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COMMENT

THE CHOICE

BY THE EDITORS

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The morning was cold and the sky was bright. Aretha Franklin wore a large and interesting hat. Yo-Yo Ma urged his frozen fingers to play the cello, and the Reverend Joseph E. Lowery, a civil-rights comrade of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, read a benediction that began with “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the segregation-era lamentation of American realities and celebration of American ideals. On that day in Washington—Inauguration Day, January 20, 2009—the blustery chill penetrated every coat, yet the discomfort was no impediment to joy. The police estimated that more than a million and a half people had crowded onto the Mall, making this the largest public gathering in the history of the capital. Very few could see the speakers. It didn’t matter. People had come to be with other people, to mark an unusual thing: a historical event that was elective, not befallen.

Just after noon, Barack Hussein Obama, the forty-seven-year-old son of a white Kansan and a black Kenyan, an uncommonly talented if modestly credentialed legislator from Illinois, took the oath of office as the forty-fourth President of the United States. That night, after the inaugural balls, President Obama and his wife and their daughters slept at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, a white house built by black men, slaves of West African heritage.

Obama succeeded George W. Bush, a two-term President whose misbegotten legacy, measured in the money it squandered and the misery it inflicted, has become only more evident with time. Bush left behind an America in dire condition and with a degraded reputation. On Inauguration Day, the United States was in a downward financial spiral brought on by predatory lending, legally sanctioned greed and pyramid schemes, an economic policy geared to the priorities and the comforts of what soon came to be called “the one per cent,” and deregulation that began before the Bush Presidency. In 2008 alone,



more than two and a half million jobs were lost—up to three-quarters of a million jobs a month. The gross domestic product was shrinking at a rate of nine per cent. Housing prices collapsed. Credit markets collapsed. The stock market collapsed—and, with it, the retirement prospects of millions. Foreclosures and evictions were ubiquitous; whole neighborhoods and towns emptied. The automobile industry appeared to be headed for bankruptcy. Banks as large as Lehman Brothers were dead, and other banks were foundering. It was a crisis of historic dimensions and global ramifications. However skillful the management in Washington, the slump was bound to last longer than any since the Great Depression.

At the same time, the United States was in the midst of the grinding and unnecessary war in Iraq, which killed a hundred thousand Iraqis and four thousand Americans, and depleted the federal coffers. The political and moral damage of Bush's duplicitous rush to war rivalled the conflict's price in blood and treasure. America's standing in the world was further compromised by the torture of prisoners and by illegal surveillance at home. Al Qaeda, which, on September 11, 2001, killed three thousand people on American soil, was still strong. Its leader, Osama bin Laden, was, despite a global manhunt, living securely in Abbottabad, a verdant retreat near Islamabad.

As if to intensify the sense of crisis, on Inauguration Day the national-security apparatus informed the President-elect that Al Shabaab, a Somali affiliate of the Al Qaeda network, had sent terrorists across the Canadian border and was planning an attack on the Mall, possibly on Obama himself. That danger proved illusory; the others proved to be more onerous than anyone had imagined. The satirical paper *The Onion* came up with a painfully apt inaugural headline: "BLACK MAN GIVEN NATION'S WORST JOB."

Barack Obama began his Presidency devoted to the idea of post-partisanship. His rhetoric, starting with his "Red State, Blue State" Convention speech, in 2004, and his 2006 book, "The Audacity of Hope," was imbued with that idea. Just as in his memoir, "Dreams from My Father," he had tried to reconcile the disparate pasts of his parents, Obama was determined to bring together warring tribes in Washington and beyond. He extended his hand to everyone from the increasingly radical leadership of the congressional Republicans to the ruling mullahs of the Iranian theocracy. The Republicans, however, showed no greater interest in working with Obama than did the ayatollahs. The Iranian regime went on enriching uranium and crushing its opposition, and the Republicans, led by Dickensian scolds, including the Senate Minority Leader, Mitch McConnell, committed themselves to a single goal: to engineer the President's political destruction by defeating his major initiatives. Obama, for his part, did not always prove particularly adept at, or engaged by, the arts of retail persuasion, and his dream of bipartisanship collided with the reality of obstructionism.

