

THE POLITICS OF TOMORROW

AN INTERVIEW WITH
SIMON ROSENBERG

AALOK KANANI

Simon Rosenberg is the founder of NDN (formerly the New Democrat Network) and is one of the first political minds to understand the changing role of media in politics. He has been credited with identifying early and successfully the important trends transforming American political life, and in 2007 was named one of the fifty most powerful people in Washington, D.C. by *GQ Magazine*. He graduated from Tufts University in 1985. He worked for Michael Dukakis' presidential campaign in Iowa from 1987 to 1988 and later served in New Hampshire and the "Little Rock War Room" for President Clinton from 1991 to 1992. He has worked extensively in the media, spending time at ABC News, PBS and other cable stations, and has also worked at the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Leadership Council. Rosenberg is a member of the Aspen Institute's 2001 Class of Henry Crown Fellows and served on the 2004 Democratic National Convention Platform Committee. He also sits on the boards of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, the Roosevelt Institute, and the publication *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*.

Aalok Kanani is a junior majoring in International Relations and Political Science at Tufts University. His interests include American foreign policy, the role of states in protecting human rights, and domestic American politics. He was a Tisch College Active Citizen Summer Fellow at Critical Exposure in 2008, worked as a foreign policy legislative intern for Americans for Democratic Action, and has also worked for the Martha Coakley for Senate campaign. He is also involved with the *Tufts Daily* and is a member of EXPOSURE, the Institute for Global Leadership's photojournalism and human rights program. He is studying economic development, crisis management, and international law in Dakar, Senegal in spring 2010.

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The dawn of a new politics is upon us. Today's political trends point to a truly global phenomenon that is changing how we think, what we believe and the very nature of how the political game is played. This is both a domestic and foreign sensation. In the US, we are in the midst of clear change that is being driven by a uniquely modern governing agenda, a media revolution and a demographic transition. The election of Barack Obama has at once inspired a generation and empowered a new constituency. It has the potential to enhance America's status in the world by renewing the American promise of freedom and self-determination.

We are at a distinct moment in history, but a positive outcome is not inevitable. Humanity still faces significant problems that require decisive solutions. This moment is as much about the change that has occurred as it is about the change yet to come. As Simon Rosenberg articulates, it is "a tipping point in human history." The politics of tomorrow will be defined by the democratization of information, an engaged generation and the emergence of greater unity despite diversity. Certainly idealistic but not at all radical: this is the global political future that Rosenberg predicts. But his vision is based on trends and numbers, not simply ideals and optimism, and the following interview serves as a reflection on what has caused this political shift as well as a guide for its future.

Discourse's Aalok Kanani sat down with Simon Rosenberg to talk about the changing international arena and how the politics of tomorrow are being shaped.

Aalok Kanani

You've said that there are certain key changes happening in the United States in terms of both daily life and politics, what do you think these forces of change are?

Simon Rosenberg

There's a new politics being born in America, and it's being driven by three big changes. First, there's a new governing agenda that's emerging and is very different from challenges that we faced in the 20th century. Second, the way that media and technology are evolving is changing the way we communicate, advocate, organize, and govern. And third, the demography of the country is changing. We may be going through the most profound demographic transformation of people living in this country since the arrival of the

Europeans here in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These three things taken together: the emergence of a new governing agenda, the way media and technology are changing the way we govern and communicate, and the way the American people themselves are changing is what we call a new politics. And we're going to be seeing this play out in the next twenty or thirty years in the life of the country.

AK

What do you think the effect of these changes will be?

SR

I think that the politics of the twenty-first century will be very different from the politics of the twentieth century. When I was at Tufts in the early 1980s, we were talking about the Cold War and the Russians, and TV was barely in the dorms. There were no computers, no mobile phones, no internet, and the campus itself was almost entirely white.

In terms of the challenges we face, the big issues when I was an undergraduate were whether there was going to be nuclear annihilation and the management of the Cold War. Today we're looking at climate change, and we're seeing the rise of countries like China, India, Brazil, and Mexico. We're seeing this sort of new wave of globalization play out which is fundamentally altering the economic arrangements in the world and the power structures of the world. And we're seeing what Fareed Zakaria calls "the rise of the rest," which is this idea that these long sleeping nations are rising up to assert themselves on the global stage. This is a completely different world.

