

## Need for more than great speeches and symbolism

Anne Summers  
*Sydney Morning Herald*  
January 10, 2009

It is just 10 days until Barack Obama becomes America's first African-American President in an inauguration that promises to be high on symbolism as well as ceremony.

But even before he is sworn in as the 44th President of the United States, the man who promised "change we can believe in" has already caused deep disappointment among previously ardent supporters who are realising, with some bitterness, that perhaps there will be more *plus ca* than *change* in Barack Obama's administration.

This week's announcement that Clinton's White House Chief of Staff, Leon Panetta, would head the CIA is just the latest of a series of jaw-dropping high-level appointments. Many Obamaites are asking why the man who undertook to bring change to Washington is staffing his administration with dozens of Clintonites.

Obama loyalists raised eyebrows when the guy who promised to end the war in Iraq tapped as his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the woman he had excoriated during the campaign for voting to authorise the Iraq war. Many were infuriated by his decision to keep the Bush appointee Robert Gates as his Secretary of Defence. Perhaps Obama had little choice since that's where the experience is, so he can hit the ground running on January 21.

Plus, having a CIA director committed to ending torture of US prisoners is definitely a change. And a case can be made that the experience of Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates are what are needed to end the Iraq War and, in Clinton's case, restart the Middle East peace process.

But this argument does not explain appointments such as the former governor of farm state Iowa, Tom Vilsack, as Secretary of Agriculture. (A few dreamers had even hoped Obama might abolish Agriculture and replace it with the broader brief of a Department of Food Security; instead he's put in a man who's pro-GMO and biotech). Then there's Colorado's Senator Ken Salazar who is to be Secretary of the Interior; a pro-mining man who believes in "clean coal". These positions are body blows to those who thought that Obama would be different.

Then there was Obama's decision that staunchly anti-gay preacher Reverend Rick Warren perform the invocation at his inauguration. No matter that he is to be "balanced" by Reverend Joseph Lowery, a civil rights campaigner and pro-gay rights advocate, performing the benediction. Gay groups have to accommodate themselves to Obama reaching out to a man who repudiates their very existence. Would Obama

reach out in the same way to the Ku Klux Klan? Aren't there limits to tolerance and inclusion?

Against all this (or perhaps an essential part of it) is the way the Obama campaign machine is maintaining the massive grass roots organisations it put together. The millions of people who signed up for email or text updates during the campaign are still receiving regular messages, including one from Obama himself on Thursday starting the countdown to when "our journey to bring change will officially begin".

This is an immensely powerful tool.

By retaining this ability to communicate directly, and instantaneously, with a millions-strong base, the Obama presidency will be able to counter negative media and campaigns by disenchanted groups. It will also be an ongoing platform for fund-raising, with the Obama network now integrated with Hillary Clinton's database, adding even more grunt to the numbers - and the star power. This week Bill Clinton went to the Hillary list and asked everyone to send \$5 for the Inauguration.

Team Obama has set up an impressive, and unprecedented, transition website (<http://change.gov>). It is a comprehensive compilation of Obama's priorities, details of all major policies, press announcements, names of people nominated or appointed so far, plus the inevitable feedback, blogging and other interactive mechanisms designed to encourage people to feel they are part of the process of governing.

The site also includes details for what promises to be the most theatrical Inauguration since JFK's in 1960.

On January 18, Barack Obama will travel on a train packed with supporters from Philadelphia, the birthplace of American democracy, to Washington, picking up vice-president elect Joe Biden along the way in Delaware. The next day, which happens to be Martin Luther King Jr Day, the Obamas and the Bidens will lead the nation in a day of volunteering in poor neighbourhoods - a fitting way for a man who began his career as a community organiser to spend his last day before he is president.

On January 20, the entire Washington Mall will be opened up for the first time at an Inauguration to accommodate the several millions who are expected to throng the nation's capital. Many more millions, across the United States and the world, will watch on television as history is being made, and we can expect to be as uplifted as we were then. Obama's Inaugural Address is likely to surpass in soaring rhetoric even his previous transporting speeches. It was these speeches that allowed Americans to believe real change was coming.

"I don't want to just end the war," he said during the campaign. "I want to end the mindset that got us into war." Given many of his appointments, of people who epitomise the mindset of traditional politics, that might prove difficult.

**[www.annesummers.com.au](http://www.annesummers.com.au)**