Perhaps inevitably, the President has disappointed some of his most ardent supporters. Part of their

disappointment is a reflection of the fantastical expectations that attached to him. Some, quite reasonably, are disappointed in his policy failures (on Guantánamo, climate change, and gun control); others question the morality of the persistent use of predator drones. And, of course, 2012 offers nothing like the ecstasy of taking part in a historical advance: the reelection of the first African-American President does not inspire the same level of communal pride. But the reelection of a President who has been progressive, competent, rational, decent, and, at times, visionary is a serious matter. The President has achieved a run of ambitious legislative, social, and foreign-policy successes that relieved a large measure of the human suffering and national shame inflicted by the Bush Administration. Obama has renewed the honor of the office he holds.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—the \$787-billion stimulus package—was well short of what some economists, including Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman, thought the crisis demanded. But it was larger in real dollars than any one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal measures. It reversed the job-loss trend—according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as many as 3.6 million private-sector jobs have been created since June, 2009—and helped reset the course of the economy. It also represented the largest public investment in infrastructure since President Eisenhower’s interstate-highway program. From the start, though, Obama recognized that it would reap only modest political gain. “It’s very hard to prove a counterfactual,” he told the journalist Jonathan Alter, “where you say, ‘You know, things really could have been a lot worse.’ ” He was speaking of the bank and auto-industry bailouts, but the problem applies more broadly to the stimulus: harm averted is benefit unseen.

As for systemic reform, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which Obama signed into law in July, 2010, tightened capital requirements on banks, restricted predatory lending, and, in general, sought to prevent abuses of the sort that led to the crash of 2008. Against the counsel of some Republicans, including Mitt Romney, the Obama Administration led the takeover, rescue, and revival of the automobile industry. The Administration transformed the country’s student-aid program, making it cheaper for students and saving the federal government sixty-two billion dollars—more than a third of which was put back into Pell grants. AmeriCorps, the country’s largest public-service program, has been tripled in size.

Obama’s most significant legislative achievement was a vast reform of the national health-care system. Five Presidents since the end of the Second World War have tried to pass legislation that would insure universal access to medical care, but all were defeated by deeply entrenched opposition. Obama—bolstered by the political cunning of the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi—succeeded. Some critics urged the President to press for a single-payer system—Medicare for all. Despite its ample merits, such a system had no chance of winning congressional backing. Obama achieved the

achievable. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is the single greatest expansion of the social safety net since the advent of Medicaid and Medicare, in 1965. Not one Republican voted in favor of it.

Obama has passed no truly ambitious legislation related to climate change, shying from battle in the face of relentless opposition from congressional Republicans. Yet his environmental record is not as barren as it may seem. The stimulus bill provided for extensive investment in green energy, biofuels, and electric cars. In August, the Administration instituted new fuel-efficiency standards that should nearly double gas mileage; by 2025, new cars will need to average 54.5 miles per gallon.

President Obama's commitment to civil rights has gone beyond rhetoric. During his first week in office, he signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which protects women, minorities, and the disabled against unfair wage discrimination. By ending the military's ban on the service of those who are openly gay, and by endorsing marriage equality, Obama, more than any previous President, has been a strong advocate of the civil rights of gay men and lesbians. Finally, Obama appointed to the Supreme Court two highly competent women, Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, the Court's first Hispanic. Kagan and Sotomayor are skilled and liberal-minded Justices who, abjuring dogmatism, represent a sober and sensible set of jurisprudential values.

In the realm of foreign policy, Obama came into office speaking the language of multilateralism and reconciliation—so much so that the Nobel Peace Prize committee, in an act as patronizing as it was premature, awarded him its laurels, in 2009. Obama was embarrassed by the award and recognized it for what it was: a rebuke to the Bush Administration. Still, the Norwegians were also getting at something more affirmative. Obama's Cairo speech, that same year, tried to help heal some of the wounds not only of the Iraq War but, more generally, of Western colonialism in the Middle East. Speaking at Cairo University,* Obama expressed regret that the West had used Muslim countries as pawns in the Cold War game of Risk. He spoke for the rights of women and against torture; he defended the legitimacy of the State of Israel while offering a straightforward assessment of the crucial issue of the Palestinians and their need for statehood, citing the “humiliations—large and small—that come with occupation.”

It was an edifying speech, but Obama was soon instructed in the limits of unilateral good will. Vladimir Putin, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Bashar al-Assad, Hu Jintao, and other autocrats hardened his spirit. Still, he proved a sophisticated and reliable diplomat and an effective Commander-in-Chief. He kept his promise to withdraw American troops from Iraq. He forbade torture. And he waged a far more forceful campaign against Al Qaeda than Bush had—a campaign that included the killing of Osama bin Laden. He negotiated—and won Senate approval of—a crucial strategic-arms deal with the Russians, slashing warheads and launchers on both sides and increasing the transparency of mutual inspections.