When I was at Tufts the world was divided into three groupings: there was the Western world, the Communist world, and the Non-Aligned world. We had very little relations with India for example. It's really an extraordinary thing to think about; it's just a short period of time ago. The world has changed, and I think we're at the beginning of a whole new era of domestic American politics and global politics.

AK

In your June 16, 2009 *Huffington Post* article "Obama: No Realist He," you argue that Obama is not the international relations realist that many paint him as. Is this really true?

SR

First of all, I think that these terms are imprecise. One of the things that I learned from writing that piece was how imprecise the concept of realism is and how easy it is to distort it. Ninety percent of the comments I got about the article were negative, which is fine, but I was fascinated by that, really taken aback. I guess that I would say that I think we're going to develop new language and words to describe American global engagement in the twenty-first century, because a lot of the concepts and words that we used in the twentieth century just feel a little bit antiquated.

The argument that I made in the *Huffington Post* piece was that, because of Obama's race and because of the way he was elected, he really doesn't have the option of being a traditional Kissengerian realist. This idea that is imbued in his own brand and in his own promise and words is a sense that we can bring everyone together. There was this other promise that he made, of the ability of an oppressed outsider to achieve political power, a guy who's sending a signal to the rest of the world that they have a chance to improve their own civil society and countries. I think that history has cast him in a different role, even more so than Nixon or Ford or even Bush Senior in some ways.

I think that the Obama team is going to have to be very careful not to overreact to George W. Bush, and not to argue that their idealism or ideological blindness caused the great foreign policy blunders of the Bush era and therefore we need to go back to a conscious realism. I don't agree with that. I just don't think that's the right historical response to what we've just gone through.

I would like to see a marriage of perhaps FDR and Wilson, in the sense that I think idealism is a requirement for success. In this moment in history where hundreds of millions of people have the opportunity to experience relatively open and free societies as never before, when more people are allowed to live than ever before, when countries are more open than ever before, there's a global political awakening taking place. You can paint a scenario, as I did earlier, where we see global renaissance and enlightenment. You also could paint a less sanguine scenario; one where we don't actually effectively manage climate change, where civil

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societies start to break apart, where progressive societies in the world start to shatter and break apart.

I think that Obama has more ability to influence than any man alive, and my hope is that settling is not an option, that he realizes that it's not just about domestic American opinion, but that the world is at this sort of tipping point. And he's been given a very special historical role.

He's maybe the most powerful person of color that's ever walked the face of the earth. He's certainly the most powerful African descendent person that's ever walked the face of the earth, and I hope that he can feel comfortable in playing that historical role as much as he may be, and his counselors around him, more careful and cautious. I think that not being cautious is not the same as intervening militarily in a foreign country. I think that there is a wide spectrum in between, and my own sense is that if he is reelected, which I think he will be, that this perhaps becomes his mission more in the second term than in the first term.

In the first term he will focus more on domestic issues and be attendant to global issues. And in the second term, we can see a giant walking along across the global stage in a way that we haven't seen in American politics. And certainly it's possible.

The flipside of this is managing the "rise of the rest." In the last G20 meeting, there was a tremendous amount of focus on making it so that developing countries had more voting rights. How does that happen? Does that mean that America has to give up voting rights? What happens when an American President says, "I'm reducing our influence over a global institution"? Does the opposition scream that he is selling out American values and American interests and sort of inexorably putting us on a path to demise?

It is something that is going to require extraordinary imagination. And we're not going to be able to go back to old tools to manage that. And I also don't think that realism alone is sufficient to manage that process. Perhaps I am more of a realist in the [Brent] Scowcroft-[Zbigniew] Brzezinski School than I am in the Kissinger school, and when I think of realism that's what I think. When I said "no he is not a realist" in that piece, what I was really referring to is the Kissengerian realism. I think Barack Obama is closer to Scowcroft and Brzezinski, and if you read what they've said, Brzezinski has said repeatedly that the single greatest issue that's driving global politics today is the global political awakening that's happening throughout the world. So my two cents for you is that this concept of "the rise of the rest" is literally the big one.

AK

You've said that the global political structure is changing. How is the domestic political structure changing along with that?

