



Obama: our mate?

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TWO questions have been constantly asked in Australia since Barack Obama was elected.

Is the US presidency a poisoned chalice? And second, what direction is his administration likely to take and how might it impact on us?

The poisoned chalice theory is a misnomer, as being elected president is a massive achievement most politicians would accept in good times or bad.

In fact, without a tanking US economy, Iraq and the unpopularity of George W. Bush, Americans might not have elected Obama.

The difficult times suited Obama's message of change.

Furthermore, as strange as it may sound, politicians often prefer hard times to prove their greatness.

Bill Clinton apparently complained he could not be a truly great president because he led America not in a time of crisis like Franklin Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln.

Obama's messianic rhetoric struck a chord with his fellow Americans.

To Australians, Obama often sounds like a preacher as much as a politician when he talks grandly about "hope" and "change".

To Americans, Obama's optimistic message of renewing America's special promise is a very familiar script, although delivered by a different looking leader.

In the short term Obama's rhetoric is inspiring, particularly with regards to healing America's history of racism and discrimination.

However, what of the economy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the massive challenge of climate change?

Obama's speeches during the campaign did not put climate change centre stage but he said enough to suggest he sees this problem as

dramatic and urgent.

His prescription is not so different to the one promoted by Al Gore in 2000, that America should embrace a green technology revolution as its path to environmental and economic success.

The question is how he can make up for those lost eight years?

The problems Obama faces in Iraq and Afghanistan are incredibly unfortunate. Mistakes can easily be made with every policy decision.

America has become responsible for the security and stability of these two nations. Some critics even suggest Afghanistan could be for Obama what Vietnam was to Lyndon Johnson: the intractable war that overshadowed his achievements fighting poverty and racism in America.

What does this all mean for Australia?

Obama's optimistic campaign talk about winning the war in Afghanistan has apparently been recast since he won the election to modest goals.

Yet, according to some reports, the Rudd Government has been asked to provide more troops and has said no.

If true, it is a wise decision that suggests a mature confidence about the Australian-US alliance.

Confidence and maturity is not always the hallmark of our relationship with America.

Rather, we seem prone to constant anxiety about things as unimportant as whether George W. Bush offered Kevin Rudd a dead-fish handshake at the G20.

Initially Australia will find it a challenge to gain the attention of the Obama administration as it competes with the rest of the world to be noticed.

The Rudd Government should aim to co-operate with an Obama administration in developing new

regional and multilateral agreements on global warming.

Australia would also be wise in the years ahead to become more involved in joint ventures aimed at developing new and more efficient energy sources.

Whenever a new US administration or Congress is elected, the spectre of renewed protectionism re-emerges — particularly given the current rise in unemployment in America.

During the campaign Obama talked about trade restrictions, particularly in rural Ohio. This not surprisingly made the Canadians nervous.

Now that Obama is the first Democrat to win Ohio in the general election since Bill Clinton in 1996, will protectionism be back on the table?

Given that unemployment levels are over 7 per cent in Ohio and nearing 9 per cent in Michigan (the home of America's crisis-ridden automobile industry), the short answer is yes.

What impact this will have on Australian businesses is hard to tell.

Perhaps our Free Trade Agreement with the US will provide us with some immunity from protectionism.

However, it only covers some industries and offers the US significant room to shift the trade goal posts. Australia will not be alone in holding its breath to see where Obama goes on trade.

People around the globe are not only admiring Obama's fine rhetoric, but also nervously waiting to see whether his administration will look after American industries at the expense of businesses in Australia and its other trading partners.

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Alliance anxiety: Australians always worry about the attitude of US presidents to our place in the world