

AFJ Report

Peter Roff talks about America No.1

The USA - Today and the Future

By

Peter Roff



一般社団法人 アジアフォーラム・ジャパン

ASIAN FORUM JAPAN

Over the last six years, since the election of President Barack Obama, America has embarked on something that is not so much a transition as it is a transformation. This is as the president promised he would do during the 2008 campaign yet few people if anyone took him seriously. Historically the pendulum swings from left to right and back again, but only by degrees. America changes but usually not quickly. Once in a good while however, as it was with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the pendulum moves faster than most people anticipated because the electorate has asked for something more.

That all this is going on under Obama is somewhat surprising. He did win two national elections by a considerable margin but, it is important to remember, the first victory was with a greater measure of the popular vote than the second. For one reason or another many people who normally vote in presidential elections did not participate in 2012, when each of the two top of the ticket candidates pulled fewer votes than the one who had lost the election four years earlier, suggesting strongly that a lot of people weren't happy with the choice presented to them.

Obama is leading a transformation in the power of the executive branch. He is comfortable challenging the expressed will of Congress and the judicial branch when it suits him, at least on the margins. Hence his comment following the mid-term elections that he still had “a pen and a phone,” which has been widely interpreted on both sides of the aisle as meaning he would adopt as a strategy for government those exercises in executive power that did not require congressional participation.

This may help explain why his job approval numbers hover in the mid-40s; respectable for a modern president but evident that there are more people dissatisfied with the job he is doing than there are those willing to stand up and cheer.

Even that number is slightly misleading because his support among black Americans remains well over 90 percent, which has the effect of throwing off the balance for the remainder of the country. This may help explain why, starting in 2010 the American electorate opted for divided government, leaving the Democrats in the White House while beginning an escalation of the Republicans' hold on political power in the Congress and, more importantly, across the states.

Federalism survives, perhaps not as vigorously as the founders intended. The idea of the states as laboratories for experiments in the way government does things, which was quite popular under both Reagan and Bill Clinton, is somewhat moribund today. Few governors and state legislatures have shown a willingness to challenge the federal government on health care, environmental policy, and other so-called “hot button” issues outside the court system. Washington has not been flooded by requests from state leaders for policy and procedural waivers that would allow them to run programs that intersect with the authority and reach of the federal government differently than the law permits.

This may change with the next election. In the meantime lots of people spend time talking about what they don't like in the area of tax policy, trade, national defense, the environment, education and every other place Obama and his team have made themselves felt but few people propose alternatives, reasonable and otherwise. Perhaps they consider such things not worth the effort as the president's team would routinely reject such requests.

Despite the fact that the American economy remains in the doldrums, and that the recovery is the weakest and most anemic in the post-war period, the electorate seems more focused on cultural issues than anything else. There is little appetite for tax reform – even though the American business community is spending considerable sums lobbying for the creation of a proposal that would end the status of the United States as the industrialized national with the highest corporate tax rate. This no doubt is because of the realization on Capitol Hill among Republicans that any effort on this front would require them to sign off on an increase in tax rates on the personal side of the code as well.

That is a non-starter for as long as Ohio's John Boehner remains speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. As a former small businessman he understands personally the impact that higher personal rates have on small business, which remains the engine for growth in the American economy. He gets that the top marginal rate would be counterproductive, producing more business failures and increases in the jobless figures as well as a diminished GOP majority in Congress.

There is also no sense of broad agreement on the need for regulatory reform. Politicians in both parties pay considerable lip service to the idea but, when the rubber hits the road, the Democrats will not approve legislation that cuts at the heart of the constituency groups like trial lawyers and organized that put boots on the ground and money in the coffers in campaign season. So while the politicians dither the out-of-control regulatory state continues to sap what some estimates put at as much as \$3 trillion per year out of the U.S. economy.

National defense also receives short shrift, no so much because of the mandatory spending caps now in place as the result of a budget and debt ceiling deal consummated several years ago. Few people are considering seriously the re-expansionist tendencies of the Russians, the problems created by ISIS, or the subtle attempts by the Chinese to expand their sphere of influence in Asia because the nation's political leaders have not made it a priority and because the country is simply worn out from the prolonged engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The biggest change remains on the cultural front. This stems in part from the way Obama came into office; he was marked like a cultural pop icon and his campaign turned into a crusade for social justice and the ratification of America as a truly post-racial country. That this was all smoke and mirrors, and a cover for his efforts to drag the party leftward, went unobserved until recently. The latest Gallup Poll on the subject finds the Democrats under Obama has shifted to their leftmost position in almost two decades. The Republicans, meanwhile, are combating efforts within the party to move them from where they are currently, echoing Reaganite policies, towards what is effectively the new center created by other parties move further out toward the fringe.

It remains to be seen whether the Supreme Court's decision ratifying the legality of marriage between people of the same sex in all 50 states makes the beginning of an even more pronounced radical drift or it is the end point, marking the place at which things will begin to move the other way. The cultural implications of the decision have yet to be truly appreciated since they involve more than just allowing people heretofore banned from marry to enter into wedded unions. New laws and regulations making this possible have yet to be written and, if the early forecasts are correct, will create a conflict over the issue of religious liberty that has not existed since the anti-Catholic movements of the late 19th century.

What issues will be addressed – tax reform, regulatory reform, privacy, religious liberty, expansions of free trade, education reform, etc. – and when is anyone’s guess. The gridlock that exists in Washington is likely to remain through the next election as President Obama spends most of his time on issues that are polarizing and divisive and the operational structures of both major political parties keep maneuvering for advantage first and the good of the country second.

Peter Roff is a visiting research fellow at Asia Forum Japan (AFJ) . A one-time political operative who worked for Grover Norquist and Newt Gingrich, he now occupies space in the think tank community as a senior fellow at Frontiers of Freedom and in journalism as a columnist with U.S. News and World Report, writing for the Thomas Jefferson Street blog at USNews.com.