



## **Obama and McCain, Hope and Magnanimity**

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Over the last week I've heard many people express pride in last Tuesday's presidential election. There are many reasons for this. Democrats are of course proud about winning, of Barack Obama's victory. And, while I'm sure Republicans are deeply disappointed in the outcome, they have expressed pride in the way John McCain handled defeat. We can all take some pride in the fact that people around the world have remarked how America demonstrated its greatness, using Martin Luther King's words, because our president-elect was "not judged by the color of [his] skin but by the content of [his] character."

Like many, I watched Senator McCain's concession speech and President-Elect Obama's acceptance speech. I was moved and impressed by both. We all know both men are human and exhibited flaws in midst of the recent heated political battle. However, for those historic moments on Tuesday night they were icons of different types of moral excellence. McCain showed us what it means to be magnanimous; Obama what it means to embody hope.

Magnanimity is not a moral term that is used with much frequency, perhaps because it's has too many syllables. Historically, this virtue identified great human beings and political leaders. It refers to a person with a largeness of mind, a great soul, one who despises pettiness and disdains small-mindedness. The magnanimous person willingly faces danger; placing the highest value on honor. Magnanimity is the virtue often attributed to the victor when he refuses to hold a grudge or exact revenge. Nonetheless, McCain exhibited this excellence in his loss last Tuesday.

John McCain's dramatic personal story demonstrates that he is courageous and values honor. But on Tuesday night he showed largeness of mind in the content of his concession speech. At its heart was the acknowledgement that his personal loss, and that of his party's, was far transcended by the historical significance of Barack Obama's election to America's highest office. McCain noted: "This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African-Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight." He went on to say that "Senator Obama has achieved a great thing for himself and for his country.... [That he] managed to do so by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans... something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving." These remarks demonstrate magnanimity by acknowledging the significance of Obama's win, at the same time he was suffering a great personal defeat.

McCain noted that Barack Obama was a symbol of hope. Scholars most often discuss hope as a theological or religious virtue, but it's vital that political leaders exhibit this excellence as well. Hope, as a human quality, is opposed to despair and cynicism, two qualities that disqualify anyone wishing to be a great leader. Hope is the human excellence that focuses on what is

possible and refuses to accept the limits of the present as insurmountable. The hopeful person is stouthearted, fresh and resilient. He or she exudes a sense of joyous bravery and confidence. Last Tuesday night in Chicago Barack Obama embodied these qualities in both his person and in the content of his speech.

In his person the President-Elect certainly exhibited energy and confidence, youth and bright optimism. He had just attained a victory that seemed so unlikely and this accomplishment alone made him a true symbol of hope. The heart of Obama's acceptance speech was hope in the American dream. It focused on the American dream and what it makes possible. He said that, "to all those who have wondered if America's beacon still burns as bright --tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope." He went on to provide an example of why despite many setbacks this hope is justified by telling the story of Ann Nixon Cooper, a 106 year-old African American women. Mrs. Cooper began life by being denied the right to vote because she was a women and black, and lived to cast a vote for the first African-American president. He concluded the narrative by saying: "So tonight, let us ask ourselves -- if our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?"

Last Tuesday night I admired the two kinds of greatness in two political leaders. One demonstrated a largeness of mind in defeat, and the other brightness of possibility in victory. While we know McCain and Obama are far from perfect, at those moments on November 4, they both embodied the human capacity for certain excellences.