



A challenging world ahead

Election shows how far we have come, yet to go

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No, this columnist was not a firsthand witness to the era of John Kennedy. As a grade-schooler in Oxnard, I recall first hearing about the young president when our elementary school teacher started sobbing uncontrollably in front of our class before we were all sent home early on that sad November day.

But what I have learned about the man from Boston in the intervening years, both fact and fiction, has led to the impression that there are important parallels and differences that faced the new presidents in 1960 and 2008.

Like Kennedy, President-elect Barack Obama will face a socially divided America. Instead of an all-out battle over civil rights in the Deep South and elsewhere nationwide in the '60s, Obama will face an America that is politically and philosophically divided between those of the so-called red and blue states over such an array of issues as abortion, gay rights and immigration.

At this point, it is uncertain if Obama will be successful in reaching across party and philosophical lines during the next four years and helping to heal the divide facing this nation, or face the same and different challenges seen by the Kennedy administration that was forced to send federal troops to the Deep South to force integration against a population that was not quite ready for change.

Like Kennedy, Obama will face an unstable world political scene. Refreshed with oil wealth, Russia is once again rattling swords and nerves, picking and choosing areas to flex its military might, this time in the Republic of Georgia instead of Berlin or Cuba.

Will Obama be able to once again forge a strong working relationship with the former lead partner of the Soviet Union, or face more political and military provocations, both minor and major, like those that led up to Kennedy's Cuban missile embargo and those fateful seven days in October 1962? That was a time where, as grade-school children, we all practiced the virtually useless duck-and-cover measures designed to "protect us" from all-out nuclear war.

Like Kennedy, Obama faces an "us against them" world, where Communist world domination and nuclear annihilation have been replaced with terrorism capable of striking at our homeland.

Can Obama successfully tackle the root causes of terrorism — the lack of political, economic and social equality — or face a Kennedyesque world where there was a fear of a communist plot everywhere from Asia and Africa to Latin America and the Middle East.

As it was in Kennedy's era, America is once again involved in firefights around the world. But, instead of the growing number of "military advisers" Kennedy sent to help fight the communists in Southeast Asia, Obama faces full-fledged battles against religious extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kennedy inherited the military situation in Vietnam, as Obama has inherited our two current wars. There are many who believed that Kennedy would have eventually pulled out of Vietnam had he survived his first term, while Obama's stated goal is eventually to redeploy our troops from Iraq to the frontline war against the Taliban and al-Qaida, along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Finally, like Kennedy, Obama had to face a defining question before reaching the nation's highest office. Instead of asking, "Can a Catholic be elected as president?" it was asked before this week, "Can an African-American be elected?"

Today, while it seems irrelevant to worry about a person's religion as a qualification for the Oval Office, in the years ahead, the issue of race and gender will also fade in importance.

Rather, it will be the measure of the individual's character that will define who they are and if they are indeed electable.

Yes, there are many similarities and challenges faced by the two young presidents. But there was also great hope and opportunity to change the world for the better, to energize the youth, promote social service and to fulfill Kennedy's challenge during his 1961 inaugural speech: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for country."

While President-elect Obama, during his election victory speech this week, looked more like a man not celebrating a win, but rather soberly realizing that the full weight of America's and the world's problems have been hoisted upon his shoulders, he did convey that same sense of optimism.

"The road ahead will be long," he said. "Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America — I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you — we as a people will get there."

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