



Genius of a nation: to change



AUSTRALIANS and people around the world in recent years have grown by steps tired, disappointed and angry about the United States and its excesses at home and abroad.

But Americans have grown unhappy with their leaders and their country, too.

Yesterday's landslide victory by president-elect Barack Obama puts an exclamation mark on four years of American self-criticism, self-reflection and self-correction.

That's the true genius of America, Obama said in his victory speech yesterday, that America can change. He is right.

Obama also embodies that change like no one in history.

The Bush Administration became kinder, gentler and closer to the global mainstream in its second term.

The Democrats won a referendum against the Iraq war in the 2006 congressional elections. The Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the way suspected terrorists were detained in Guantanamo.

Now Obama has won the biggest prize, and won it in the most convincing fashion.

In addition to winning every state John Kerry carried in 2004, Obama won the state that undid Kerry in 2004, Ohio, as well as the scene of Al Gore's 2000 tragedy, Florida.

Obama added the capital of the old confederacy, Virginia, and states in the mountain west with large and growing Latino populations that had been Republican for decades.

Record numbers of Americans went to the polls, and the base of Obama's vote was broad. He won more than two thirds of the

under 30s, on whom Obama's meteoric rise to fame was based.

But he also won two thirds of Latino and Asian votes, in addition to the expected more than 90 per cent of African Americans.

Obama achieved yesterday what Jesse Jackson could only dream of two decades ago, a multi-racial rainbow coalition.

And on top of it all, Obama's Democrats increased their majorities in both houses of the US Congress. Obama has a mandate to govern that is stronger arguably than any since Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s.

Like Roosevelt, the challenges facing Obama are immense. An economy in the worst down turn in a generation.

Two intractable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with crises looming in Iran and Pakistan.

Australians should have been pleased to hear Obama insert a planet in peril between the economy and Islamic extremism on his must-do list.

Obama will take on these challenges with immense political capital, not only at home but also around the world.

If the world had voted for the next US president, it would have voted for Obama by a margin of more than four to one.


But despite all this political capital, Obama will inherit a country that is running on empty when it comes to normal capital.

America's budget deficit is heading towards a trillion dollars.

Its public debt mountain is nearly the size of the entire American economy.



Herald Sun
06/11/2008
Page: 27
General News
Region: Melbourne
Circulation: 530000
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 243.88 sq.cms
MTWTFS-



It is a cliché that extraordinary leadership is often borne in extraordinary times. Roosevelt's New Deal reversed the Great Depression and his entry into World War II saved democracy. Five decades later Ronald Reagan brought home the American hostages from Iran and defeated communism. Obama is a once-in-a-generation politician, combining rock star charisma and soaring speeches with an academic's delight at the nitty gritty policy details. Can Americans under his leadership overcome this challenge, as other generations have overcome other crises? Yes, we can, Obama told the adoring crowd at his victory speech. The world can only hope he is right.

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