

The Scouting Report – A New Presidency
Live Web Chat with Brookings Vice President and Director Darrell West and
***Politico* Senior Editor Fred Barbash**
January 21, 2009

12:28 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Darrell M. West is our guest today. He is the Vice President and Director of Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. We'll be talking about the inauguration, Obama's speech, his appointments and his first few hours in office. Welcome Darrell. Let me start with the obvious question: Obama's speech is getting, well, mixed reviews, substantive but not as inspiring as some had hoped. What did you make of it?

12:29 Reader Poll

How was Obama's speech?

Excellent (57%)

Better than average (43%)

Disappointing (0%)

12:29 Darrell West:

It wasn't as electrifying as some of his past speeches. But I think it was the right speech for the moment. It was a speech of "tough love" laying out all the hard work and sacrifice that is ahead. It is going to be a rough next 12 months.

12:30 [Comment From MaryEllen in MA]

Do you think Rick Warren hurt Obama with his base?

12:31 Darrell West:

Warren was a contentious choice. With all the past controversy, I was surprised when he added the Lord's Prayer at the end. Most invocations at public events are less denominational than this.

12:32 [Comment From Kenneth from Chicago]

What do you think about Obama including "non-believers" in his speech alongside Muslims, Christians, Jews, etc.? How do you think this will play with religious voters?

12:33 Darrell West:

That was surprising to me as well. It is rare for American politicians to include non-believers in the list of people to whom they feel they must express tolerance. The Muslim reference will play well in a number of places outside the U.S.

12:34 [Comment From Andrea]

Were you surprised that the market took another hit yesterday, despite all the upbeat feelings of celebration?

12:35 Darrell West:

Rush Limbaugh has been interpreting the stock market losses as a referendum on Obama and his policies. However, it seems to be the market is merely forecasting what we all know is going to be a tough 2009: rising unemployment, weak corporate profits, and a difficult fiscal situation. Had McCain been elected, the market would have dropped too.

12:35 [Comment From Matt]

Media coverage of the inauguration was the most thorough that I've ever seen! And it had record viewers. How will this media obsession with Obama pan out? Does it set him up for a great fall if he can't come through on some of the major issues?

12:37 Reader Poll

How was the media coverage of the inauguration and parade?

Right on target (55%)

too much (36%)

not enough (9%)

12:37 Darrell West:

I think everyone (including the media) now is obsessed with Obama because he is such a novelty: young, African-American, and a Democrat! However, we all will settle into a routine where we get used to him as our president and will treat him based on how he governs. The cult of personality will persist for awhile, but eventually, he is going to be judged based on his actual performance.

12:37 [Comment From Jack]

Hi Darrell, following the executive order issued today suspending military trials at Guantanamo, do you expect to see more executive orders come out today about closing Guantanamo?

12:39 Darrell West:

I think Obama will close Guantanamo, but he has to figure out what to do with the 250 people left. Some can be shipped to other countries, but a number of them are not people we want walking the streets. They should be tried either here or elsewhere, and held accountable for their actions.

12:39 [Comment From Suzie in Chicago]

Any thoughts on all the inauguration fashion coverage?

12:40 Darrell West:

I loved Michelle's fashion choices yesterday, both her swearing in and the inaugural ball outfits. Both were much better than what she wore on election night. I hated that choice!

12:41 [Comment From Jeff]

So what was it like being in DC during the inauguration? Did you participate in any of the festivities?

12:42 Darrell West:

It was a lot of fun being in DC. We went down and witnessed the swearing in and then saw the Obamas and Bidens walk down Penn. Avenue during the parade. It was cold and there were huge crowds of people, but spirits were high and it was a very festive mood.

12:43 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Darrell: How does the 'attitude' of this administration coming into town compare with prior administrations--for example, the Carter folks came in with a kind of "chip on their shoulder" attitude....Do you have a feel for this yet?

12:45 Darrell West:

I think Obama is coming in trying to retain his sense of what the rest of the country wants, but also touching various bases in DC. He is meeting prominent journalists and going to Ben's Chili (a big neighborhood restaurant in the U Street Corridor). He seems to understand he needs Washington, but also will be willing to use his grass roots power when Washington interests fight change he wants.

12:46 [Comment From Sally]

How do you think Obama's army of activists will engage now? Is the DNC the right vehicle for channeling their enthusiasm?

12:48 Darrell West:

Obama will use his army of activists. He already has organized them by state, congressional district, and zip code. When the first really tough vote comes before Congress, members will hear from those people. He also is using WhiteHouse.gov to encourage ideas and suggestions for improving government. He would be crazy not to use the emotional and intellectual energy these people have.

12:48 [Comment From Gregg]

Do you know if Obama ended up giving up his Blackberry? I hope he didn't - we need a president who is in touch with technology!

