frankly, I think things start to get overshadowed by the dire challenges the US faces".

Obama's most pressing problem would be righting the crisis-ridden US economy and as Jackman says: "He may not be able to do as much as he wants, certainly in the first two years. The real challenge is how much of his reform agenda - health care, the green jobs initiative, investment in education - he can achieve in his first term."

He suggests that perhaps Obama's pledge to bring US combat troops home from Iraq within 16 months of taking office, may be "all we can expect in the first two years".

Obama's plans include taking a leading role on climate change, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

He wants greener energy with a $US150 billion fund over 10 years to encourage climate-friendly energy sources such as wind, solar, clean-coal technology and bio-fuels.

And he wants to overhaul health care, making it mandatory for children to have health insurance and work towards universal coverage for adults by requiring big business to share the cost of insuring their employees.

Obama also is proposing a 90-day moratorium on home foreclosures, $US3000 tax credits for bosses who hire American workers, penalty-free withdrawals from retirement accounts, and a tax cut for middle-income earners and tax rise for those earning over $US250,000.

At the age of 47, Obama would be the third-youngest leader after former US presidents Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.

His daughters Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, would be the youngest children at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue since nine-year-old Amy Carter followed her father Jimmy Carter to Washington in 1977.

Obama would probably run a disciplined internal administration. As he has shown on the campaign, he demands loyalty from his staff. He will expect them to be tight-lipped, methodical, accountable, and value detail. They also would be adept at spin.

They undoubtedly will receive the "no drama" speech when they come on board - a mantra that has served Obama and his close-knit team well during his marathon 21-month presidential campaign.

He has shown a willingness to be a leader who delegates and trusts his advisers rather than micro-managing.

But several times during Obama's campaign, he has slipped from his normal cool demeanour and appeared wrong-footed by surprises. He has been slow to regroup, seemingly reluctant to make decisions on the run.

One of his biggest presidential hurdles could come from the predicted size of the Democratic win and managing the competing interests and ideologies of the vastly expanded Democratic ranks.

Americans are not only deciding their 44th US president, but one-third of the US Senate seats are up for election as well as the entire House of Representatives.

The Democrats already control the US Congress, but some are anticipating their gains could be so great in the Senate they may reach a 60-vote majority, the number needed to overcome what is termed in US politics as a filibuster.

It is a technique where debate continues and can prevent a final vote being taken. If the Democrats have a 60-vote majority, Republicans would have no avenue to stall legislation.

It would mean Democrats would "own" all of America's problems.

Franklin argues there is a potential collision course between Obama as US president and the Democrat-controlled Congress because it runs on a two-year electoral imperative.

Some Democrats, expected to ride Obama's long coat tails into the Congress, are from conservative areas and may not always agree with his liberal agenda.

"In Obama's case, the risk is that an enthusiastic and expanded Democratic majority may want to pursue policies that their constituencies want a pay-off from in the first two years," Franklin says.

"A president has a certain incentive to look for policies that pay off in four years, and that's a big division between the interests of Congress and the interests of a president, particularly during the kind of economic crisis we are having.

"There are going to be issues about whether Obama can get Congress to do things that pay off to create long-term stability and growth, rather than one stimulus cheque after another after another."

On the foreign stage, Obama has promised to restore America's "moral standing" after two terms of thego-it-alone diplomacy of the Bush Administration.

The "Coalition of the Willing" is no more, and Australia has handed in its "deputy sheriff" badge after withdrawing from Iraq.

It could be called on for a bigger commitment in Afghanistan.

Under any Obama administration, Australia most likely will join the queue of nations competing for the new president's attention, but its geography gives it clout to emerge as a potentially important diplomatic partner in the region.

"The story going forward, over the eight years that Obama presumably could be president, is the rise and rise of China at a time when America is stalled or declining economically," Jackman says.

"I think (Australian Prime Minister) Kevin Rudd and his Government is positioning itself as a go-between, as a broker of sorts. Australia already is positioning itself in that way, I suspect, in terms of how it may be of help and also prominence in the new order of things in Washington."

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