

Quiet As It's Kept, Barack Can't Do It Alone

By Christopher D. Cathcart

The groundswell of grassroots support for Barack Obama's campaign has been nothing short of phenomenal. People who barely raise their voice above a whisper when it comes to matters of politics are downright shouting this time around. Emails, phone calls and mailers are flying around the nation encouraging financial contributions and other support. Bumper stickers, yard signs and Obama t-shirts and buttons are everywhere, and you can't get through the day without hearing some discussion of the candidates or the issues at the local gym, supermarket, bank or post office. And that's a beautiful thing.

But what happens November 5th, the day after, God willing, Barack is elected the nation's 44th president? Will the clouds part and the light shine down, melting away all our problems like icicles in the spring thaw? Perhaps the euphoria will sweep through the Capitol Dome, prompting both sides of Congress and the Supreme Court to lay down their "arms" and allow our new president to do his thing without much resistance.

Of course no reasonable person believes any such nonsense. The real concern, however, is not that folk will have unrealistic expectations of Barack Obama, but that they will not have adequate enough expectations of themselves. Once the campaign season is over, whichever way it goes, and the need for grassroots political organizing is supposedly at its end, then what? If people simply go back to a "me and mine" mentality then a great deal of this wonderful mobilization will not only be lost, it will be desecrated. It will be disrespectful to both Barack and the people who worked so hard to help him climb the nation's highest and most daunting political mountain.

Once he is in office—again, God willing, we can't take anything for granted—he'll have to take on a host of enormous issues, many of which have been left in complete disarray by his predecessor. The challenges of the economy, Iraq, the on-going Middle East crisis, Darfur, gun-control, gas prices, immigration, the housing meltdown and so on will require full and focused attention. Add to that the on-going jousting with the Republicans in the House and Senate, negotiations with the state governors, talks with Iran and North Korea, and the general repair work needed to rebuild America's international prestige and it's plain to see his plate will be full, if not running over.

In short, he can't be expected to do everything, particularly on the local level. It will be shameful if all this wonderful, ground level organizing strength that has grown from all four corners of the nation is allowed to dissipate after the general election. The ad-hoc groups comprised and run by everyday citizens must find a way to pivot and focus on the many on-going issues facing our communities. Illiteracy, poverty, hunger, health concerns, failing schools and general hopelessness will, unfortunately, still require attention after the next president is selected.

The fundraising prowess displayed during this campaign will surely still be needed as well. There are more than enough struggling community groups that need support to continue the vital work they do regardless of who sits in the White House.

History has shown over and over again that true movements never really rally around a person—though it may appear that way at a glance—but around the ideas that person (or persons) helps bring into focus. Thus, real support for Barack Obama should manifest itself in support for what he stands for and the ideas he advocates. As a former community organizer, it's certain he'll appreciate his supporters turning their organizing might toward addressing the issues that impact everyone, everyday, on the local level.

He'll also understand that those who helped fuel his drive to the oval office will not only be among his staunchest supporters, but also in the ranks of those most demanding of accountability, and an adherence on his part to the core ideas and values that define his campaign, and the aspirations of millions.

It's almost certain some people, hopefully a minority, are rallying around Barack because it's fashionable and the thing to do right now, and once this election is over they'll recede back into a petty, self-serving existence. The hope is that most are doing it because they truly feel a part of something special, something relevant. These are people who not only want to see change, but be a part of it.

With the right combination of luck, sacrifice and tireless effort from all concerned, Barack Obama's work will truly begin after November 4, 2008. But, of equal importance, his supporters must realize their work too must continue past this election.

Christopher D. Cathcart is president/founder of OneDiaspora Group, a media consulting company in Los Angeles. He is also an acclaimed public speaker and author who has written a book on volunteering and mentoring titled "The Lost Art of Giving Back." For more information, email Chris@OneDG.com or visit www.onediaspora.com.