

Leader's Message January 2009

by Richard L. Kiniry

The excitement and optimism created by the recent election of Barack Obama were tested quickly with the economic collapse of both the financial and industrial sectors. When you add the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the energy and environmental crises to the list of issues that the President elect must face immediately, you could despair of his ability to create much actual change. You can almost believe the departing administration let the crises collect just so a new, more progressive administration would be too busy keeping the ship afloat to actually change the government's course.

While it was never clear what the exact agenda of candidate Obama was, many of us felt an affinity with his values and attached our wish list for social, economic and political change to his candidacy. The President-elect's cabinet choices do not encourage our expectation for a redirection in government but it makes sense to expect some of those who helped create the problems to be there to solve them.

But politics is not our major area of concern. Even without the separation of Church and State, when we approach politics it is not from the direction of our party affiliations but from our moral concerns. The connection that some had with the Obama campaign went beyond a wish for change: there was moral passion. It was a passion for justice and a relatively selfless wish for a better life for all. It was a cry for a government driven by a deeper morality beyond just sexual issues. In that I believe we can be encouraged that Barack Obama is on our page.

But if, now that the election is over, we expect the politicians to fulfill the dreams without our constant "encouragement," we are naive. All that energy and money poured into the election was not spent to assure a few people jobs, nor should the passion for better government be allowed to sink into the swamp land along the Potomac. In other words, we can not let the new administration think they and their friends alone own the mandate.

All that hope for progressive change can not be allowed to drift far from essential values. Since politicians are busy these days being pragmatic and centrist, moral issues can become platitudes to be saluted and then ignored. It is our job to keep the focus on the larger moral issues.

To be fair, we should give politicians the benefit of the doubt. They have to live with the reality of diverse values, some not so pretty, while we can remain pure and refuse to compromise our long-term values. In other words, politicians have one job, we another. We must stand for core values.

While our moral voice that calls for an end to war is, in politics, blunted by expedience, we must continue to challenge the moral legitimacy of war. The war machine creates its own legitimacy. It creates a world in which too often war makes sense. War as an instrument of policy will not end until the people declare war to be evil and they expect government to find ways of solving conflicts without violence.

And so with many issues, Politicians must negotiate with small-minded business interests to obtain small increases in the minimum wage, while we must stand for a true living wage. We must fight for an environmental consciousness including, but exceeding, "global warming" while politicians negotiate with coal burning power plants to install scrubbers.

Ultimately the route to a better world goes through government but it won't get there unless the citizens become better informed and more passionate about real ethical values. American religion has failed at creating individuals with a mature social conscience. We ought to be doing better at that.

