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Four Reasons Why Obama is the Connective Leader for a New Era

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith's measure of the best world leaders he had known was their ability to meet the unique challenges of their era. President Barack Obama's inaugural address and his campaign leading up to it make it clear that he is determined to do just that. His determination is founded on four strengths:

1) Obama is a new type of leader, a "connective leader," who understands that "the world has changed, and we must change with it." He is pointing to a new Connective Era, in which a multi-splendored diversity of communities, nations, and religions, as well as political and ethnic groups, clamors for conflicting agendas. At the same time, he understands we are all increasingly interdependent, connected, through vast financial and political systems, not to mention the Internet and the environment we all share - like it or not. As a connective leader, Obama knows he must bring these contradictory forces together so that Left and Right, East and West, including Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, and nonbeliever, as well, can live in peace and prosperity. Hard - but not impossible if we have leaders who "get it." And Obama "gets it."

2) Obama has a "connective eye," through which he sees "our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness." He looks for connections that link us all, rather than chasms that separate us. As a connective leader, he takes even the smallest area of mutuality as the starting point for greater and greater collaboration. So, we should not be surprised - instead, very heartened - that, in his inaugural address, Obama invited the Muslim world to join us in seeking "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

3) Obama demonstrated his "connective" perspective by urging Americans to accept a "new era of responsibility" at home and around the world. Connective leaders view leadership differently than traditional leaders: They see leadership not as personal privilege, but as communal responsibility. This new, young leader doesn't promise to meet these challenges single-handedly. Instead, he calls upon all of us - as he did throughout his campaign -- to work together in a realistic, pragmatic, but open and generous, effort to address the ills confronting not only Americans, but the entire world. As a connective leader, he reassured poor nations of our help and asked more prosperous nations to work together with us to address the "suffering outside our borders."

4) Connective leaders know that their vision is not the only -- or even the best -- one. Rather, they connect their vision to the vision of many diverse others to create a more perfect solution. I believe that's what Obama meant during the campaign when he insisted, "It's not about me; it's about you." And rather than promise, "Yes, I can," Obama taught his supporters to say, "Yes, we can." Connective leaders seek mutual goals, rather than mutual enemies. When Obama offered his hand in peace and collaboration to nations with "clenched fists," he was doing what connective leaders often do: reaching out to those their predecessors saw only as the foe. In that way, we enlarge our vision and strengthen our resolve.

Our new president has dedicated himself to the old truths of "hard work, honesty, courage, fair play, tolerance, and curiosity, loyalty, and patriotism." But much more than that, he urged us to "find meaning in something greater than ourselves," to commit ourselves to service to others and, thereby, to transform the world. And, as connective leaders are wont to do, Obama asked the nation and the world to join with him in that noble enterprise. In this new Connective Era, we should do nothing less. Then, perhaps, John Kenneth Galbraith's measure will be grandly met.