

Ten for the History Books from 2008

Tuesday, December 30, 2008

The year 2008 began with the anticipation that history would be made, and on that count the year certainly did not disappoint. Nevertheless, the year unfolded with more surprises than usual. The intellectual task of reviewing a year is always fascinating, usually difficult, and often humbling. That is certainly the case with the year 2008.

As a matter of fact, a good deal more time must pass until the meaning of 2008 and its events come into clearer view. In the meantime, here is a personal list of the events that shaped the year. Some may not make a list created by the historians of the future, but each is noteworthy in its own right. The list is not ranked in a specific order of relative significance, though the list is generally weighted toward the top.



1. The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Sen. Barack Obama's historic election victory reset the political map of the United States. The first-term senator from Illinois galvanized the youth vote, maximized use of the Internet, and reached across traditional Democratic Party divisions to become the party's nominee and then to win a clear victory in the general election. In so doing, he toppled the favorite for the nomination, Sen. Hillary Clinton, and turned much of the conventional political wisdom on its head. His defeat of Sen. John McCain, the Republican nominee, seemed to symbolize a generational shift, but Obama drew from a wide spectrum of the electorate. His record is predictably liberal for a Democratic nominee — even more liberal than Sen. Clinton — yet he won the confidence of voters on an agenda of “change.” His liberal positions on social issues cost him significant support among evangelical Christian voters, though he attracted noteworthy support from some younger evangelicals. As the year came to a close, the Obama transition team had assembled a core of cabinet nominees that was, in the main, drawn from traditional Democratic power circles — a version of John F. Kennedy's “the best and the brightest” based in intellectual achievement. Americans, concerned about challenges at home and abroad, looked to the President-elect — the nation's first African-American President — with great expectations.

2. America becomes Ground Zero of a global economic crisis. The American economy experienced a financial crisis that, by the fall, turned into a full-blown economic crisis. A collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market, driven by a fall in housing prices, led to a credit collapse that spread across the globe. The crisis led to the downfall of historic and iconic firms on Wall Street and put the entire economy into a spasm of uncertainty. Stocks fell sharply, with more than \$7 trillion disappearing from the markets. A recession was deepened by the crisis as credit largely disappeared and as consumer spending fell. The federal government pushed through over \$700 billion of stimulus plans and the nation's taxpayers became part-owners of Fortune 500 firms. Before the year ended, the CEOs of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler had gone before Congress to ask for relief. The upheavals continue as the year does not.

3. The Bush Administration prepares to depart. The eight-year presidency of George W. Bush will end less than twenty days after the new year begins. By any measure, the eight years since January 20, 2001 have been momentous in terms of both domestic and international issues. Though first elected on a platform of domestic proposals, the Bush presidency was consumed with foreign policy concerns within months of assuming office. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 reset the agenda for the Bush administration and the nation. Within months the United States was at war against Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, followed by a massive invasion of Iraq that toppled the regime of Saddam

Hussein. The invasion of Iraq led to a quick military victory, but the goal of creating a stable society in post-Saddam Iraq defied American plans. A “surge” in military support led to considerable progress on the ground in Iraq and, as the Bush years came to a close, signs of a functioning civic culture provided hope for the nation’s future, even as a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan added new concern. Growing tensions between India and Pakistan and between Israel and Hamas brought the year 2008 to a troubling close. Domestically, President Bush will be remembered for his advocacy on behalf of human life, including a policy that limited federal funding of research using human embryos and his nomination of Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito to the United States Supreme Court.

4. Controversy in the Episcopal Church leads to schism. Pressures in the Episcopal Church USA reached a breaking point as more congregations and dioceses voted to leave the denomination over its actions and policy positions on homosexuality — most centrally the election of an openly homosexual bishop in 2003. Several churches had taken refuge under Anglican churches in Africa and the Southern Cone of South America, but as the year came to a close a new Anglican Church in North America had been declared. Court battles over church property continued, but conservatives won a major decision in Virginia in late December.

5. California voters approve Proposition 8. The decision of the California Supreme Court to mandate the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state set the stage for a battle to amend the state’s constitution to affirm marriage exclusively as the union of a man and a woman. This measure affirmed what California voters had overwhelmingly affirmed just a few years earlier, but the battle to pass Proposition 8 was heated and close. In the end, the measure passed by a 52-48 vote, but appeals put the question back before the California Supreme Court. The vote sent a clear signal to the nation — voters support marriage as a heterosexual union. Votes in Arizona and Florida added weight to this signal. By the end of 2008, a majority of the nation’s citizens lived in states that had adopted similar measures.

6. The death of Alexander Solzhenitsyn marks end of an era. The death of Alexander Solzhenitsyn on August 3 marked a symbolic end of the Cold War and served to remind the world of the horrors of the Soviet Union and its gulags. A Nobel laureate, Solzhenitsyn lived long enough to return to his native Russia and to die there as he had promised. He also lived long enough to see Russia return to many of its bad habits, including oligarchy. His death seemed to put a coda on the Cold War, proving that the human spirit cannot be broken by persecution, however brutal.

7. Euthanasia is approved in Washington State. Voters in Washington State adopted a measure legalizing “physician-assisted suicide,” even as the record of the practice in neighboring Oregon should have served as sufficient warning. Though the administration of lethal drugs was presented to voters in terms of alleviating pain and suffering for the terminally ill, in reality many of those who receive the drugs are not terminally ill at all. The main thrust of the movement toward legalized euthanasia is a Promethean vision of personal autonomy and human life. Late in the year, a judge in Montana put that state on a collision course with the controversy.

8. John Edwards is caught in a sexual affair — and America cared. Predictably, the media made a circus of the affair as former senator and presidential candidate John Edwards, the 2004 Democratic nominee for Vice President, was forced to admit to an extra-marital affair with a media consultant even as his wife was battling cancer. After repeated denials, Edwards’ admission came in the form of a Greek tragedy. The significant aspect of this scandal was not so much about Edwards’ political prospects, but about the fact that Americans, generally confused about sexual morality, still believe that extra-marital affairs are wrong and sinful. Virtually no one seemed to argue that Edwards’ affair was of no moral consequence. That, it seems, is worth remembering.

9. Atheists launch public relations efforts. The so-called “New Atheists” continued to sell books and make controversy, but some decided to take an additional step and forged efforts that included public relations and advertising. In the United States, an Atheist Alliance sought to present atheists and agnostics as mainstream. In Great Britain, atheists launched a campaign that put signs on buses that read: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” It seemed that Londoners were not entirely reassured in atheism by the claim that God “probably” does not exist, sending the advertising team back to their drawing boards.

10. The world takes note of a demographic downturn — Where are the babies? Citizens of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania learned in 2008 that deaths now outnumbered births within the city. In most of Europe, a “demographic winter” took shape as birthrates had fallen well below population replacement. Leaders of the Russian Army informed national leaders that the strength of the armed services was endangered by a lack of young males of military age. In the United States, the birthrate is stable mostly because of immigrant and minority communities. Once again, worldviews are

seen to matter.

These and so many other developments marked 2008 as a year to remember. Each year brings surprises, but few years bring so many. Most of us hope that 2009 will be a bit less eventful than 2008. The times, however, are in God's hands and not ours.

We will discuss this list — and ask for your own — on today's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.