SR

I think it's changing dramatically. I think you saw in Barack Obama's election the use of these new modern media tools that allow millions more Americans to uniquely participate in our democracy than would have been possible in the old political order. You saw the rise of a bi-racial candidate elected to be President of the United States, which is something that was unimaginable, I would argue, twenty or thirty years ago. You're seeing the president really try to address – through the G20 process and the Copenhagen process (United Nations Climate Change Conference) – the new arrangements that are going to be required to help govern the world in a very different age. The G20 replacing the G8 as the entity with all of the energy is a

sign that the powers at the global table are changing. This may not be well understood by the American public, but this is a profound change and we're starting to see it codified.

AK

You mentioned that college-aged youth today are starting their careers at such an important time, and also that President Obama has inspired this sort of evolution in American political life. Do you think that the youth movement that rose up in this last election will become a permanent force in American politics?

SR

I would say that there is both a global youth movement and a domestic youth movement. Let me address the domestic first. Domestically, what we're seeing is the rising up of a new generation, often called the millennial generation, and it's the largest generation in American history. This is not a typical group of young people; this is a very large group. They will overwhelm and become in the twenty-first century what the boomers were in the late twentieth century. The Millennials, as they age, will start to change politics, media, society, and culture the way the boomers did in the twentieth century. This will become the dominant generation in American politics over the next thirty or forty years, and there is no way to imagine being a majority party in American politics with success without this rising generation.

You've seen this generation start to exert itself in this last election, the vote margin that Obama got and the size of the vote share that Millennials represented in the electorate meant that essentially Obama's entire margin of victory was dependent on the Millennial generation. What you're seeing play out now is the beginning of the Millennials asserting themselves in the political process, and what's important is that this is not a typical young generation. This is not like people when I was at Tufts; this is an active, engaged generation that participates in politics at a much higher level than previous youth generations. They have a commitment to service that did not exist in previous generations and also, as of today, they're much more liberal than the boomers or the Gen-Xers. They're much more ideologically left and much more Democratic than the generations that have come before. There's a whole different culture and ethic.

Globally, 53 percent of the people in the world are under 29, and in the developing world an overwhelming majority are under thirty. And so what you see is what we saw in Iran recently. Seventy percent of the people in Iran are under 30 years old. Many of them were wired in through mobile devices and the Internet. Those people using these new tools really affected civil society in a very important way. The majority of the world today will have grown up very wired, and what we're going to see at some point in the next five to ten years is that essentially everybody in the world will have a mobile device, something we used to call a phone. And it's my belief that this is going to a tipping point in human history, that you're going to have a before and an after. You're going to have everybody, from an Indian farmer making \$2 a day to my kids with their 24 inch iMac, having the same access to information as each other. Just like we saw that the printing press was a precursor to

the Renaissance and the Enlightenment because of the rapid democratization of information that took place, we're seeing a moment coming that is the most profound democratization of information that's happened in all of human history. And we don't really know the long-term impact of that.

What we saw in Iran was both the positive side of that, which was the ability of average citizens to assert themselves more in a repressive society, but you also saw the government using these same tools to further repress and identify dissenters. So this issue of the whole world becoming connected, which will be unprecedented in all of human history, is something that will happen in the near term. Nearly 60 percent of the world today has a mobile phone, and we will be at 90 percent in about ten years. That's really going to be a profound moment.

A lot of what we will unfold over the next twenty or thirty years is going to be driven by people today who are under 30, and it's really going to be more their world than my world. And I think it's what makes this time both so promising and also so possible that there will be extraordinary change and transformation. So much of the world that is alive today is essentially very young and hasn't asserted themselves into their civil societies. It means that a lot of what we know to be civil society and civilization is going to be created over the next twenty or thirty years, and I think that this is going to be a time of both enormous opportunity and challenge for the world.

AK

Earlier this summer, you said that the U.S. is growing more intolerant of intolerance, what do you think the consequences of this attitudinal shift will be?

SR

Well, I think it's a profound thing. I think that if you go back to the founding of what we know to be modern America, tolerance was really our founding principle. I think that in this recent era of American politics, you've seen intolerance and demonization of the sociological other as a core part of what happened here in America in the last forty years. And I think that we're coming out of

that era in America politics. I think that what we are seeing with the election of Barack Obama is this idea that America's ready for a period of racial reconciliation, of becoming more tolerant of people not like them. I think it's reflective of how diverse our society has become and how we ourselves are changing. I think you're seeing this play out in things like gay marriage, obviously the discussions around race, the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. You're seeing Americans themselves becoming more accepting of people not like them. I'm not going to argue that we're in a post-racial America, certainly not, I don't know that any society is ever post-racial. I think management of internal minority groupings, ideological groupings, religious groupings, and ethnic groupings is always hard in a diverse society. The good news is that I think we're managing our own diversity better today than we have in a very long time, and that's very exciting to me.

