



Beyond brand Obama

Obama retained the message of bringing people together as a sub-theme to hope and change, writes Rosenberg.

BY Paul Rosenberg - 15 Oct 2012

In commenting on the first presidential debate, MSNBC's Chris Hayes astutely noted that Obama's advisers adhered to a first principle: first do no harm to the Obama brand, the brand of "no drama Obama", the perennial "adult in the room", who never gets ruffled, never gets angry - which, Hayes acknowledged, is partly a racially-imposed requirement. Yes, precisely: the Obama brand, for a brand is exactly what Obama is; and the logic of brand development, marketing and maintenance is precisely the logic that has defined his political career, beginning even before anyone outside of Illinois had ever heard of him.

And this is precisely what's wrong with Obama: on one hand, the inherently limiting logic of the brand in general, and on the other, the precise "reasonable" nature of Obama's brand, which makes it so politically ineffective and inappropriate for the actual political challenges of our day - challenges which are largely the result of a much more politically successful brand: the brand of American conservatism, which seems to thrive, zombie-like, on its numerous policy disasters.

That's not to say that Obama's brand obsession is entirely a bad thing. In the past, Democrats have frequently been far too careless of deliberate and deceptive attacks on their character which would automatically draw a swift response from any brand-protecting organisation.

Senator John Kerry might very well be President Kerry today, if only he and his campaign organisation thought a little more in terms of brand protection. But the issue is not brand-protection per se; rather, it's the obsessive brand-oriented mindset that pre-emptively rules out any other way of thinking about a politician, and necessarily limits the ability to "think outside the box" - the brand world's trademarked designation for what's otherwise known as critical and creative thinking... or, better yet, just plain thinking, period.

Obama's brand

It's important to recognise that what's now seen as Obama's brand was not always so. During the 2008 campaign, the campaign slogan, "hope and change" effectively washis brand, particularly since no one could ever say what exactly that was supposed to entail.

As I noted in an earlier column, Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine*, laid it out brilliantly on *Democracy Now!* - Obama had been the first candidate to run a "lifestyle" presidential campaign, similar to the corporate advertising campaigns that seek to associate consumer products with the look and feel of liberating social change movements:

"He really is a super brand on line with many of the companies that I discuss in No Logo... lifestyle brands that co-opted many of the, you know - the iconography of the transformative political movements like the civil rights movement, the women's movement," Klein said.

"The first time I saw the 'Yes, We Can' video that was produced by Will.i.am, my first thought was, you know, 'Wow. A politician has finally produced an ad as good as Nike that plays on our, sort of, faded memories of a more idealistic era, but, yet, doesn't quite say anything'."

The last bit, "doesn't quite say anything" proved to be incredibly prophetic. Four years before he ran for President, when he first appeared on the national stage as the keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama defined his brand in a similarly optimistic spirit, but tellingly different terms: he was a spokesman not for the Red States or the Blue States, but for the United States of America.

Of course, this ideal of including everyone was itself a Blue State attitude, as evidenced, for example, by the fact that the electoral heart of Red State America once fought a war to disunite the states, and that talk of secession remains popular with conservatives to this day - as evidenced by examples like Todd Palin's long involvement with the secessionist Alaska Independence Party and Rick Perry's speculation about secession in response to a 2009 Tea Party gathering in Texas.

Obama retained the message of bringing people together as a sub-theme to hope and change, but it remained profoundly ambiguous how this was supposed to be done - and for good reason: The partisan and ideological lines inside DC and the political class are profoundly different than those in the country at large.

In the country at large, after the financial crises hit, saving people's homes and their jobs had enormous bipartisan support, for example. Among the political elites? Not so much. Cutting the deficit - particularly programmes like Social Security and Medicare - was much more their concern.

Bringing people together

Thus, bringing the American people together implied one kind of bipartisanship - arguably even post-partisanship: one that protects and defends the welfare state, which is absolutely integral to the creation of the modern mass middle class. (Four decades of polling via the General Social Survey and many others shows broad, cross-ideological support for the American welfare state, even among self-identified extreme conservatives.)

Bringing the one per cent together implied something completely different, indeed, exactly the *opposite*: a "grand bargain" on how to dismantle the welfare state - and thus *dismantle* the middle class.

