

“Fulfilling the Promise: What Obama and Rural America Share in Common”

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If there was a single defining theme in the recent presidential election, it was “the audacity of hope” – the temerity of envisioning a more promising future, even when things seemed bleakest. It was a timely message – not simply because it was a message sorely needed as the global economic crisis worsened daily, but also because it was message so long awaited as Americans increasingly found themselves divided by false dichotomies and fears that were nevertheless joined together by hope’s unifying though virtually imperceptible thread:

- hope for greater security against the threat of terrorism and also hope for less government intrusion by virtually unlimited powers of covert surveillance in the wake of 911;
- hope for greater opportunity of meaningful, livable-wage jobs with benefits at a time of increased corporate outsourcing to other countries and, also hope for extended unemployment benefits for those who find themselves suddenly without jobs;
- hope for less dependence on foreign oil and also hope for increasing utilization of alternative, renewable resource strategies in the face of global warming;
- hope for renewed commitment to individual and civil rights at a time when our federal government and nation’s courts have championed and upheld legislation to seriously curtail those rights.

The 2008 presidential election called upon the American electorate to embrace the *audacity* of hope – its seeming unlikeliness and absurdity – when so many of us had become cynical, adopting an almost fatalistic view of the possibility of these hoped-for realignments of national and social priorities occurring in reality as in our dreams. Many of us had reached the point of abandoning hope – hope having become a candle burning low in the dark cave of anxiety, fear and inevitability: this noxious mixture threatening to use up the last bit of breathable air and extinguish hope altogether.

In the midst of this dark night, the audacity of hope made possible the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of our nation at the moment when national uncertainty, division and marginalization reached their apogee. Like Washington, Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt before him, President-elect Obama faces his own perfect storm – a nation at war in two countries (one to wipe out terrorism and

the other to satisfy our greed for oil and military domination), a global economy on the verge of collapse and an ideological division within these United States that has for nearly three decades pitted rural against urban, gays against straights, conservatives against liberals and the wealthy and middle class against the poor.

Still the audacity of hope – born out of promise – comes of age only if the promise is fulfilled. Without hope's determined and capable leader stepping forward ready to ensure the promise is fulfilled, hope enters onto the stage of real events prematurely – perhaps dying an early death and leaving an even greater void where before hope's glimmer illuminated the promise and its prospect of fulfillment.

The election of Barack Obama and Rural America share not simply the audacity of hope, but also the opportunity of fulfilling the promise. This same challenging transition ahead for the new administration – i.e., from the audacity of hope to the reality of change for a better future – is reminiscent of the challenge that former U.S. Ambassador to South Africa, the Honorable James A. Joseph, issued to the founders of the National Rural Funders Collaborative at the beginning of its work seven years ago. In his remarks, "Rural America: Our Crown Jewel,"¹ Ambassador Joseph gave several reasons why philanthropy should invest in Rural America and also painted a contrast between a romanticized, nostalgic rural America of the past and a hoped-for rural America of the future:

"There are still two rural Americas – the rural America of our romantic dreams and the rural America of contemporary reality. I want to speak today of rural America that is no longer dominated by agriculture or represented by agricultural interest groups; the rural America that increasingly means not only poor, but diverse minorities; the rural America that is poised and well-positioned to protect our natural resources and provide for our recreation; the rural America that is badly in need of reinvestment and nurture."

National Rural Funders Collaborative's work in the past seven and 1/2 years to discover and invest in "the rural America of contemporary reality" has in some ways been an enterprise of hope against hope – having been born in 2001 under the dark star of a Rovian administration, emboldened by the events of 9/11. Launched within the first 200 days of the initial term of George W. Bush, NRFC began its early work with the idea that it would not simply be an effort of private philanthropy but a private-public partnership with the new administration. Indeed, our first few years were ones filled with hope as we were able to establish promising relationships with several federal agencies and their regional and state counterparts – notably USDA, Health and Human Services and the Appalachian Regional Commission. But the promise of a public-private partnership working differently to devote new resources and energy to rural America and to capture the spirit of the new reality of rural America was a promise *unfulfilled* as the end of the Bush administration's first term and throughout its second saw draconian cuts to rural budgets and increasing isolationism and scripted, hollow promises from federal agencies.

¹ Joseph, James A. , "Rural America, Our Crowned Jewel." National Rural Funders Collaborative: *Rural Connections*, August 2001

Even so, NRFC's work during the dark night of the Bush presidency has resulted in a private/corporate philanthropic initiative ²that has invested nearly \$6 million in rural communities and regions nationwide and leveraged more than \$50 million in additional private and public funds. During that period we have supported more than two dozen initiatives in nearly one half of our nation's states – especially many of those that are most rural and in many ways define what is meant by rural America in its current reality. But this record of investment is admittedly modest – both when looking at the work of so many other intermediaries and organizations who themselves have worked longer and invested far greater resources and at the resources historically available at the federal and regional (and occasionally state) levels of government.

What is most distinctive about NRFC's work is its increasing focus on calling attention to the new rural America that reflects neither rural America's romantic past nor the Rovian characterization of rural America as the storehouse of America's most conservative values. The rural reality that NRFC has sought to acknowledge, support and strengthen is the rural America of innovation, effective social institutions and structures, cultural and natural assets and increasing diversity. It is also the rural America in which poverty is concentrated and disproportionately shouldered by families and communities of color:

“Over seven million Americans living in rural America are poor. While the rural poor are likely to be white, rural people of color are a disproportionate segment of those living in extreme poverty and persistently poor counties. Whites are 73 percent of the rural population; 11.3 percent of rural whites are poor. Combined, communities of color only account for 17 percent of the total rural population, but they are poor at two to three times the rate of their white counterparts. African American and Latino poverty rates are 34.5 percent and 25.4 percent respectively, and the rate for Native Americans is 34 percent.” ³

As a ten year initiative, NRFC is within three years of its original sunset date with much of its work and learnings only just begun. The hope with which it was created – to establish a national public-private partnership that could begin to increase, advance and accelerate rural initiatives for social change with outcomes of increased family self-sufficiency, wealth creation and civic participation (especially among those who have traditionally been marginalized within rural America) – is still a promise unfulfilled.

The incoming Obama administration and rural America have in common a unique opportunity to realize and fulfill the promise that has lain dormant within rural communities themselves. No doubt the new administration's task is to fulfill the promise of urban and rural America alike. Yet a new opportunity exists to get right what previous administrations have missed: the intrinsic value *for all* of investing in

² Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Bank of America Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, The California Endowment, Calvert Social Investment Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, William Randolph Hearst Foundation, F. B. Heron Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Fannie Mae Foundation, Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education and Northwest Area Foundation.

³ “Zeroing In: Choices and Challenges for the National Rural Funders Collaborative.” Oakland: Applied Research Center, p. 8.

rural America, along with those pragmatic lessons of persistence and transformation by rural leaders and communities –especially those so long marginalized both by geography and by race, class and power -- that have enabled them to remain strong and viable despite increasing neglect by their urban counterparts. In this way, rural America offers its own special contributions – leadership, cultural and social values and the earth’s own resources of nature – to help meet the challenges of present day America in fulfillment of hope’s promise.