In Afghanistan, he has set a reasonable course in an impossible situation.

The unsettled situations in Egypt and Libya, following the Arab Spring of 2010, make plain that that region's political trajectory is anything but fixed. Syria shames the world's inaction and confounds its hopes of decisive intervention. This is where Obama's respect for complexity is not an indulgence of intellectual vanity but a requirement for effective action. In the case of bin Laden, it was necessary to act alone and at once; in Libya, in concert with the Europeans; in Iran, cautiously but with decisive measures.

One quality that so many voters admired in Obama in 2008 was his unusual temperament: inspirational, yet formal, cool, hyper-rational. He promised to be the least crazy of Presidents, the least erratic and unpredictable. The triumph of that temperament was in evidence on a spring night in 2011, as he performed his duties, with a standup's precision and preternatural élan, at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, all the while knowing that he had, with no guarantee of success, dispatched Navy SEAL Team Six to kill bin Laden. In the modern era, we have had Presidents who were known to seduce interns (Kennedy and Clinton), talk to paintings (Nixon), and confuse movies with reality (Reagan). Obama's restraint has largely served him, and the country, well.

But Obama is also a human being, a flawed and complicated one, and as the world has come to know him better we have sometimes seen the downside of his temperament: a certain insularity and self-satisfaction; a tendency at times—as in the first debate with Mitt Romney—to betray disdain for the unpleasant tasks of politics. As a political warrior, Obama can be withdrawn, even strangely passive. He has sometimes struggled to convey the human stakes of the policies he has initiated. In the remaining days of the campaign, Obama must be entirely, and vividly, present, as he was in the second debate with Romney. He must clarify not only what he has achieved but also what he intends to achieve, how he intends to accelerate the recovery, spur employment, and allay the debt crisis; how he intends to deal with an increasingly perilous situation in Pakistan; what he will do if Iran fails to bring its nuclear program into line with international strictures. Most important, he needs to convey the larger vision that matches his outsized record of achievement.

There is another, larger “counterfactual” to consider—the one represented by Obama's Republican challenger, Willard Mitt Romney. The Republican Party's nominee is handsome, confident, and articulate. He made a fortune in business, first as a consultant, then in private equity. After running for the Senate in Massachusetts, in 1994, and failing to unseat Edward Kennedy, Romney relaunched his public career by presiding successfully over the 2002 Winter Olympics, in Salt Lake City. (A four-hundred-million-dollar federal bailout helped.) From 2003 to 2007, he was the governor of Massachusetts and, working with a Democratic legislature, succeeded in passing an impressive health-

care bill. He has been running for President full time ever since.

In the service of that ambition, Romney has embraced the values and the priorities of a Republican Party that has grown increasingly reactionary and rigid in its social vision. It is a party dominated by those who despise government and see no value in public efforts aimed at ameliorating the immense and rapidly increasing inequalities in American society. A visitor to the F.D.R. Memorial, in Washington, is confronted by these words from Roosevelt's second Inaugural Address, etched in stone: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide for those who have too little." Romney and the leaders of the contemporary G.O.P. would consider this a call to class warfare. Their effort to disenfranchise poor, black, Hispanic, and student voters in many states deepens the impression that Romney's remarks about the "forty-seven per cent" were a matter not of "inelegant" expression, as he later protested, but of genuine conviction.

Romney's conviction is that the broad swath of citizens who do not pay federal income tax—a category that includes pensioners, soldiers, low-income workers, and those who have lost their jobs—are parasites, too far gone in sloth and dependency to be worth the breath one might spend asking for their votes. His descent to this cynical view—further evidenced by his selection of a running mate, Paul Ryan, who is the epitome of the contemporary radical Republican—has been dishearteningly smooth. He in essence renounced his greatest achievement in public life—the Massachusetts health-care law—because its national manifestation, Obamacare, is anathema to the Tea Party and to the G.O.P. in general. He has tacked to the hard right on abortion, immigration, gun laws, climate change, stem-cell research, gay rights, the Bush tax cuts, and a host of foreign-policy issues. He has signed the Grover Norquist no-tax-hike pledge and endorsed Ryan's winner-take-all economics.

But what is most disquieting is Romney's larger political vision. When he said that Obama "takes his political inspiration from Europe, and from the socialist democrats in Europe," he was not only signalling Obama's "otherness" to one kind of conservative voter; he was suggesting that Obama's liberalism is in conflict with a uniquely American strain of individualism. The theme recurred when Romney and his allies jumped on Obama's observation that no entrepreneur creates a business entirely alone ("You didn't build that"). The Republicans continue to insist on the "Atlas Shrugged" fantasy of the solitary entrepreneurial genius who creates jobs and wealth with no assistance at all from government or society.

