

THE FIRST 2,920 DAYS

The iconic first 100 days of the US presidency have passed from the scene in a seamless way.

The honeymoon period encountered only a modest threat from the opposite political camp which was engaged in finding a new Republican voice in the midst of electoral defeat. There was little of the dynamism that accompanied the introduction of President Roosevelt's New Deal in the early 1930's. Nor had President Obama's prior campaign handshakes with foreign powers left much room for the relief that followed John F. Kennedy's request for a sense of restraint from the Soviet Union during his first few months in the Oval Office.

In contrast to Gerald Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon, a decision that reportedly saw that president's support drop nearly 30% in as many days, today's poll numbers tend to boast averages as well as a slight, negative departure from the honeymoon days of previous chief executives. President Obama appears less favored than Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter, but he also holds an approval rating similar to that enjoyed by Ronald Reagan. An additional parallel is found in the fact that during their first 100 days in office, both Democrat Obama and Republican Reagan engendered more public enthusiasm for their personal attributes and qualities than for their policy proposals. (1)

European presidential elections follow a path toward an office that is often more ceremonial than substantive in nature. However, they have now taken on a battleground atmosphere as EU populations seek a leadership that might mitigate the worst effects of the global economic meltdown. May, 2009 is the month in which Germany's increasingly uncomfortable center-left coalition may be seriously undermined by a Social Democratic challenge to an incumbent Conservative presidency. This month also brings the first round of presidential elections in economically damaged Lithuania where 7 candidates, including several independents, a retired general, and a former TV game show personality, have announced their candidacies.

In the Czech Republic Vaclav Klaus still holds firmly onto the helm, assured office for another 4 years due to his re-election in 2008. His premiership gave way somewhat contentiously to the presidency, but only after many years of grouping and regrouping political activities with minority parties, encountering and fending off charges of corruption, and a series of on-again, off-again relationships with a notable leftist contingent. His days in a variety of official offices have made him one of the most outstanding figures in Czech politics. He is cited both for his unabashed anti-environmentalist stance as well as for a bold Euroscepticism in the face of Czech sovereignty issues, and currently clings to a disinclination to lend his signature to the Lisbon Treaty in spite of the Parliament's recent ratification.

The Czech President's lengthy public years still appear able to skirt the harried, first hundred day appraisals to which US presidents are subject in other, distinctive ways. He is an economist whose beliefs can be traced to the ideals of the Reagan political years that came effectively to an end just as his own decades in politics were about to begin. Similarly rooted in the free market approach of Milton Friedman, President

Klaus, along with President Reagan, equated the institution of economic choice in a free market climate with freedom from the intrusive restrictions of an overarching governmental rule. Though the Czech President's image has been somewhat tarnished by resistance to federalist EU goals, a belief in unfettered market economies and the individual freedoms associated with their advent in the eastern Europe of the 1990's remains unchanged. For one whose youth was spent under a strenuous totalitarian reach, the liberation invited by an economic-political equation remains central to its geographic expansion, though not necessarily its complete adoption, by far-flung peoples; he is noted for underscoring the fact that on a state visit to Mongolia, one of his favorite books, Milton Friedman's "Free to Choose," was readily available in translation in a local store on the main street of the country's capital city. (2)

The road to a successful, multilateral Lisbon Treaty seems clear in spite of an additional public referendum in Ireland, or the prospect of further presidential objections. Less clear is a response to the operations of an unfettered free market given its devastating global effects and current attempts at regulation and transparency. On Main Street in the US and in Eastern Europe there is a rising need to contrast unregulated free markets, as these have been constructed in theory, with the disappointing reality they have brought to everyday life when placed decisively into practice. Some of the most revealing inquiries have come from journalists, who though at one time were given to forensic reporting, have now turned their considerable attention to the facts of the case in light of a review of the past few decades. (3)

It is argued that less market regulation, associated with risky investments in derivatives based on questionable sub-prime mortgages, have belied a promise to include a majority of politically-free people in economic opportunity. Main Street instead, as well as smaller localities everywhere, have been battered by a search abroad for less expensive labor, company mergers and geographic movements that have left behind largely abandoned factory towns, and a loss in services, as both a growing wealth gap, and a decline in middle-level incomes, pervades even the long-tested, sophisticated care delivery services of urban institutions and their neighborhoods.

The search is now on for remedies to the growing sense of lack of connectedness between a set of economic beliefs and their failure to successfully deliver promised rewards. To many, the arcane, taxing details remain as hidden as the histories of Western economic theories President Klaus once sought to retrieve from the limited, unenlightened bookshelves of Soviet-era libraries.

Though troubling to those who favor an elevated pan-European experience, one attempt at remediating a rapidly devolving economic legacy seems to be a trend towards a measured reassertion of political control at the national level. The long-standing French insistence on continued agricultural subsidies, is usually mentioned, as is a growing German dissatisfaction with an EU-wide stimulus package or a European food bank for the poor. (4) Another has been to rearrange recent history's integral tie between politics and economics in an effort to find a flexible middle-ground that comprehends democratic free market ideals with oversight and governmental regulatory structures. These trends point towards an ongoing review of the place of sovereignty issues in regional relations. They may also entail an admission that unrestrained free market theories may be incapable of being

universally applied at all times without adjustable policies and appropriate practical reforms.

Both eurosceptics and those more inclined to federalism might approach these trends with some caution but nevertheless with hope. In the East of Europe the era of obtrusive government has ended, and in the Czech Republic the welcome transformations of the Velvet Revolution have taken place. The libraries are full of once hard to acquire books and popular magazine articles along with a customary presence of academic journals.

At least a few students of the works of Milton Friedman, the rather shadowy persona behind the boisterous politics of decades ago, might adopt a similarly optimistic if ironic attitude. It was his belief that an "optimal society" of free individuals could best be achieved through the mechanisms of an Economics that was removed from the armchairs of conservative theoreticians and subject to empirical proof and reordering through hypothesis testing. (5) That testing is now ongoing. The context is a great deal more agonizing than anticipated. It will require a length of time far longer than the initial 100 days of any presidency.

- (1) "Barrack's In The Basement." Editorial. Washington Times. (4/28/2009). Kohut, Andrew. Guest Column. "Will Obama Ride Reagan's Ratings Roller Coaster?" New York Times Online. (4/21/2009) (2) "Vaclav Klaus: Czech President Turned 'European Dissident.'" EuBusiness.(12, 2008); Klaus, Vaclav. "Remarks At Milton Friedman Memorial Service." Klaus.cz (1/29/2007). (3) Kleinknecht, William. The Man Who Sold The World: Ronald Reagan And The Betrayal Of Main Street America. New York, Nation Books (2009). (4) Charlemagne. "Those Selfish Germans." Economist Online (4/30/2009) (5) Ebenstein, Lanny. Milton Friedman: A Biography. New York, Palgrave Macmillan (2007; Pp.54;66)

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