Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 United States (US) Presidential Election has special meaning for differing segments of the American social structure, for its dominant elite as well as for people around the world. Distinguishable are three meanings: First, even if Obama begins without changing the US strategic objectives in foreign policy, he will undoubtedly sheath Washington’s military initiatives in a silken glove. We shall see Obama distance US foreign policy from the overt influence of outgoing President Bush’s “neo-cons” (the “hawks”). Obama will probably develop an economic plan not very different from the current one. However, he likely will sweep the “free market” fundamentalists from the corridors of power. The end of the influence of the “neo-con warriors” and the end of the influence of Bush’s economic ideology in the White House should have major impact on social movements in Latin America and the rest of the world. Bush’s ideological allies, the neoliberals, will have to reexamine their positions throughout the Latin American region.

Second, President Obama will find that south of the US border Latin Americans are willing to sit down and talk. He may find it difficult to overcome Washington’s traditional predatory style of imposing its views and policies. Obama will have to put forth a set of political conditions that include subjects that were skipped over by President Bill Clinton (1992–2000) and ignored by President George W. Bush (2001–2009). Among the political conditions Latin American leaders have stressed are: ending the US blockade of Cuba, respecting new democratic institutions in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, and developing a different approach to the whole question of US military intervention in the region. The latter should address Plan Colombia, the Merida Initiative, and the regional presence of the US 4th Naval Fleet.
And third, the presence of Barack Obama in the Oval Office is having a huge cultural impact within the United States. The very fact that an Afro-American has moved into the White House implies that a significant transformation is occurring with repercussions throughout US society. President Obama is very much celebrated and perceived as a member of a social construct labeled a “minority.” The list of American Presidents from Washington to Lincoln to F. D. Roosevelt through to George W. Bush is now challenged by the first African-American: Barack Obama. Previously the only serious interruption in the line of succession was from the Irish-Catholic John F. Kennedy. These fractures in the order are impressive. For generations Catholics in the United States were perceived as vicious, lewd and/or idolatrous. Likewise, the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) “mainstream” perceived African-Americans as savage, treacherous and/or subjected (slaves).

Perceptions have changed in the 21st Century. Now the President of the United States can be seen paying homage to the Roman Catholic Pope in an airport (a gesture not even seen for another Head of State or world leader). What will Obama’s legacy be vis-à-vis the perceptions of the people of the United States in relation to Africa, and to the over 30 million Afro-Americans?

Currently, people of African-American ancestry in the United States are a “minority,” still perceived by some as too different or as inherently inferior. Will Obama’s victory open the way for Blacks to be part of the mainstream in the US? This would have been extremely difficult to imagine not too many years ago. A similar road was traveled by Irish Catholics, Orthodox Ukrainians, Lutheran Scandinavians and numerous others struggling for full social acceptance and citizens’ rights. Today there are more than 40 million people identified as Latin Americans (or Latinos) in the US. They are another “minority” also considered to be somehow too different or inferior. The notion of a “minority” is a social construction implemented to convince both Black and Latin American people in the United States that they are “other” than 100% American citizens. It is in essence a variant form of apartheid driven home with significant effectiveness.

In the history of the United States the White House itself has experienced many ups and downs. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s tenure, the Oval Office has become highly esteemed, the most highly honored office in the land. What is more, the President of the US now has