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Well Done America: Now it's Europe's Turn to do its bit.

LSE Ideas

By Nick Kitchen

Barack Obama's landslide election brings with it impossible expectations of, according to the front page of the Times, "The New World". In his speech last night Obama promised a new dawn of American leadership based on the enduring power of American ideals. Yet one man's beneficent leadership is another man's ignoble imperialism, and talk of universal values and American leadership could well have come from the mouth of George W. Bush. If Obama is to realise the hopes contained within notions of American leadership and avoid the traps of leading without followers he will need to work with Europe, but Europe must also be prepared to fulfil its side of that particular bargain.

Nicholas Sarkozy has pledged that Europe "will find a new energy to work with America". It needs to. Multilateralism is not just about shared decision making but about sharing the responsibilities entailed by those decisions. And good leadership is not just about bringing others along with you, it is about delegating roles and responsibilities. In the post-Cold War world to date Europe has not given the United States the opportunity to be a good leader because Europe has been a negligent multilateralist – demanding American activism but unwilling to back those demands with significant contributions of its own. The Clinton administration derived very little political capital at home from leading where Europe asked – in Bosnia and Kosovo – and an Obama administration would be wise to demand more from its European allies in return for activism.

So Europe must expand its capabilities, be prepared to contribute, and above all refrain from the kind of petty, electorally expedient ad hoc anti-Americanism that characterised much of the Bush era. In Robert Kagan's phraseology, if Europe wants American foreign policy to be sprinkled with a touch of Paradise, then Europe will have to bring some Power to the table.

The opportunity is there. Obama won this election, not by moving his party to the centre-right, the modus operandi of Bill Clinton, the great triangulator, but by asking the American people to move themselves out of their political comfort zone. The American public feel that George Bush squandered the goodwill of the world that followed September 11th, and wants America's prestige restored and its alliances rebuilt. Rebuilding the global financial system is the first major task, an area in which Europe is already possessed of both power and ideological authority.

But Europe should be warned: fail to fully engage, fail to back fine words with the means to help achieve them, and the United States will have little option to continue upon the unilateral pursuit of its interests rather than embrace a shared approach to our shared transatlantic goals. The Bush Doctrine was not so much of an aberration as many in Europe believe, and we would be wrong to assume that with Bush gone enlightened liberal multilateralism will simply fall into being. For that to happen Europe must be prepared to step up to the plate.

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