

MISSING: A VISION OF ECONOMIC POSSIBILITY¹

David Korten©

It is now the morning after. Republicans, as expected, are celebrating a sweeping victory. Democrats are licking their wounds. Meanwhile, record numbers of people are still contending with the hardships of unemployment and foreclosure with no relief in sight. And the nation braces for deepening political gridlock. It is a moment of opportunity for America to set a new course and for a young President Barack Obama to establish his place in history as a path-breaking leader. So how does electoral failure and political gridlock create a moment of opportunity?

Neither of our two major parties has a credible vision for the economic future of our nation. We are a nation consumed by short-term thinking and fragmented political contests centered on narrowly defined issues. Neither of our two major parties has a credible vision for the economic future of our nation. The Republicans offer only their standard prescription of tax cuts for the rich, a rollback of regulations on predatory corporations, and elimination of the social safety net—a proven prescription for further job loss and devastation of the middle class. The Democrats have no identifiable program for economic recovery, let alone for adapting our economy to the dramatic demographic, environmental, economic, and political changes that rule out any chance of a return to pre-2008 business as usual.

In an insightful interview, Populist historian Lawrence Goodwyn suggests that this creates a historic opportunity. He observes that bankers have been a dominant ruling power throughout much of our national history and a barrier to realizing the democratic ideal on which our nation was founded. It has not been within the power of any American president to break their hold due to lack of an adequate public understanding of the nature of the problem.

We now have 15 million unemployed people who feel deeply betrayed and upwards of two million homeowners whose homes have been foreclosed—all as a direct consequence of the actions of Wall Street bankers. These same interests used conceptual deception backed by massive political spending to swing the election in favor of right wing extremists devoted to policies that will further decimate the middle class without resolving the pain of the unemployed and the foreclosed.

The deception, which can be maintained only so long, sows the seeds of its own self-destruction. In taking control of the House and leaving the Democrats with only a slim majority in the Senate, Republicans now share responsibility for what is certain to be continued economic failure. The administration, however, remains in the hands of a now seasoned Democratic president who Goodwyn believes has the potential to rise to the occasion, lead his party to a second term victory, break the power of Wall Street, and actualize the democratic ideal that has for so long eluded us.

It requires, however, a vision of a New Economy that is truly democratic, based on sound market principles, rooted in community values, and accountable to community interests. Economists steeped in the economic models that got us into this mess are not going to provide President

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Obama with such a vision. He will need to look to the people who are working from the bottom up outside the halls of established power to frame and implement a new economic vision aligned with the values of caring and sharing at the core of authentic spiritual teaching and for which scientists tell us our brains are wired.

An emerging vision calls for a fundamental economic restructuring to put life values ahead of financial values and to give the creation of sustainable livelihoods for working people priority over bonuses for Wall Street traders. This vision is being articulated and popularized by alliances such as the New Economy Working Group and the New Economy Network and implemented by groups such as the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, the American Independent Business Alliance, Transition Towns, local food movements, and many others. The vision is grounded not in some utopian ideology or theory, but rather on the work and experience of millions of people are already engaged in living the New Economy into being through grassroots actions that flow from their deepest values and aspirations.

The emerging vision calls for a fundamental economic restructuring to put life values ahead of financial values, give the creation of sustainable livelihoods for working people priority over bonuses for Wall Street traders, and root the power to create and allocate money in people and community rather than in Wall Street financial institutions. David Brancaccio has documented impressive examples in a PBS television special titled "Fixing the Future" scheduled to be aired on November 18, 2010.

As awareness grows that no adjustments at the margin of the existing Wall Street-dominated economy will resolve the plights of joblessness and the homelessness, so too does potential political support for fundamental economic restructuring in support of the emerging vision. The political party that responds to this rapidly growing economic and political force will gain a decided advantage in 2012 and beyond.

It is President Obama's opportunity to win a second term and establish his place in history not only as the first African-American president, but as well the president who liberated the nation, our democracy, and the market from the grip of Wall Street. I have drafted a framing presidential economic address ready for delivery by the future president who dares to take on the challenge. Imagine a president delivering this speech. Let us make it happen.