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# The History of Hope

Voters drawn to Barack Obama are often criticized as naive. But appeals to our collective hope for a more decent society are core to the American experience.

**Peter Dreier** February 19, 2008 | This article appeared in the March 3, 2008 edition of *The Nation*.

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America seems to be holding its breath, trying to decide what kind of country we want to be. The current presidential election may provide an answer.

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In the next four years—and beyond—progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

### Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

Political campaigns don't ignite grassroots movements for change, but politicians, by their rhetoric and actions, can encourage or discourage people from joining crusades for social justice. They can give voice and lend credibility to people working for a better society.

In recent weeks, Hillary Clinton and some of her supporters have taken to criticizing Barack Obama for his charisma, his inspiring speeches and his campaign's boisterous rallies. "There's a big difference between us--speeches versus solutions," Clinton said February 14 in Ohio. "Talk versus action. You know, some people may think words are change. But you and I know better. Words are cheap."

The Clintonites say that Obama is peddling "false hopes." They suggest that the fervor of the crowds at his rallies is somehow "creepy," as though his followers are like a herd of sheep who would follow Obama off a cliff.

But Obama is clearly touching a nerve in America's body politic--a pent-up idealism that seeks not utopia but simply a more decent society. Obama can recite his list of policy prescriptions as well as, perhaps even better than, most politicians. But he also views this campaign as an opportunity to praise and promote the organizers and activists on the front lines of grassroots movements and to explain what it will take to bring about change. A onetime organizer himself, Obama knows that, if elected, his ability to reform healthcare, improve labor laws, tackle global warming and restore job security and living wages will depend, in large measure, on whether he can use his bully pulpit to mobilize public opinion and encourage Americans to battle powerful corporate interests and members of Congress who resist change.

Talking about the need to forge a new energy policy during a speech in Milwaukee on Saturday, Obama explained, "I know how hard it will be to bring about change. Exxon Mobil made \$11 billion this past quarter. They don't want to give up their profits easily."

The dictionary defines "encourage" as "give hope to"--and that's an important role for a public official, including a President. In his 2002 book, *A History of Hope: When Americans Have Dared to Dream of a Better Future*, New York University historian James Fraser examined the nation's history from the bottom up. He showed how ordinary people have achieved extraordinary things by mobilizing movements for change. But it is also true that at critical moments, a few Presidents--including Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson--embraced these movements and helped propel them forward.

Obama, who called his recent book *The Audacity of Hope*, understands this history. In his speech in Milwaukee, he challenged Clinton and others who accuse him of being what he

termed a "hope-monger." His opponents, Obama said, think that "if you talk about hope, you must not have a clear view of reality."

Hope, Obama countered, is not "blind optimism" or "ignoring the challenges that stand in your way."

Obama explained that during his twenty years as a community organizer, civil rights lawyer, state legislator and US senator, "I've won some good fights and I've also lost some fights because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power."

"Nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope," Obama insisted, reviewing the history of American movements for social justice, starting with the patriots who led the fight for independence from England.

"That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom's cause."

Change comes about, Obama said, by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."

That's the lesson that Fraser recounts in *A History of Hope*. Starting with the revolutionaries of 1776, he shows how activists have built powerful rank-and-file movements through hard work and organization, guided by leaders who have combined empathy, political savvy and that elusive quality we call charisma.

Fraser examines the abolitionists who helped end slavery; the progressive housing and health reformers who fought slums, sweatshops and epidemic diseases in the early 1900s; the suffragists who battled to give women the vote; the labor unionists who fought for the eight-hour workday, better working conditions and living wages; the civil rights pioneers who helped dismantle Jim Crow; and the activists who since the 1960s have won hard-fought victories for environmental protection, women's equality, decent conditions for farmworkers and gay rights.

The activists who propelled these movements were a diverse group. They included middle-class reformers and upper-class do-gooders, working-class immigrants and family farmers, slaves and sharecroppers, clergy and journalists, Democrats and Republicans, socialists and socialites. What they shared was a strong belief that things should be better and that things could be better.