If the keynote of Obama's Administration has been public investment—whether in infrastructure, education, or health—the keynote of Romney's candidacy has been private equity, a realm in which efficiency and profitability are the supreme values. As a business model, private equity has had a mixed record. As a political template, it is stunted in the extreme. Private equity is concerned with rewarding winners and punishing losers. But a democracy cannot lay off its failing citizens. It cannot

be content to leave any of its citizens behind—and certainly not the forty-seven per cent whom Romney wishes to fire from the polity.

Private equity has served Romney well—he is said to be worth a quarter of a billion dollars. Wealth is hardly unique in a national candidate or in a President, but, unlike Franklin Roosevelt—or Teddy Roosevelt or John Kennedy—Romney seems to be keenly loyal to the perquisites and the presumptions of his class, the privileged cadre of Americans who, like him, pay extraordinarily low tax rates, with deductions for corporate jets. They seem content with a system in which a quarter of all earnings and forty per cent of all wealth go to one per cent of the population. Romney is among those who see business success as a sure sign of moral virtue.

The rest of us will have to take his word for it. Romney, breaking with custom, has declined to release more than two years of income-tax returns—a refusal of transparency that he has not afforded his own Vice-Presidential nominee. Even without those returns, we know that he has taken advantage of the tax code's gray areas, including the use of offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. For all his undoubted patriotism, he evidently believes that money belongs to an empyrean far beyond such territorial attachments.

But holding foreign bank accounts is not a substitute for experience in foreign policy. In that area, he has outsourced his views to mediocre, ideologically driven advisers like Dan Senor and John Bolton. He speaks in Cold War jingoism. On a brief foray abroad this summer, he managed, in rapid order, to insult the British, to pander crudely to Benjamin Netanyahu in order to win the votes and contributions of his conservative Jewish and Evangelical supporters, and to dodge ordinary questions from the press in Poland. On the thorniest of foreign-policy problems—from Pakistan to Syria—his campaign has offered no alternatives except a set of tough-guy slogans and an oft-repeated faith in “American exceptionalism.”

In pursuit of swing voters, Romney and Ryan have sought to tamp down, and keep vague, the extremism of their economic and social commitments. But their signals to the Republican base and to the Tea Party are easily read: whatever was accomplished under Obama will be reversed or stifled. Bill Clinton has rightly pointed out that most Presidents set about fulfilling their campaign promises. Romney, despite his pose of chiselled equanimity, has pledged to ravage the safety net, oppose progress on marriage equality, ignore all warnings of ecological disaster, dismantle health-care reform, and appoint right-wing judges to the courts. Four of the nine Supreme Court Justices are in their seventies; a Romney Administration may well have a chance to replace two of the more liberal incumbents, and Romney's adviser in judicial affairs is the embittered far-right judge and legal scholar Robert Bork. The rightward drift of a court led by Justices Roberts, Scalia, Thomas, and Alito—a drift marked by appalling decisions like *Citizens United*—would only intensify during a Romney

Presidency. The consolidation of a hard-right majority would be a mortal threat to the ability of women to make their own decisions about contraception and pregnancy, the ability of institutions to alleviate the baneful legacies of past oppression and present prejudice, and the ability of American democracy to insulate itself from the corrupt domination of unlimited, anonymous money. Romney has pronounced himself “severely conservative.” There is every reason to believe him.

The choice is clear. The Romney-Ryan ticket represents a constricted and backward-looking vision of America: the privatization of the public good. In contrast, the sort of public investment championed by Obama—and exemplified by both the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Affordable Care Act—takes to heart the old civil-rights motto “Lifting as we climb.” That effort cannot, by itself, reverse the rise of inequality that has been under way for at least three decades. But we’ve already seen the future that Romney represents, and it doesn’t work.

The reelection of Barack Obama is a matter of great urgency. Not only are we in broad agreement with his policy directions; we also see in him what is absent in Mitt Romney—a first-rate political temperament and a deep sense of fairness and integrity. A two-term Obama Administration will leave an enduringly positive imprint on political life. It will bolster the ideal of good governance and a social vision that tempers individualism with a concern for community. Every Presidential election involves a contest over the idea of America. Obama’s America—one that progresses, however falteringly, toward social justice, tolerance, and equality—represents the future that this country deserves. ♦

* Obama’s speech was given at Cairo University, not at Al Azhar University.

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