12:49 Darrell West:

He wants to hold on to his Blackberry and I hope he does. Most presidents get insulated over time and end up in a "bubble of insularity". Technology will help him stay in touch with ordinary people from outside the normal political circle.

12:50 [Comment From Derek]

Obama focused much of his campaign on online efforts. What will happen to his website and the loads of people who participated in his campaign via the web? Do you think he'll keep up this form of communication? Do you think it's the beginning of a new era in president-constituent relations?

12:50 Reader Poll

Do you think the internet and online communications will change the way Obama and his administration do their jobs?

Yes (88%)

No (13%)

12:51 Darrell West:

Obama wants to bring the same sense of innovation he demonstrated during the campaign to the public sector. He is about to appoint a first-ever Chief Technology Officer and already has named a Chief Performance Officer. Both will use technology to improve performance. And with a trillion dollar deficit, we need technology now more than ever!

12:51 [Comment From Ann - DC]

I was surprised a few days ago to receive an email from Obama with video that exhorted me to join yet another list. It was one thing coming from a candidate, but I'm not sure how I feel about that coming from my president.

12:52 Darrell West:

I think most of the electronic lobbying and use of the famous 13 million email addresses will come from outside the White House, probably the DNC or an outside organization. Obama does have to remember he is president of all the people, not just the ones who voted for him.

12:52 [Comment From Jonathan]

Have you gotten a chance to look at the new White House website? What do you think?

12:54 Darrell West:

I have looked at it and it is impressive. It has lots of information and video, and is going to be the place where people can comment for five days before the president signs major legislation. It also is amazingly honest. There was a story on Politico.com this morning about how in describing past presidents, the bios are quite candid, like saying Clinton got impeached.

12:54 [Comment From Gregg]

Do you think he will continue to use YouTube for promoting videos and Facebook for organizing? Or is he going to consolidate everything in to WhiteHouse.gov?

12:55 Darrell West:

He will continue to use YouTube and Facebook. He is a techie at heart and understands digital communication was key to his election and important in harnessing the energy of his grass roots base. You should expect federal agencies soon to start using these tools for public outreach in an effort to reduce the gap between citizens and their government.

12:55 [Comment From emily]

Why is no one wondering about Cheney in the wheelchair? I thought that was totally ridiculous and a big attempt to get attention.

12:56 Darrell West:

I don't think he was trying to get attention. He actually did strain his back and was in bad shape. But it did create a powerful contrast between the young and vigorous Obama family and Cheney exiting in a wheelchair. I think everyone noticed the stark visual contrast!

12:57 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

SNL and the Daily Show are major sources of news for millions of people. But they seem to be adrift in the absence of a campaign and particularly in the departure of Bush. What do you suppose they'll find to spoof in this administration?

12:59 Darrell West:

There are so many big egos in the Obama Administration that I am not worried about the future of SNL and the Daily Show. Politicians will continue to provide them with great material in the future. There are new stars to make fun of such as Larry Summers and Joe Biden. And am I the only one who thinks Obama has big ears???

12:59 [Comment From Christine]

I am very impressed with Michelle Obama and I am interested in what sort of First Lady she will be. Any idea what her pet projects will be, what she will focus on?

1:01 Darrell West:

She will have pet projects for sure. She faces interesting contrasts in Hillary Clinton taking a big policy role and Laura Bush going the apolitical route. I think the new First Lady will fall somewhere in between. She probably will choose a safe policy area such as health care for children or something like that. She comes from a background in hospital administration.

1:02 [Comment From Jackie - Boston]

So what now? We have a new president and a whole lot of problems. What will be different in Obama's leadership, then say if, McCain or Clinton had been in his shoes yesterday?

1:04 Darrell West:

I think Obama is going to have a leadership style that focuses on the big picture and delegates details to his Cabinet and WH staff. McCain would have been more of a micro-manager. In a time of crisis, I think Obama's calm demeanor will help reassure Americans and restore some confidence in our collective future.

1:04 [Comment From Jimmy]

What do you expect from the Republicans in Congress? Will they work with Obama on the economy? Iraq?

1:05 Reader Poll

Do you think Republicans in Congress will work well with Obama?

Yes (69%)

No (31%)

1:06 Darrell West:

Republicans are in a dilemma. It no longer is clear what being conservative means. They ran up a trillion dollar budget deficit and engaged in a partial nationalization of the banks. They need to think about their governing philosophy and what they stand for. There will be points of contrast with the new Obama administration. But in the short run, he will remain very popular and hard to attack.

1:06 [Comment From Mila]

How long of a honeymoon period do you believe Obama has, given the financial crisis we are facing, before the public begins demanding quick fixes?

