Shout Obamalama!

Scene of celebration at the Manning Bar Photo: Courtesy of American Studies Centre

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On Tuesday, November 4, 2008, America voted for its 44th President. On Wednesday, November 5, 2008, Australia, and the world, celebrated in a festive spirit.

I had the pleasure of attending an Election Party at Sydney University's Manning Bar along with 1,500 students, journalists and politically-savvy people as we awaited the results of who would be crowned "leader of the free world". The University's new American Studies Centre was hosting the event, broadcasting live video to CNN Election Head Quarters in the United States, but it was the size of the crowd that really made me wonder.

The event could best be described as an intellectual's Grand Final: a room of joyous people downing myriad alcoholic beverages wearing the team colours of red, white and blue. Every commercial break would bring a great rush to the toilet. Australian election parties culminate around a barbecue and a few beers. This party, however, was characteristically American.

Being born in the US, I jumped at the opportunity to vote for the Democratic candidate, Barack Hussein Obama, up against the Republican "maverick," John McCain. Having faxed my absentee ballot to the state of California only days before, I was in with the special few who had actually voted, though everyone was emotionally unanimous as we anticipated the results. We all hoped, as far as I could tell, that Obama, the African-American senator from Illinois, would be the victor.

A brief conversation with a woman in a yellow t-shirt with a succinct message brandished across it, told me how an Obama Presidency offers hope and change to America's political system, but she highlighted the possibility of an abrupt end that has plagued so many reformists before him.

"I think his biggest challenge will be to stay alive," she said. Our feelings of hope in Obama, however, overwhelmed any macabre notions.

I continued to make my way around the bar, taking stock of the differing views on why Obama was the best choice to lead the US, and the world. It was then that I met Hussein, an American exchange student who shared more than a common name with the soon-to-be President-elect, for he was also a homeboy from Illinois. When I asked him about how he felt about the possibility of an America electing a black President he told me most earnestly: "I love it! It's going to say something to the rest of the world when we elect a black man with a Muslim name," he said, with a large and sincere smile on his face.

"Everyone gives America shit for being partisan and always going with a middle-aged white guy, but I think this time there's going to be a change."

Like the atmosphere that disseminated throughout Manning Bar, Hussein was filled with the message of positivity and hope that was so electrifying for the Obama campaign, and we were all dreaming that it would materialise in his Administration.

"I think [Obama's] Administration would be more open, and foreign relations are going to improve," Hussein said. "I think America's changed, and we've set a new course."

I certainly shared Hussein's optimistic appraisal, as one CNN commentator put forward a hypothetical of the impossibility of McCain victory, and they hadn't even started on California. The Manning Bar went hysterical with cheers as the election was called for Obama. At this moment my vote didn't even count, though I was overcome with joy.

Unfortunately, in the midst of that joy there was one not-so-merry thought that brought my party back to earth. The comment from the lady in the yellow tee swelled in my mind for a moment, but it was swiftly quelled by the monumental feelings for the prospect of change in the world, spurred by the one thing that united the US, the world and Manning Bar: the hope we had placed in a great man, President-elect Barack Hussein Obama. SSH