

# Intelligent Business

America's election

## Great expectations

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### Barack Obama has won a famous victory. Now he must use it wisely

NO ONE should doubt the magnitude of what Barack Obama achieved this week. When the president-elect was born, in 1961, many states, and not just in the South, had laws on their books that enforced segregation, banned mixed-race unions like that of his parents and restricted voting rights. This week America can claim more credibly than any other western country to have at last become politically colour-blind. Other milestones along the road to civil rights have been passed amid bitterness and bloodshed. This one was marked by joy, white as well as black.

Mr Obama lost the white vote, it is true, by 43-55%; but he won almost exactly same share of it as the last three (white) Democratic candidates; Bill Clinton, Al Gore and John Kerry. And he won heavily among younger white voters. America will now have a president with half-brothers in Kenya, old schoolmates in Indonesia and a view of the world that seems to be based on respect rather than confrontation.

That matters. Under George Bush America's international standing has sunk to awful lows. This week Americans voted in record-smashing numbers for many reasons, but one of them was an abhorrence of how their shining city's reputation has been tarnished. Their country will now be easier for its friends to like and harder for its foes to hate.

In its own way the election illustrates this redeeming effect. For the past eight years the debacle in Florida in 2000 has been cited (not always fairly) as an example of shabby American politics. Yet here was a clear victory delivered by millions of volunteers—and by the intelligent use of technology to ride a wave of excitement that is all too rare in most democracies. Mr Obama showed that, with the right message, a candidate with no money or machine behind him can build his own.

### Hard times and a bleak House

With such a great victory come unreasonably great expectations. Many of Mr Obama's more ardent supporters will be let down—and in some cases they deserve to be. For those who voted for him with their eyes wide open to his limitations, everything now depends on how he governs. Abroad, this 21st-century president will have to grapple with the sort of great power rivalries last seen in the 19th century. At home, he must try to unite his country,



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tackling its economic ills while avoiding the pitfalls of one-party rule. Rhetoric and symbolism will still be useful in this; but now is the turn of detail and dedication.

Mr Obama begins with several advantages. At 47, he is too young to have been involved in the bitter cultural wars about Vietnam. And by winning support from a big majority of independents, and even from a fair few Republicans, he makes it possible to imagine a return to a more reflective time when political opponents were not regarded as traitors and collaboration was something to be admired.

Oddly, he may be helped by the fact that, in the end, his victory was slightly disappointing. He won around 52% of the popular vote, more than Mr Bush in 2000 and 2004, but not a remarkable number; this was no Roosevelt or Reagan landslide. And though Mr Obama helped his party cement its grip on Congress, gaining around 20 seats in the House of Representatives and five in the Senate, the haul in the latter chamber falls four short of the 60 needed to break filibusters and pass controversial legislation without Republican support (though recounts may add another seat, or even two). Given how much more money Mr Obama raised, the destruction of the Republican brand under Mr Bush and the effects of the worst financial crisis for 70 years, the fact that 46% of people voted against the Democrat is a reminder of just what a conservative place America still is. Mr Obama is the first northern liberal to be elected president since John Kennedy; he must not forget how far from the political centre of the country that puts him.

Mr Obama's victory, in fact, is almost identical in scope to that of Bill Clinton in 1992; and it took just two years for the Republicans to sweep back to power in the 1994 Gingrich revolution. Should President Obama give in to some of the wilder partisans in Congress, it is easy to imagine an ugly time ahead—and not just for the Democrats in the 2010 mid-term elections. America could fatally lapse into protectionism, or re-regulate business and finance to the point at which innovation is stifled, or "spread the wealth" (to quote the next president) to the extent that capital is prudently shifted overseas.

## Our mutual friends

Mr Obama will not take office until January 20th, but he can use the next ten weeks well. A good start would be to announce that he will offer jobs to a few Republicans. Robert Gates, Mr Bush's excellent defence secretary who has helped transform the position in Iraq, ought to be kept in the post for at least a while. Sadly, Richard Lugar has ruled himself out as secretary of state; but Chuck Hagel, senator for Nebraska, is another possibility for a defence or foreign-policy job. Mr Obama might even find a non-executive role for John McCain, with whom he agrees on many things, especially the need to tackle global warming and close Guantánamo. Another pragmatic move would be to announce that his new treasury secretary (ideally an experienced centrist such as Larry Summers or Tim Geithner) will start working closely with Hank Paulson, the current one, immediately.



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Whoever he appoints, Mr Obama will be constrained by the failing economy. He should not hold back from stimulus packages to help America out of recession. But he has huge promises to keep as well. He has pledged tax cuts to 95% of families. He has proposed near-universal health care—an urgent reform, as America’s population ages and companies restrict the health insurance they offer. He proposes more spending on infrastructure, both physical and human. But if he is to tackle all or any of this, he must balance his plans with other savings or new revenues if his legacy is not to be one of profligacy and debt. He has to start deciding whom to disappoint.

Non-Americans must also brace for disappointment. America will certainly change under Mr Obama; the world of extraordinary rendition and licensed torture should thankfully soon be gone. But America will, as it must, continue to put its own interests, and those of its allies, first. Withdrawing from Iraq will be harder than Mr Obama’s supporters hope; the war in Afghanistan will demand more sacrifices from Americans and Europeans than he has yet prepared them for. The problems of the Middle East will hardly be solved overnight. Getting a climate-change bill through Congress will be hard.

The next ten weeks give Mr Obama a chance to recalibrate the rest of the world’s hopes. He could use part of his transition to tour the world, certainly listening to friends and rivals alike but also gently making clear the limits of his presidency. He needs to explain that, although his America will respect human rights and pay more heed to the advice of others, it will not be a pushover: he must avoid the fate of Jimmy Carter, a moralising president who made the superpower look weak.

