

## Observations of an Eavesdropper

*Ganar elecciones siempre es difícil, pero cada cual está en su derecho de elegir el mejor modo de perderlas..* [Winning elections is always difficult, but everyone has the right to choose his/her method of losing them] (*Poleo Party*, ABC, Madrid, 4-11-10)

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It would seem that President Obama agreed with the spirit of our subtitle. He blamed himself for the mid-term defeat of the Democrats, describing it as a "shellacking". The Spanish-language press was almost universally in agreement with his assessment and his choice of words as well, referring to the election results as *un severo voto de castigo, vuelco, varapalo, debacle, fracaso apabullante, batacazo, embate, baño de sangre*, all of which can be translated as shellacking, to put it kindly.

Regarding the defeat, one columnist wrote: *Se acabó el efecto Obama...se ha topado con la realidad* [The Obama effect has ended...it has bumped into reality] (*Terremoto en Washington*, Abel Veiga Copo, El Tiempo, Bogotá, Colombia, 4-11-10). The defeat was seen in no small part as due to his ineffectiveness as leader: *El Mandatario no ha sido capaz hasta ahora de llenar las expectativas que despertó su elección... Pese a sus promesas, no ha logrado que la situación económica mejore de manera sustancial, el desempleo sigue alto y ha promovido un intenso activismo fiscal que despertó resistencias en una sociedad que mira con desconfianza la injerencia excesiva del Estado. La reforma a la salud aprobada en 2009 ratificó esta tendencia hacia una burocratización pronunciada y terminó provocando una reacción ciudadana galvanizada a través del Tea Party.* [Thus far the President has not been capable of fulfilling the expectations which came with his election... Despite his promises, he has not been able to improve the economic situation substantially, unemployment continues to be high and has fostered an intense fiscal activism which caused resistance in a society that looks unkindly toward excessive interference by the State. The health reform bill approved in 2009 solidified this tendency, further provoking a citizens' reaction which was galvanized by the Tea Party.] (*Voto de castigo para Obama en Estados Unidos, Opinión, La Tercera*, Santiago de Chile, 4-11-10).

Ernesto Semán, of Argentina's Página/12, stated the President's problem in similar terms: *Obama miró con desdén la dimensión de la crisis y el esfuerzo que hubiera requerido de su parte obtener efectos más inmediatos y preservar el poder político para seguir con sus reformas. Eso no es la economía, sino sus ideas.* [Obama underestimated the dimensions of the crisis and the effort that would have been required on his part to obtain more immediate results and preserve the political power to continue with his reforms. That is not the economy, but his ideas.] (Buenos Aires, 6-11-10).

Note that in the above paragraph *desdén* was translated with a good deal of license. Perhaps "disdain" might well be more appropriate. The idea that the President has a tendency to look down upon, to feel above the fray, is repeated in the press. He is

described in one column as *parte de la facción (del Partido Demócrata) de los profesores de izquierda; es de hecho profesor* [part of the faction (in the Democrat Party) of leftist professors; he is in fact a professor]... *la debilidad del hombre (es) ... su falta de comprensión y empatía hacia el hombre de la calle. (Hillary Clinton) llegó incluso a decir que lo había visto expresar arrogancia y desdén* [the man's weakness (is) his lack of understanding of and empathy with the man in the street. (Hillary Clinton) even went so far as to say that she had seen him express arrogance and disdain.]. (*Cómo puede Obama reconquistar a Estados Unidos*, Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff / Der Spiegel, derechos exclusivos para La Nación, Santiago de Chile, 6-11-10)

As Carlos Chirino reported for BBC Mundo, while quoting Republican political strategist Adolfo Franco, "... *el presidente malinterpretó las elecciones del 2008. Efectivamente la gente votó por un cambio, pero un cambio (en la manera de hacer política) en Washington y no en cómo se organiza nuestra sociedad* [the president misinterpreted the elections of 2008. Essentially the people voted for a change, but a change (in how to conduct politics) in Washington and not in how to organize our society.] (*EE.UU./elecciones: noche de ganancias republicanas*, Carlos Chirino, BBC Mundo, Washington, 3-11-10)

Along those same lines, Diego Petersen Farah, of Mexico City's El Universal, states the following: ... *factores como los auxilios financieros y el multimillonario rescate de empresas como los automotrices también habrían obrado en contra del mandatario, quien además ha perdido apoyos entre grupos minoritarios, como homosexuales o hispanos, al no lograr las reformas que les prometió en la campaña electoral.* [...such factors as financial help and the mega-million dollar rescue of such entities as the automotive industry also have worked against the President, who has also lost support among minority groups, such as homosexuals and Hispanics, since he did not make the reforms which he had promised in his campaign.] (*Los fantasmas de Obama*, Diego Petersen Farah, El Universal, México DF, 6-11-10).