1:08 Darrell West:

Obama should have a honeymoon of at least six to nine months. Everyone understands we face deep problems and none are going to get solved soon. Indeed, the economy is going to get worse before it gets better. Obama's leadership challenge is keeping people hopeful and focused on the future while unemployment keeps rising. Most politicians are not able to do this. It takes exceptional leadership and communications skills to survive bad economics. FDR did it but most are not able to retain popularity when conditions are bad.

1:08 [Comment From Jack]

On the subject of accountability I feel that in order to restore the US stance as a moral world leader, certain members of the Bush administration need to be held accountable for actions that contravened the Geneva conventions on torture and which were war crimes. I have heard conflicting opinions on this from the Obama camp and would be interested to hear your opinion.

1:11 Darrell West:

I saw signs yesterday at the inauguration proclaiming "Arrest Bush". I think this or other such actions would be disastrous for Obama. It would ignite intense partisanship of the sort he condemned during the campaign and make it virtually impossible for him to bring about the fundamental policy changes he desires. The GOP accountability we have had rests with the election process. Republicans lost the House and Senate in 2006 and the presidency in 2008. The electoral verdict is pretty clear right now. Americans don't like what transpired over the last administration.

1:11 [Comment From Frank]

What do you think about the pace of the cabinet confirmations? Are they on par with past transitions?

1:12 Darrell West:

Obama has about half his Cabinet confirmed. The Senate needs to finish this job. If we delay the appointment of top officials, then it delays naming the deputies, under secretaries, and assistants who actually do the work. We can't afford to have vacant positions during this time of crisis.

1:13 [Comment From Joseph from DC]

Do you feel President Obama should reach out first to international leaders instead of waiting for an event to take place?...sort of picking the brain to see where they are heading.

1:14 Darrell West:

Obama should have a call list now of top international leaders whom he should be calling. You can't wait for a crisis to connect. He needs to establish trust and mutual respect now so he can use those good feelings later when he needs help.

1:14 [Comment From Kenneth]

Do you think the election and current public opinion polls give Obama the chance to say to Congress that he has a mandate to enact his election platform?

1:15 Darrell West:

I don't think people voted left, center, or right in this election. They were seriously ticked off about the economy, Iraq, and health care. The only mandate is a vote for competence. Ultimately, Obama will be assessed based on whatever results he delivers.

1:16 [Comment From Mimi]

Do you have any thoughts as to why Obama called for a new era of personal responsibility in his inaugural speech, without offering specific examples for taking such responsibility?

1:17 Darrell West:

Obama has seen the consequences of irresponsibility in public policy and in local families across America. I thought it was interesting he has taken a theme often used by conservatives to make a major statement that we all need to do a better job. It is not just leaders who must perform, but people in all walks of life need to understand individual behavior matters.

1:17 [Comment From Suzie in Chicago]

Do you think Blago-gate could come back to haunt the new administration?

1:19 Darrell West:

I don't see many consequences from the Blago situation for Obama. It is clear he was not involved in this and he does not condone the bad behavior that was displayed. He has a strong track record of ethical behavior in office.

1:19 [Comment From Ron]

Did Obama walk on water or turn water in to wine yesterday?

1:19 Fred Barbash - Moderator:

We have time for just a few more questions....so keep'em coming.

1:20 Darrell West:

Neither. He is not Superman or the Messiah or whatever metaphor you want to use. He is a gifted man who is going to need a lot of help and some good luck in order to be successful. With some of our problems, it may take years to really make meaningful progress.

1:20 [Comment From Doug]

Peter Orszag will have to try to rein in the agencies on budget requests. Stockman failed on this in the end in part because the agencies went around him to the President. How do you think Obama will be different?

1:22 Darrell West:

What is different now is we have a trillion dollar budget deficit. Peter Orszag has no choice but to rein in agency spending and Obama doesn't have much choice other than supporting Peter in this endeavor. Since we are going to spend so much money on the economic stimulus, our deficit is going to move serious entitlement reform back onto the agenda. We are going to have to think seriously about constraining costs in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and health care in general.

1:23 [Comment From Margaret]

Obama's kids are young....but do you think they will play a role in the administration? Possibly by helping American kids learn about the political system?

1:25 Darrell West:

I hope for the sake of the kids that they play NO ROLE in the administration. We should all allow them to be kids and to grow up as best they can in the harsh public spotlight. Being young is tough enough these days without them getting involved as role models, educators, or some other capacity. I hope they turn out better than many children of famous celebrities. Most of those kids have a tough time growing up.

1:25 Fred Barbash - Moderator:

Ok, I think we're going to wrap it up there. Thanks everyone for your great questions, and thank you to Darrell for your thoughtful answers.