

Pierre Martin

# Introduction

*The 2008 US election—challenges for a new president*

It is not uncommon for a US election to be qualified as historic. Indeed, the choice of a leader in the most powerful country in the world is always consequential and most presidents do eventually manage to write a few pages, if not a whole chapter, of the world's history. But in the case of the 2008 election, it was clear long before voting day that this one was going to be very special.

Throughout a long series of primaries that attracted unprecedented levels of attention, the Democrats knew they were going to write a page of history by nominating either the first woman or the first African-American as their candidate. They chose the young junior senator from Illinois with an unusual name and an even more unusual background, Barack Obama, to oppose the Republican John McCain, a war hero and an experienced senator with a reputation as a “maverick” in his own party—perhaps the only Republican who could manage the improbable feat of campaigning credibly *against* an incumbent of his own party.

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Indeed, there was much to campaign against after the two consecutive administrations of President George W. Bush. The popularity of the outgoing Republican president, which had reached nearly unprecedented heights in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, gradually went down thereafter, to reach dismal levels, around 20 percent, in the last months of his administration.

For a while, it looked like the Arizona senator might have a chance to pull it off and achieve the impossible but, in spite of his desperate attempt to reenergize his campaign with the nomination of Sarah Palin as his running mate, there wasn't much McCain could do to erase the heavy burden of the Bush administration's legacy from the voters' memories.

This portion of *International Journal* is based on a conference held at the Université de Montréal just a few days before 4 November 2008, when the election of Barack Obama had become all but a fait accompli. The conference was held 30-31 October and organized by the chair in American political and economic studies (*Chaire d'études politiques et économiques américaines*; CÉPÉA) and the Centre of International Studies (*Centre d'études et de recherches internationales de l'Université de Montréal*; CÉRIUM), both at the Université de Montréal, and by the Network for North American Studies in Canada (NNASC). As director of the CÉPÉA, I organized this conference with Jean-François Lisée, executive director of the CÉRIUM, and Michael Hawes, director of the NNASC and executive director of the Canada-US Fulbright program.<sup>1</sup>

1 In organizing this conference, we benefited from the invaluable help of many individuals. Jean-François Lisée and Michael Hawes join me in extending very special thanks to Christine Fréchette, the CÉPÉA's coordinator, and Jennifer Regan, the NNASC's coordinator. They were joined by a very able group of students, technicians, translators, and staff members, whose combined talents made the event a success. The conference was videotaped and its entire content is freely accessible online via the CÉRIUM's website, [www.cerium.ca](http://www.cerium.ca). In addition to the authors of the articles presented in this issue, five other speakers deserve mention. Richard Johnston, scientific director of the national Annenberg election study at the University of Pennsylvania, gave the first keynote conference on "The dynamics of a long campaign: A report from the front line." The second keynote speaker was David Mendell, author of a bestselling biography of Barack Obama, who presented his book to a packed auditorium. Louis Bélanger, of Laval University; David Haglund, of Queen's University; and former ambassador Raymond Chrétien, strategic advisor at Fasken Martineau and chairman of the CÉRIUM board of directors, also made widely appreciated presentations at the conference. Elinor Sloan, regrettably, was not able to attend the conference but we are pleased to include

At that point, except perhaps for the hardcore supporters of John McCain, the results of the election were all but a foregone conclusion. For conference participants, therefore, the challenge was not to forecast the election's results but rather to reflect on why the policies of the Bush administration had been so harshly judged by the electorate, what difference the election of a new Democratic president would make in important policy areas, and what this all meant for Canada and for Canadians.

We chose to approach this election from the point of view of public policy, identifying four issue-areas that were central to public debates throughout months of primary and general election campaigns: the economy; health and social policy; energy and the environment; and, of course, international security. The choice must have been judicious, as these issues were boldly highlighted in passages of Barack Obama's own victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park on the night of 4 November:

For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime—two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century. Even as we stand here tonight, we know there are brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan to risk their lives for us. There are mothers and fathers who will lie awake after their children fall asleep and wonder how they'll make the mortgage, or pay their doctor's bills, or save enough for college. There is new energy to harness and new jobs to be created; new schools to build and threats to meet and alliances to repair.

In advance of the conference and in the weeks thereafter, we asked our contributors to reflect on four questions as they pertained to their policy area. What is the current state of US policy and what is your assessment of the Bush administration's record? What role did issues in this policy area play in

her contribution nonetheless. Finally, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the financial support that made our conference and these articles possible. Our main source of financial support came from Québec's Ministry of International Relations through its continuous support of the CÉPÉA and the CÉRIUM, and from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, the core sponsor of the Network for North American Studies in Canada. Additional support for the conference came from Aeroplan, La Presse, and the Conseil des relations internationales de Montréal.

the presidential campaign? What changes are expected with the arrival of a new administration? What are the implications of the current evolution and expected changes in this policy area for Canada, both in terms of their direct or indirect impact and in terms of lessons to be drawn?

Of course, to answer all these questions in detail in a short presentation or text was an ambitious order. Nonetheless, the participants in this symposium, all specialists in these policy areas based in Canadian institutions, managed to provide a fresh and distinctive outlook on the enormous tasks that lay ahead for the Obama administration and, by extension, for Canada's policymakers as well. All our authors bring their own perspective on the challenges that confront the Obama administration, but they may all agree on at least one point: the mere fact that this "improbable candidate" managed to be elected president less than half a century after the civil rights revolution in the United States has given Barack Obama a place in history. If he manages to succeed in meeting the momentous policy challenges he has inherited, he will have fully earned it.