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VIEWPOINT

BY WILLIAM F. WELD

A Republican's Advice for Barack Obama

How to inspire Americans in bleak times? Rally us around an issue that will empower us again: energy.

MR. PRESIDENT-ELECT: Congratulations. You are now the vessel for the hopes of many millions—those who voted for you and those who did not. You will take office amid a thicket of intractable problems. But no policy position, no substantive program, will be as important as your hopeful outlook and your deep calm. Because of the economic crisis, you will be the equivalent of a wartime President for your first two years. Part of your new job will be to make Americans feel good about being Americans. To achieve this goal, you need not growl or frown to demonstrate that you are resolute. You of all people have shown that you can display seriousness of purpose without being grim—even with a touch of humor. An upbeat attitude and a willingness to be flexible in devising approaches to new economic conditions (recalling F.D.R.'s "bold, persistent experimentation") will carry you a long way.

Of course, many folks are expecting you to greatly expand the federal budget right out of the box, beginning with tax increases and an expensive national health-care bill. You could surprise everyone by instead emphasizing the need for all Americans to get their hands dirty, on their own time, to address public needs. An ideal area for such an appeal, which could become a signature issue for you, is energy. Reducing energy consumption is an area where every American can make a difference. Give every citizen a stake in fighting global warming for the survival of the planet, and give each one a stake in reducing dependence on foreign oil to preserve the national security of the U.S. These goals are no less lofty than President Kennedy's call for the U.S. to land a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s—and with something as simple as tax incentives to replace inefficient windows and appliances, you can enlist the energies of many citizens.

You have pointed out that for 100 years our communities have been organized around the principle of cheap gasoline. You have suggested that perhaps walking, bicycling, and rail trans-

portation could occupy a greater place in our lives. Bravo! This is both a quality-of-life and a public-health issue and deserves presidential attention.

An immediate diplomatic challenge will be to induce such major economies as India and China to go along with the rest of the world in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. If those countries are pushed either too hard or not hard enough, the whole global climate-change effort will come to a halt. That cannot be your legacy.

A second great task, particularly in a time of global recession, will be to maintain the benefits of global free trade. This will be a matter of particular delicacy for you because of protectionist sentiments among your political supporters. To turn our backs on the North American Free Trade Agreement and similar initiatives, as some have urged, would run contrary to the economic interests of the U.S., which has the most productive workforce in the world. Instead, you could meet legitimate labor and environmental concerns simply by disfavoring goods (steel, for example) from countries that flout their obligation to join in the fight against global warming. (This idea was advanced by Hillary Clinton and organized labor during the presidential primaries.)

A third objective where you could simultaneously promote the interests of the U.S. and other countries is to prevent Africa from becoming a gunpowder continent. You could do worse than to dust off Ronald Reagan's Caribbean Basin Initiative and F.D.R.'s rural-electrification program and apply them to sub-Saharan Africa. Add favorable trade policies, vastly increased hydropower, and family-planning assistance to George W. Bush's successful anti-AIDS and antimalaria programs, and not only Africa but the whole world will be surprised and delighted.

Both at home and abroad, your personal approach will help to close the sale. Because of our superpower status, you will lose nothing by delivering your message calmly and softly, as the African proverb advises. Mr. President, we are counting on it. ■

MY TAKE

WILLIAM WELD, Republican governor of Massachusetts from 1991 to 1997, crossed party lines in October to endorse Barack Obama for President.