AK

You said that President Obama created a more tolerant America, but what about the radical wing that has become even more radical because of his election?

SR

The important thing is that they're not in charge of the government anymore. I mean the reality of it is that, if you can allow me to be a partisan for a minute, the Republican Party used the exploitation of racial fear as a core way of achieving political power in America over the last forty years. Let me say this clearly, I do not believe that intolerance is an attribute that is particular to one political party; I think that the Republican Party used the exploitation of racial fear as a political strategy in order to achieve political power in the United States. And whether they themselves were actually racist or intolerant is, I think, not an issue. I think what is manifestly true is that the Republican party played to people's intolerant fears of people not like them.

I think that that period of our history, which we have seen in recent years and which every civil society goes through, is something that was really out of sync with our historical mission and America's unique position in the world. And I think that what you're starting to see with Obama now is an effort to reconcile and to find common ground in a

wildly large and diverse country. In some ways, it is a prerequisite for a successful democracy. If you really analyze how our government is setup, the basic premise of the way the American government is setup is that people who have different interests and ideologies can come together to find common ground to govern themselves. It's essentially the promise of America. I think the ability to find common ground with people who are not like you is what has made this country different from many other countries that have experienced horrible manifestations of internal demonization of their populations. I think what's amazing about this country is that, particularly in the last 50 years, we've been able to really work through and around the civil rights movement and with immigration. We've been able to work through and reconcile a lot of this in a way that I think is more in sync with who we are and more honest with what this country really is.

In many ways, I think that's Barack Obama's greatest promise to the country. If you can break down the Obama brand, the thing that is most potent and powerful is this idea that he can bring disparate interests together to solve common challenges and to work towards national interests. I think that at any point, if it feels as if he's not able to do that whether due to lack of interest or lack of strength or lack of vision, he will pay an extraordinary personal price for it because I think that's core to his promise over the last few years.

Just as we were discussing earlier the rise of the rest, part of what counts as the rise of the rest is that the European-descendent world is about 15 percent of the population of the world, which means about 85 percent are from non-European traditions. I think that one of the processes we're seeing play out in global politics today is the desire of the non-European, non-white world to have a bigger seat at the global table. And Obama's election becomes an incredibly inspiring symbol to the populations around the world that even those who are on the outs can make it.

Just as we talked about racial reconciliation in the US, when we look at the G20 meeting in September, when you look at who's at that table, there are a lot of non-white faces you're looking at. That has not been the case at the global power table for a very long time. So just like what we're

seeing play out here, where we're seeing non-white Hispanics and African-Americans and Asians assert themselves in a much more powerful way in a growingly diverse America, the same dynamic is playing out globally, which has enormous implications for American power in the rest of the world.

AK

Do you think that the birther movement we've seen lately is a push back against that?

SR

If you look at more data on this, somewhere in between 15 and 20 percent of the country is upset and angry over the racial transformations, and I'll take that. There is an extraordinary level of transformation taking place in the population – you've gone from a country that was 88.5 percent white and 11 percent African American when I was born, to a country today that is 66 percent white and 33 percent persons of color. We are heading toward being a majority-minority country by 2042. That is an extraordinary, rapid, and profound level of transformation and just goes to the core of who we are, the core of any civil society. The fact that 15 to 20 percent of the country is angry about that shows the basic generosity and liberal instinct of the American people. They have reconciled themselves with this racial transformation, they're not protesting in the streets.

I do think, though, that it still represents 15 to 20 percent of the public, which means that one out of five, one out of six people will take political action, which you've seen in the immigration debate. You've seen it play out in the birther movement, and I think that's not going to go away. I think that's going to be a part of managing this racial transformation, but 53 percent of the country just voted for a biracial man, and it's the largest margin of victory a Democrat has gotten since 1964. When people voted for Barack Obama, they knew what they were getting. There was no way to hide who he was. He had a funny name, we all knew his history, and amazingly 53 percent of this country voted affirmatively, enthusiastically, for this biracial self-described mutt from Chicago. So the concept of race in America today is evolving and changing. We're never going to be in a post-racial America, but I think we can redefine your generation, the generation at Tufts today has

the opportunity to redefine what race actually means, to make it something much more benevolent, much more about celebrating peoples' differences and honoring and finding common ground, not exploiting and segregating.