Abraham Lincoln was initially reluctant to divide the nation over the issue of slavery, but he eventually gave voice to the rising tide of abolitionism, a movement that had started decades earlier and was gaining momentum but could not succeed without an ally in the White House.

Woodrow Wilson was initially hostile to the women's suffrage movement. He was not happy at the sight of women picketing in front of the White House, a tactic designed to embarrass him. But eventually he changed his attitude, in part for political expedience and in part through a sincere change of heart, and spoke out in favor of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in an address to the Senate. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 only after suffragists combined decades of dramatic protest (including hunger strikes and mass marches) with inside lobbying and appeals to the consciences of male legislators--some of whom were the husbands and fathers of the protesters.

In the 1930s, workers engaged in massive and illegal sit-down strikes in factories throughout the country. In Michigan--where workers had taken over a number of auto plants--a sympathetic governor, Democrat Frank Murphy, refused to allow the National Guard to eject the protesters even after they had defied an injunction to evacuate the factories. His

mediating role helped end the strike on terms that provided a victory for the workers and their union.

President Franklin Roosevelt recognized that his ability to push New Deal legislation through Congress depended on the pressure generated by protesters. He once told a group of activists who sought his support for legislation, "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it." As the protests escalated throughout the country, Roosevelt became more vocal, using his bully pulpit to lash out at big business and to promote workers' rights. Labor organizers felt confident in proclaiming, "FDR wants you to join the union." With Roosevelt setting the tone, and with allies like Senator Robert Wagner maneuvering in Congress, labor protests helped win legislation guaranteeing workers' right to organize, the minimum wage and the forty-hour week.

President John Kennedy was a hard-line cold warrior and ambivalent, at best, about the emerging civil rights movement. Despite this, his youth and his famous call to public service ("Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country") inspired Americans, especially young people, to challenge the nation's racial status quo.

When Lyndon Johnson took office after JFK's assassination, few expected the Texan--a stalwart New Deal liberal but, like FDR and JFK, no civil rights crusader--to embrace the Rev. Martin Luther King and his followers. At the time, many Americans, including LBJ, viewed King as a dangerous radical. However, the willingness of activists to put their bodies on the line against fists and fire hoses tilted public opinion. The movement's civil disobedience, rallies and voter registration drives pricked Americans' conscience. These efforts were indispensable for changing how Americans viewed the plight of blacks and for putting the civil rights at the top of the nation's agenda. LBJ recognized that the nation's mood was changing. The civil rights activism transformed Johnson from a reluctant advocate to a powerful ally.

King and other civil rights leaders recognized that the movement needed Johnson to take up their cause, attract more attention and "close the deal" through legislation. King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the August 1963 March on Washington inspired the nation and symbolized the necessity of building a mass movement from the bottom up. LBJ's address to a joint session of Congress in March 1965--in which he used the phrase "We shall overcome" to urge support for the Voting Rights Act--put the President's stamp of approval on civil rights activism. Johnson said, "There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. And we are met here tonight as Americans--not as Democrats or Republicans. We are met here as Americans to solve that problem."

Not all Presidents rise to the occasion. Some straddle the fence, forgoing the opportunity to rally Americans around their better instincts. And some actively resist movements for justice, siding with the forces of bigotry and reaction.

Obama recognizes that some candidates and public officials engage in demagoguery: "I've seen how politicians can be used to make us afraid of each other. How fear can cloud our judgment. When suddenly we start scapegoating gay people, or immigrants, or people who don't look like us, or Muslims, because our own lives aren't going well."

And he clearly understands that as a candidate, and as President, he can give voice to those on the front lines of a grassroots movement trying to unite Americans around a common vision for positive change. "That's leadership," he told the enthusiastic crowd in Milwaukee last week.

Then Obama called on the crowd to "keep on marching, and organizing, and knocking on doors, and making phone calls." Yes, he was asking them to work on his campaign, but he was also encouraging them to see themselves as part of the long chain of change, the history

of hope, that has often made the radical ideas of one generation the common sense of future generations.

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