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Barack Obama's reborn America

Geoffrey Garrett
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AFTER nearly two years of drama, hype and more than a little lampooning, the United States seems set to make history.

Unless the opinion polls are greatly off the mark, tomorrow America will elect an African American as its next president, only four decades after blacks got full voting rights.

What's more, Obama is not running as a "black candidate" in the mould of Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton, but as a man who transcends race - embodying America living up to its highest ideals.

A President Obama would enter the Oval Office facing an economy in free-fall, two intractable wars to resolve, new foreign policy crises looming, and with Washington's reputation in tatters.

Sky-high expectations at home and abroad would descend on Obama's wiry frame. But a flood of global goodwill would lighten his load.

And Obama may well be a once-in-a-generation leader capable not only of meeting the immense challenges facing America but also of transforming his country and the world.

How did the highly improbable, a President Obama, become the seemingly inevitable?

In 2004, Obama was an unknown outside his home state of Illinois running to fill its open Senate seat.

Obama's meteoric rise from obscurity was all about rock-star charisma playing to stadium-size audiences.

The message was (as usual) to rise above politics, buffered by faultless anti-Iraq credentials. Critics said "now is not the time" to take the risk of putting America in untested hands.

His Republican opponent, John McCain, went so far as to liken Obama to Paris Hilton - all celebrity buzz, no substance. And for a time, the criticisms seemed to stick.

Obama just couldn't "seal the deal" with middle America, and race was no doubt part of the story. Today, Obama is seen as a very different man.

Cool, calm and collected, his is a safe, sensible pair of hands ready and able to deal with all the world throws at him.

Even his critics marvel at the professionalism of his campaign; he never lost his temper despite the withering intensity of the world's daily scrutiny.

Americans still see risks in Obama. But given the economic mess inherited from the Bush Administration, they are willing to give him a chance.

When Bill Clinton won the presidency in 1992 during a recession that now looks mild, his mantra was "it's the economy, stupid". Obama's line today is wordier, but the message is the same.

America's economic crisis is the "final verdict on eight years of failed economic policies, promoted by George Bush, supported by Senator McCain", Obama tells anyone who will listen. And Americans are listening.

Since the collapse of Lehman Brothers (http://www.lehman.com/) on 15 September, Obama has gone from being five percentage points behind McCain in the opinion polls to double-digit leads. What began as a Wall Street meltdown is turning into Main Street misery of foreclosures, unemployment and deep anxiety.

Four in five Americans feel the country is on the "wrong track".

The country wants the next president to feel their pain and to put serious salve on their wounds. Despite his best efforts to make a cult hero out of "Joe, the plumber", McCain remains a low-regulation, tax-cuts-for-the-rich Republican, just like George W. Bush.

Obama hasn't changed his political stripes, either.

For more than a year, his core economic policies have been ending the Bush tax cuts for the rich, making health care cheaper, and investing in alternative energy. Obama's message sounds good to America right now.

So good, in fact, that Obama's Democrats will increase their majorities in both Houses of Congress tomorrow, perhaps creating the strongest platform for political change since America's revulsion over Vietnam and Watergate.

But don't forget the history America is about to make. Whatever an Obama presidency might bring, the US would be a different country.

Professor Geoffrey Garrett is CEO of the US Studies Centre. Net link: sydney.edu.au/us-studies (http://sydney.edu.au/us-studies)

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