AK

In your "Dawn of a New Politics" presentation, you essentially predict the demise of the Republicans. Why are the Republicans doomed and what can the Republicans do to fix that?

SR

I think that the Republican Party has a long road back to power. They were a very successful political party in the late twentieth century and, like many successful enterprises, they're having a hard time letting go of what used to work very well for them. With these structural changes I described earlier, they are trying to assert themselves more in American civil society and in American politics. They're very far behind in using these new tools to communicate with Americans in a much more powerful, meaningful way.

You know the Republican Party seems to be digging in instead of adapting. There are only five Republican minorities in either the House or the Senate, four are Cuban Hispanics and one is Vietnamese and a Congressman who probably won't be there at the end of the year. The only Republican minority in the U.S. Senate, Mel Martinez, quit. He had been Chairman of the Republican National Committee in 2007 and resigned after ten months because of the racial intolerance of his own party. Mel Martinez's abandonment of the Republican Party is similar to the fleeing of the Republican Party by many Latinos all across the country.

I think that you can see the Republicans being in the wilderness for a very long time, and I think they're having a very hard time of letting go of what worked and adapting to the new realities, which is true of any institution. So I think their road back is a long one.

AK

What are the challenges for the U.S. in the near term?

SR

I do think that in the U.S. today we're facing a very specific

economic challenge that potentially we've never faced before in our history. And I don't think it's well understood. In this decade, prior to the Recession, we had a period where our GDP growth was at an extraordinary high level and you saw the stock market boom and corporate profits reach high levels, and yet incomes dropped and wages stagnated. The classical economist at Tufts would tell you that there are immutable laws in economics, and that when GDP rises there is a certain level of job creation, and when productivity rises there's a certain amount of wage and income gain. Well those things did not happen in this decade. We actually saw a period of a long, sustained Bush recovery, which classical economics can't really explain. And so I think we are entering a period where, for the US, the greatest domestic government challenge we have is going to be how do we create once again broad based prosperity in the age of the rise of the rest. We've seen this more virulent global competition take place in places like India, China, Brazil, Mexico, and American companies are competing now with not two or three European counterparts, but with dozens of developing country counterparts.

I think we're going to have to develop an entirely new strategy of how to make sure that workers and kids have the adequate skills they need to compete in a much more virulently competitive world. And I think there's been an inadequate amount of attention by policymakers in Washington to the sort of game-changing nature of what's happening in the American economy. I think it is our greatest domestic governing challenge, and in some ways it's related to our global challenges as well.

If you go back to the time of FDR and Truman, it was the Democratic progressive vision that created a strategy of how the world was supposed to work, which was we wanted everyone to have a seat at the table. We wanted a United Nations, and we wanted to see development and wanted to see countries like China and India rise up and assert themselves in the global market place. Well they're doing it now, and we have to accept the consequences of that as a country, because this was a progressive vision that created the rise of China and India and Brazil and Mexico and all these other countries. We could have had a very different attitude towards the developing world at the end of World

War II. We could have had a more colonial, more hegemonic attitude. I would argue that despite some of the things we did in the Cold War, which were required in a period of conflict, the American attitude has been fairly beneficent.

If FDR and Churchill were looking down from heaven today and looking at what has happened, they would say that that's exactly what we wanted, that we wanted the rest of the world to rise up and overthrow totalitarianism, for hundreds of millions of people to come out of poverty in recent years. The consequences of that may be that it's harder to increase the standard of living for average Americans. That is an unsustainable construct as a civil society. I mean, what are political leaders going to say to people your age, to people at Tufts today, that we had it good in the twentieth century, but in the twenty-first century you're not going to have it so good? So if that's not the message, what is the message? I don't think we're there yet, and I think this is going to be an enormous opportunity for your generation, the generation at Tufts today, to really start to imagine how do we actually create a society that continues to prosper in an age in which we really are competing with hundreds of millions of people your age.

It's a very different world. I don't think we've really come to terms with it, as a civil society and as a political elite class. This concept of "the rise of the rest" is not something that we have really come up with an answer to, and domestically, globally, and everything else, I think its going to be one of the great opportunities for you guys to help us think through, how we ensure that America has the same levels of prosperity and opportunity that we've had in the 240 years that have come before us.