

Economic hope springs eternal

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— I write this on Martin Luther King Day. Tomorrow we will have a new president. And that is everybody's business.

We also have a level of fear, excitement, optimism and pessimism, and hope that this country has not experienced in 75 years.

While his predecessor too ran on the platform of a uniter, not a divider, this president has somehow managed to unite a worried nation fearful of its economic future. His ability to bring such a diverse country together is an amazing thing to witness. And it speaks so well of our collective capacity to hope.

A recent survey indicated that President Obama has given more than two thirds of the world a renewed sense of hope. Such hope is also surprising, given the economic predicament that has bedeviled this nation and the world.

Hope is a scary thing, though. We experience it only when we feel we have lost control of our own destiny.

When Prometheus stole the secret of fire, the Greek god Zeus retaliated by creating the seductress Pandora. Her curiosity in opening her sealed gift of a jar from Zeus unleashed evil upon the world. Out from the jar came war and pestilence, famine and disease, burdensome labor, fear, and then hope.

Not unlike the five stages of grief, hope is that double-edged sword of serenity and surrender we experience once we have exhausted every other option. Unlike the acceptance that concludes our five stages of grief, though, hope requires us to abandon our own sense of control and instead rely on another. After hope, there is nothing left in the jar.

Never before in the economic history of the nation has so much hope been directed on one person. While the Great Depression facing Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the division between North and South facing Abraham Lincoln, were certainly opportunities for leadership, the nation had sunk to new lows at those points in history. There was no place to go but up. President Roosevelt had to reform government, and President Lincoln had to abolish slavery in the South, for strategic reasons as well as the obvious moral ones.

Unlike his predecessors, though, President Obama must guide an economy that could fall much farther. He recognizes that we will lose more altitude before we pull ourselves out of this death spiral. And he tells us how we must marshal our energies, without sugar coating the challenges ahead of us.

And yet we hope. President Obama has given us a faith that there is someone in charge. He has assembled an amazing team of advisers that is as remarkable in their ability as their diversity. It is this diversity of ideas that will be our economic salvation. Such diversity eschews conventional wisdom and group think, and has the intellectual honesty and courage to have the great debate.

Only from this diversity will we garner novel solutions for new problems never before seen.

Only from this diversity will we create the acceptance that all voices are heard and all groups are represented in our shared predicament.

Only from diversity will no idea go unexplored, and no group unrepresented.

Only from diversity will we each feel sufficient ownership to make the 300 million sacrifices necessary to bring this economy from the brink and this nation together. And only from this diversity flows hope.

Some have called President Obama an appeaser. I think our president would find that label a compliment. It means he is truly interested in making everybody part of the solution. Appeasement is not meant in the spirit of Neville Chamberlain with regard to Hitler's Germany, but rather in recognition that each of us has to be part of the solution if we are to avoid being part of the problem. Appeasement is about a big, open tent.

Perhaps politics will be better off with a modicum of appeasement, rather than the winner-take-all philosophy that really has not worked for either party, and certainly has not worked for the nation. I believe President Obama knows this, and is proud of any label we can hang on him that indicates his only special interest is our common interest.

It will be interesting to see if we can cast aside our special interests for the good of the nation. Can we avoid indemnifying ourselves while expecting sacrifices from others? Can we avoid the common trap of protectionism that says to the rest of the world "good luck, you are on your own?" Can we put aside our pet projects and personal agendas and instead simply focus on putting America back to work? And can we create a truly level playing field that gives equal access to all, regardless of whether they are in our club or not? We shall see.

It seems logical to have one big worry, though. This place and time imposes almost superhuman pressure on a mere mortal. Most anybody else would crush under the weight. But he is no Atlas that shrugged, even with the collective weight of the planet on his shoulder.

Indeed, he seems to gain confidence with increased pressure. It is as if our hope is fueling him. And perhaps it is. A measure of greatness is one who can see the potential before all others, can gain energy from the gap between what we are and what we can be, and can somehow translate that vision to us.

Of course, we have to be willing to be led, be unafraid of casting off our own lot and personal agendas, and be prepared to change.

This country rallies behind its presidents. This President Obama is offering us hope right now. Let us all wish him well. After all, our own future is riding on it. And the next step is up to each of us.

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