Once elected, Obama swiftly chose to do the later - calling for a debt-reduction commission almost immediately, and eventually appointing his own presidential commission (Simpson-Bowles) when Congressional Republicans reversed themselves and refused to create one legislatively. That choice - to market himself directly to DC and the one per cent as their kind of post-partisan - decisively determined what the third incarnation of his brand would be.

That decision also spelled doom politically, because the terms of its definition utterly precluded responding effectively when conservative Republicans - predictably - drastically changed the rules, adopting a strategy of virtually total opposition, based on a European parliamentary model, but without the prerogatives that a parliamentary majority enjoys.

Chris Hayes also momentarily touched on a related point - the shifting nature of conservative Republican economic policy, which long ago focused on balanced budgets, but has since come to be defined by tax cuts for the rich - and even the latest wrinkle, calling for tax *increases* for low- and middle-income Americans (the "47 per cent").

Hayes did not dwell on the shift, much less discuss it in terms of branding, but that's exactly how it should be considered. The term "fiscal conservative" is precisely that: a brand, having nothing at all to do with reality - at least as far as the "fiscal" part is concerned. Indeed, the absolute worst *fiscal* conservatives, in the original meaning of the term, are the Reagan-era and post-Reagan Republicans.

This is not a matter of opinion, but rather, cold hard fact (charts here): With the sole and slight exception of the Nixon-Ford presidency, every President in every 4-year term from World War II until Reagan took office reduced the federal deficit

as a percentage of GDP - the preferred and only reasonable way to judge the functional size and burden of a nation's public debt.

From Reagan's first term onward, the debt-to-GDP ratio has steadily grown - except under Democratic President Bill Clinton, who shrunk the budget deficit so sharply he produced four straight years of government surpluses.

But, as indicated above, this is not a problem for conservatives - they simply redefine the "fiscal conservative" brand to mean supporting tax cuts for the rich, based on the repeatedly discredited notion of trickle-down economics, with the constantly-discredited notion that this will produce spectacular growth.

Seeming contradiction

Careful readers will note that I'm arguing a seeming contradiction here: that Obama is constrained by the logic of brand identity, while conservatives are freed by it. But this is not a contradiction, it's exactly my point: whether or not one accepts the logic of brand-identity as inviolable is a cultural/cognitive artefact, with the neo-liberal Obama coming out of one tradition - the bourgeois Enlightenment - and conservative Republicans coming out of another - the aristocratic, military-religious counter-Enlightenment and its pre-modern antecedents.

In most intellectual matters, it's the liberal Enlightenment camp that's predisposed to question, and the conservative counter-Enlightenment camp that's predisposed to accept things at face value, even argue that they cannot be otherwise. Hence the language of "natural slaves", "*the* definition of marriage", etc.

But the world of branding and mega-corporations in the conservatives' home turf, which is part - but only part - of the reason that the tables are turned in this instance. The larger reason is that conservatives, rooted in the church, the military and inherited mega-wealth and privilege - see politics as all-out war, for

the purposes of gaining and maintaining absolute dominance, while Enlightenment liberals see it as an alternative to war, for the purposes of solving problems to meet everyone's needs.

In the real world history of brands, rebranding is a not uncommon occurrence, proving that brands need not be static entities forever limited by a given logic. Indeed, brands are ideally presented in such broad terms that they can be repeatedly retooled without the need for a massive overhaul, but when such an overhaul does become necessary, its success depends on a sort of double vision, with one eye on what's made the brand successful in the past, and the other, critical eye on the broader cultural landscape, surveying the broader environment in which the brand faces new challenges that it is not meeting well.

Conservatism has always presented itself in terms that ideally suit it to such rebranding. Indeed, it often even denies that it is an ideology at all, but rather a disposition. Which is, at one level, simply a way of explaining away its multiple contradictions, such as how the supposedly freedom-loving Ronald Reagan was such a reliable friend to Third World dictators, how Milton Friedman's "free markets" flourished under the dictatorial Chilean junta of Augusto Pinochet, etc. This propensity for evading consistent ideological positions - a potential, even a predilection for political shape-shifting - is a defining characteristic of conservatism in the modern era, since the time of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre.

As political scientist Corey Robin argued last year in *The Reactionary Mind*: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin, the idea of "Burkean conservatism" guided by prudence, ruled by sobriety and devoted to continuity, is merely a myth or a pose, not least because Burke himself was no Burkean in these terms - he only appeared to be until things got too challenging to be contained by "Burkean" means, at which point he became a burn-them-all-down extremist.