Like most politicians, Mr Obama will surely fail more than he succeeds. But he is a man of great dignity, superior talents and high ideals. In choosing him, America has shown once again its unrivalled capacity to renew itself, and to surprise.

## Intelligent Business Worksheet

### Great Expectations: November 6<sup>th</sup> 2008

1. Before you read the article, read through the statements below. Using your background knowledge and opinions, mark the following statements as true [T] or false [F]. If you don’t know, guess at the response.
  - a. In 1961, when Barack Obama was born, marriages between blacks and whites were illegal in many states in the USA.
  - b. In 1961, many states had separate schools, toilets, hospitals, universities, and drinking fountains for blacks and whites.



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- c. In 1961, many states had laws saying that blacks were not allowed to drive cars, trucks or motorised vehicles.
- d. At the same time, blacks had limited voting rights in many States.
- e. More than 50% of white Americans voted for Barack Obama.
- f. More than 50% of white Americans voted for Bill Clinton.
- g. Hawaii, where Barack Obama was born, was one of the 50 United States in 1961.
- h. The majority of the population in Hawaii are Muslims.
- i. Barack Obama was educated in Kenya, where his father was born.
- j. Barack Obama represents the Democratic Party. The current President George W. Bush, represents the Republican Party.
- k. The Republican Party currently have majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.
- l. Barack Obama will become President of the USA on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009.

**2. Read the entire article quickly. Link the summaries in the boxes below to each of these sub-headings:**

- a. Barack Obama has won a famous victory. Now he must use it wisely
- b. Our mutual Friends
- c. Hard Times and a bleak House

- 1. This section summarises what Mr Obama needs to do during the next ten weeks.
- 2. This section summarises the election results and reports on voting patterns in different age and ethnic groups.
- 3. This section summarises the political, economic and foreign and domestic policy challenges Mr Obama faces

**3. General comprehension. Read the article more carefully and check your responses to Question 1. Find references in the text (if they are there) to justify the answers.**



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4. Vocabulary. Choose the best synonym for the words in the first column in the table below.

	A	B	C
credibly	believably	truthfully	comfortably
abhorrence	pride	fear	hatred
tarnished	polished	made dirty	renewed
foes	enemies	industries	businesses
debacle	victory	fiasco	dilemma
scope	space	dimension	beauty
lapse	dash	climb	fall
tackle	control	encourage	decide
constrained	limited	defeated	grown
profligacy	thrift	excessive spending	innovation
brace	remove	restrict	prepare
stifled	corrupted	strangled	cured
pledged	promised	prevented	refused
traitors	opponents	supporters	torturers
cement	make firm	construct	stick together

5. Cultural reference 1: The article uses the phrases: *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. These are references to which great author's work?
- Ernest Hemmingway
  - Edgar Allan Poe
  - Charles Dickens
  - Maya Angelou
6. Cultural reference 2: What do you know about this author's work? Why do you think the author of the article has used these references? *Discuss*.
7. Stylistics. The author of the article could have referred to another work by the same author *A Tale of Two Cities*. Many sentences in the article contrast two extremes. Find as many examples as you can.
8. Stylistics. The shortest sentence in the article contains only two words. Find it and notice how powerful a very short sentence can be.



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## Teachers' Notes

The tasks in this worksheet can be done individually or by groups working together. Group work will generate more language use and promote more careful analysis of the text.

Learners should be encouraged to use dictionaries, reference books and the internet (if available) to assist their research.

## Answers

1)

- a) In 1961, when Barack Obama was born, marriages between blacks and whites were illegal in many states in the USA. [T]
- b) In 1961, many states had separate schools, toilets, hospitals, universities, and drinking fountains for blacks and whites. [T]
- c) In 1961, many states had laws saying that blacks were not allowed to drive cars, trucks or motorised vehicles. [F]
- d) At the same time, blacks had limited voting rights in many States. [T]
- e) More than 50% of white Americans voted for Barack Obama. [F]
- f) More than 50% of white Americans voted for Bill Clinton. [F]
- g) Hawaii, where Barack Obama was born, was one of the 50 United States in 1961. [T] *Hawaii became the 50<sup>th</sup> State on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1959*
- h) The majority of the population in Hawaii are Muslims. [F] *There are very few Muslims in Hawaii.*
- i) Barack Obama was educated in Kenya, where his father was born. [F] *His father was born in Kenya, but Barack Obama was educated in Indonesia, which has a Muslim majority population.*
- j) Barack Obama represents the Democratic Party. The current President George W. Bush, represents the Republican Party. [T]
- k) The Republican Party currently have majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. [F] *The Democrats have majorities in both Houses.*
- l) Barack Obama will become President of the USA on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009. [F] *He will become president on January 20<sup>th</sup> 2009.*

2) a/2, b/1, c/3.



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3) Student's own answers

4)

**credibly**--believably--

**abhorrence**---hatred

**tarnished**--made dirty-

**foes**-enemies--

**debacle**--fiasco-

**scope**--dimension-

**lapse**---fall

**tackle**-control--

**constrained**-limited--

**profligacy**--excessive spending-

**brace**---prepare

**stifled**--strangled-

**pledged**-promised--

**traitors**-opponents--

**cement**-make firm—

3) Charles Dickens.

4) Dickens often wrote about contrasts between riches and poverty, honesty and dishonesty, country life and town life.

5) The Tale of Two Cities is about differences and similarities between London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution.

6) The shortest sentence is "***That matters.***" at the start of the third paragraph.



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