The first year and a half of the Obama presidency has been compared to the presidency of Jimmy Carter. As one Mexican columnist put it, both came into the job following difficult periods in our country: Carter following the defeat in Vietnam, and Obama, *no se explica sin Bush* (can not be explained without Bush). The columnist goes on to say, *El sello de ambos para la sociedad estadounidense es la ineficiencia. Sin duda, el problema es que los dos partieron de una enorme expectativa imposible de cumplir*, [The hallmark of both for US society is inefficiency. Undoubtedly, the problem is that both began with enormous expectations (of them) impossible to achieve.] (Diego Petersen Farah).

The President's shrinking popularity was not the only cause of his defeat. The Tea Party was certainly seen as an important factor in the election results. In an article from a daily in Quito, Ecuador, the Tea Party is explained in the following way: *Ya antes se ha usado el término para designar a núcleos políticos. En los últimos años, 'Tea Party' es un agrupamiento de extrema derecha que enfrenta la "amenaza izquierdista" o "socialista" del presidente Barack Obama. Son una suerte de "ala derecha" del Partido Republicano, que se opone a los migrantes, apoya posturas extremistas de desempleados*

*blancos, exige recortes en el gasto social, lucha porque se exonere de impuestos a los más ricos y propone eliminar reformas a la seguridad social.* [The term has already been used to designate political groups. In recent years “Tea Party” is a grouping of the extreme right which opposes the “leftist threat” or “socialism” of President Barak Obama. They are a sort of “right wing” of the Republican Party, opposing migrants, supporting extremist positions of unemployed whites, demanding cuts in social spending, fighting for tax breaks among the most wealthy and proposing to eliminate reforms to Social Security] (*Tea Party*, Enrique Ayala Mora, El Comercio, Quito, Ecuador, 12/11/2010)

One of our writers saw the loss in terms of a growing anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism in our country (*Antielitismo conservador*, Mauricio García Villegas, El Espectador, Bogotá, Colombia, 5-11-10). The same author saw the defeat as a rejection of *el presidente negro* and expressed his view that this was an indication of racism, fear and anti-Muslim feelings – the “Muslim” president, not even born in the United States.

Of course, the possible effects of the election on Latin America were of importance to our columnists. Responding to just that question and aware that the prime topic of pre-election discussion among the candidates was the economy, Moisés Naím, the Venezuelan political analyst and commentator, stated: *Si ni siquiera están dispuestos a hablar de Afganistán, ¿cuán importante puede ser América Latina o Colombia?* [If they are not disposed to talk about Afganistan, how important can Latin America or Colombia be?] (La silla vacía, Juanita León, 3-11-10, <http://www.lasilla vacia.com/historia/19346>). Making reference to those comments by Naím, an editorial columnist in Bogotá’s El Espectador makes the following observations: ... *América Latina ni aparece por ahora en el radar. Lo que no implica que no vaya a haber endurecimiento frente a gobiernos como los de Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua o Bolivia ... Con respecto a Colombia, es prematura la celebración de un eventual impulso a la aprobación del TLC, pues los intereses a favor o en contra se dejarán sentir más adelante y, dada la incertidumbre de los Tea Party, es prudente esperar a ver cuál será su posición definitiva.* [... Latin America doesn’t even appear on the radar right now. This does not imply that there will not be a tougher stance toward governments like those of Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua or Bolivia ... With respect to Colombia, the celebration of an eventual push toward the approval of The Free Trade Agreement is premature, since the interests in favor or opposed will be made clear later on and, given the uncertainty of the Tea Party, it is prudent to wait to see what their final position will be.] (Bogotá, 5-11-10)

That sort of uncertainty is typical of Latin America’s view of its future vis-à-vis the newly weakened President Obama. It is a kind of “We’ll wait and see but not hold out too much hope” attitude. There is little hope because the belief is that, unlike President Clinton and others of his predecessors who were able to bounce back after suffering mid-term defeats, President Obama will not be able to re-establish his role as leader: ... *tendrá que adaptarse a las nuevas circunstancias y mostrar una flexibilidad y una disposición al diálogo que hasta la elección del martes no había exhibido.* [... he will have to adapt to the new circumstances and show a flexibility and a disposition toward dialogue which up to

Tuesday's election he had not shown.] (*Voto de castigo para Obama en Estados Unidos, Opinión, La Tercera, Santiago de Chile, 4-11-10*)

We do have to wait to see what future awaits our country. As most of the columnists indicate, it is still too soon to see if President Obama will be able to regain his initial popularity. So, we will wait.

Note from Jim: However, and sadly enough, we can now know what the future of *Observations of an Eavesdropper* holds for us – articles without the cooperation of Elaine Carter. After more than twenty years of co-authorship, Elaine has decided to move on to other things. I assure you and the readers, Elaine, that your voice will be missed. Thank you for your insights into the language and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world, for enriching my experiences as student and writer, and for being the consummate colleague.

Reza el refrán: *Amistad de verdad es lo más difícil de encontrar y cuando ya la hay es lo que más tenemos que valorar -- y yo sí valoro tu amistad.*

Gracias