What is consistent, Robin argued, is a defence of inequality and privilege, which always involves some degree of concessions (and occasional realignments) allowing for those in the lower orders to find some basis for identifying with those of much greater power above them, and lording over those below.

Conservative framing of issues

In the 1970s, conservatives went on a binge of institution building - the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute and Cato Institute in the think-tank world, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in the realm of state legislative policy, the Moral Majority on the culture war front, etc.

Conceived in reaction to the dominant political tides of the 1960s, but with roots dating back to fighting the New Deal - as described by historian Kim Phillips-Fein in *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* - these institutions were long-range and explicitly ideological from their inception.

Brought into being either by marketing experts, or those keenly aware of what marketing can do, these institutions were designed from the start to run long-term propaganda wars, what Italian independent Marxist Antonio Gramsci called a "war of position" or "culture war", in the sense of being a war to control the cultural reality-defining institutions of a given society.

While pre-existing think-tanks and foundations might have a generally liberal orientation compared to these newcomers, a crucial aspect of the liberal mindset was a focus on experimentation, analysis, reflection, discussion and debate - all a far cry from organised political struggle.

It was, quite tellingly, a state-level conservative think-tank, the Mackinaw Centre in Michigan, which produced the clearest expression of this difference - the "Overton Window" (classic explanation by a conservative activist here), which

defined the purpose of a conservative think tank as shifting the range of acceptable options over time.

Also tellingly, the classic example used to describe this was education, structured by the sole organising principle of privatisation, which has nothing to do with education *per se*. It had the "desired extreme of total freedom" on one end, to wit "No government involvement in education" (roughly the practice of the Southern states under slavery) and the "undesirable extreme of total statism" - which no one in America has ever advocated for - "Children taken from parents and raised as janissaries" on the other.

The mindset embodied in this view of education is perfectly honed for fighting ideological wars, but utterly absurd for dealing with actual educational policies and problems. Yet, four decades after conservatives initiated this war-fighting public policy model, Democrats continue playing checkers against chess.

They have repeatedly accepted conservative framing of issues and definition of terms - framing that increasingly makes it difficult even to state a progressive point of view. Conservatives turn out shoddy, often dishonest "studies" with an army of PR flaks for every writer, and flood the media with their talking points.

Liberals turn out disciplined, detailed, often damning studies with no media strategy or coordination whatsoever and are utterly ignored - even by those supposedly on their own side... such as President Obama.

Reversing unequal situation

One reason that many were attracted to the Obama campaign was the hope and promise that it would at the very least *start* to reverse this highly unequal situation, that it would begin building a powerful communicative and deliberative structure that could go toe-to-toe with the right-wing noise machine, answering its incoherent policies with actual solutions.

I never believed that any such promise was real, but I encountered countless Obama supporters who did believe, and I hoped that I was wrong and they were right. Indeed, the Obama campaign actively nurtured this hope, not just with rhetoric - such as his appropriation of black feminist poet June Jordan's declaration "we are the ones we've been waiting for" - but by soliciting the views of volunteers along the way.

Yet, once in office, the doors swiftly swung shut on all that. Two top proposals were simply too much for Obama to handle. One called for prosecuting Bush administration officials for war crimes, the other called for legalising marijuana.

While one might well understand the difficulty such demands might pose for Obama, effectively shutting the door on millions of fired-up supporters only helped create vastly greater difficulties, as the right-wing's prefabricated Tea Party movement rushed in to fill the void created by Obama's intentional demobilisation of those who made his election possible. Obama may well survive his poor debate performance to gain re-election.

But if he does, he will almost certainly continue operating within his chosen brand logic, defined in terms of the political class, Beltway conventional wisdom, and the one per cent. For 30 years now, these terms have been shaped by the conservative institutions established in the 1970s.

It does not matter which party the President belongs to, or what brand he adopts, as long as this "intellectual" environment remains fundamentally unchallenged, the chance for any fundamental improvement in American life is virtually nil.

On the one hand, the conservative brand can morph at will to become whatever it needs to be in order to thrive, regardless of the havoc it wrecks upon the rest of us. On the other hand, even the most precious cultivated other brands - such as Obama's - will find their strengths quickly turned into weaknesses, because someone else keeps changing the rules of the game.

Paul Rosenberg is the senior editor of Random Lengths News, a bi-weekly alternative community newspaper.