

Obama's Victory Took Root in Kennedy-Inspired Immigration Act

BY PETER S. CANELLOS

Barack Obama's victory last week triggered an immediate accounting of debts to be paid off in constructing his new administration. There were those who speculated that Obama would be building a White House staff of loyal old Chicago hands. Others foresaw a bevy of Clintonistas. And still others had a vision of a kind of Kennedy redux that wags quickly dubbed "Obamalot."

After all, Caroline Kennedy had emerged from her shell of shyness to head Obama's vice-presidential search team, after joining her Uncle Ted on a national barnstorming tour with Obama in the days leading up to Super Tuesday. Her exertion not only signaled her enthusiasm for Obama, but also her willingness to be a greater presence in public life: Some now envision her as a possible UN ambassador.

Her cousin, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., has spent decades developing credibility as a global environmental activist, and some people close to the Kennedy family feel he, too, is ready to emerge on the national stage, having overcome a troubled youth. They see him as a possible Environmental Protection Agency chief.

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There is no question that Obama owes a debt to the Kennedys—but it may be far greater than he or they realize. Yes, Senator Edward M. Kennedy offered a crucial early endorsement, comparing the Obama of 2008 to the Jack Kennedy of 1960. And certainly Caroline and others in the Kennedy family

worked hard on the campaign trail. But the greatest Kennedy legacy to Obama isn't Ted or Caroline or Bobby Jr., but rather the Immigration Act of 1965, which created the diverse country that is already being called Obama's America.

That act is rarely mentioned when recounting the high points of 1960s liberalism, but its impact arguably rivals the Voting Rights Act, the creation of Medicare, or other legislative landmarks of the era. It transformed a nation 85 percent white in 1965 into one that's one-third minority today, and on track for a nonwhite majority by 2042.

Before the act, immigration visas were apportioned based on the demographic breakdown that existed at the time of the

1920 Census—meaning that there were few if any limits on immigrants from Western and Northern Europe, but strict quotas on those from elsewhere.

The belief that the United States should remain a nation of European lineage was openly discussed when immigration laws were revisited in 1952. The resulting bill, the McCarran-Walter Act, was notorious for giving the State Department the right to exclude visitors for ideological reasons, meaning that a raft of left-wing artists and writers—includ-



President-elect Barack Obama and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) share a laugh together on the campaign trail.

ing Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and British novelist Graham Greene—and scores of others were denied visas. But it also had the effect of maintaining the 1920s-era notion of the United States as a white nation. (Congress imposed the bill over President Truman’s veto.)

A decade later, attitudes were changing, and President Kennedy proposed a new immigration structure that would no longer be based on national origins. After Kennedy’s assassination, his brother Ted took up the fight, pushing the Johnson administration to go even further than it wanted in evening the playing field. Though Lyndon Johnson, in signing the bill, tried to reassure opponents that it wouldn’t do much to change the balance of immigration, its impact was dramatic.

In the 1950s, 53 percent of all immigrants were Europeans and just 6 percent were Asians; by the 1990s, just 16 percent were Europeans and 31 percent were Asians. The percentages of Latino and

African immigrants also jumped significantly.

Simon Rosenberg, president of the liberal think tank NDN, formerly the New Democrat Network, called the Immigration Act of 1965 “the most important piece of legislation that no one’s ever heard of,” and said it “set America on a very different demographic course than the previous 300 years.”

By adding so many Asians, Latinos, and African immigrants, Rosenberg says, the act changed the racial narrative in America from one of oppression — the white-black divide dating to slavery — to one of diversity. That change was strongly echoed in the Obama campaign, which emphasized the candidate’s mixed-race background as making him representative of a new generation of Americans.

That generation has its roots in the Immigration Act of 1965, and the act had its roots in the Kennedys’ legislation. Obamalot may be the modern reflection of JFK’s New Frontier, after all. ■

We rise and fall together as one people: “La Raza Cosmica” — the cosmic people

Barack Obama’s Pledge to La Raza

The following remarks are excerpts from Barack Obama’s speech to the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), San Diego, California, July 13, 2008.

I’ve got to tell you, being here with all of you today feels a little like coming home. Because while I stand here as a candidate for President of the United States, I will never forget that the most important experience in my life came when I was doing what you do each day — working on the ground in our communities to bring about change.

[I]n this country, change doesn’t come from the top down. Change doesn’t happen just because someone in Washington says it should... [I]t starts when you send leaders to Washington committed to taking this country in a new direction.

That’s the kind of change you’re making every single day. The theme of this conference is the work of your lives: strengthening America together. It’s

been the work of this organization for four decades — lifting up families and transforming communities across America. And for that, I honor you, I congratulate you, I thank you, and I wish you another forty years as extraordinary as your last.

I come before you today at a defining moment for our nation. I’m thinking of an article I read in the newspaper a while back about struggling schools in Los Angeles. The article told the story of a boy named Gonzalo, who started falling behind in the seventh grade and wasn’t getting the support he needed to catch up. When his mother called the school to complain, nothing changed.

“Maybe the system is not designed for people like us,” she said.

Not designed for people like us.

It was a comment about education, but it reflects a broader feeling that so many people today share — that the system just isn’t working for them. And they’re right. It’s not.

The system isn’t working when a child in a