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Obama's Abolitionists

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Obama's Abolitionists

Kevin Bales

As a candidate, Barack Obama said next to nothing about human trafficking and modern slavery. Sen. John McCain said slightly more, but the difference could be measured in a few short sentences. After his election as president, Obama continued his quiet approach to the issue, and for several weeks many anti-slavery activists feared the worst – that desperately needed changes would be swept away by the perfect storm of economic meltdown. But two months in, it is clear that the Obama administration is “walking the walk” on modern slavery, if still a little quiet on the talk. Three significant steps demonstrate this.

In late February, the 2009 fiscal year budget appropriations were being hammered out in the U.S. House and Senate. The Obama White House put forward requests that increased funding across the board for anti-slavery work. Then, as the congressional committees stirred their pots, the requested amounts were increased again, usually by 25 percent to 30 percent. The totals were very small potatoes compared to the overall budget, but in a field that is chronically underfunded, these increases will make a real difference, as well as help to build a foundation for an American anti-slavery policy that actually addresses the issue.

In early March, Melanne Verveer was appointed to an important new foreign-policy position. Under Secretary of State Clinton, Verveer is the new Ambassador-at-Large for International Women's Issues. Previously the head of Vital Voices, a women's rights group known for its anti-trafficking work, she also had been instrumental in setting up the Interagency Council on Women in the Clinton Administration. This matters because Verveer has years of experience in working with anti-trafficking groups around the

world, meeting and helping the victims of slavery, and navigating the controversies that rage around trafficking and prostitution.

Finally, in late March, Obama announced his choice to head up the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking. Established by the 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act, this is a crucial post because the occupant of this job coordinates something called the Senior Policy Operating Group, where all relevant government departments plan how they will work together against human trafficking. Two people were appointed to this job by George Bush. Both were extremely dedicated and hard-working, but both entered the post with a disadvantage. Neither Bush appointee had any previous experience in anti-trafficking, and both spent their tenures on a steep learning curve.

In contrast, Obama's appointment is one of the world's most knowledgeable and respected legal experts on human trafficking. Luis de Baca comes to the job from being Majority Counsel at the House Judiciary Committee, where he guided the updating of anti-slavery law, giving it more teeth to put human traffickers in jail. And he should know, since for 14 years before going to the House, de Baca was the leading attorney in the Justice Department prosecuting human-trafficking and slavery cases. He won convictions against more than 100 traffickers. E. Benjamin Skinner put it well when he wrote recently in the *Huffington Post* "Saying that de Baca has a vigorous attitude about slave traders is like saying Killer Whales have an affinity for seals."

De Baca will need shark-like tenacity to make real progress in his post. Leaving the shaky economic context to the side, he inherits an issue that is little understood. Perhaps the most telling fact is how this crime has fit within past government priorities. For example, according to government estimates, there are about 17,000 people trafficked into the United States in any given year, in other words, 17,000 new slaves in America each year. Coincidentally, there are also about 17,000 people murdered in the US each year. Obviously, murder is the ultimate crime, but slavery comes a close second, especially considering the other crimes associated with it, such as rape and torture. Note that the national success rate in solving murder cases is about 70 percent, so around 11,000 murders

are “cleared” each year. But working from the government’s own numbers, the annual percentage of trafficking and slavery cases solved is less than 1 percent. If 14,500 to 17,500 people were newly enslaved in America in 2006, the fact is that in the same year the Department of Justice brought charges against only 111 people for human trafficking and slavery; 98 were convicted. And those figures only apply to people trafficked from other countries; no measures exist for domestic-slavery victims.

By the same token, to deal with 17,000 murders each year, every one of the country’s 20,000 police departments has trained homicide specialists. The total numbers are not clear, but a conservative estimate would be 40,000 trained homicide police. Ask how many full-time and trained anti-trafficking police there are in the 20,000 departments, and you will get several different answers, but none are larger than 10. The fact is that America is awash with slavery, but hasn’t trained its police and citizens to see it or funded the work necessary to wipe it out. It doesn’t have to be like this.

For the past eight years, a lack of coordination among agencies with statutorily mandated roles and responsibilities has resulted in a failure to establish, achieve and monitor coherent goals in the fight against human trafficking. This isn’t just the view of activists. Government Accountability Office and Congressional Research Service reports, along with independent studies, have repeatedly highlighted a lack of overall strategy and coordination, and have uniformly urged the need for leadership. If the Obama administration takes slavery seriously and provides strong leadership, it will be hard not to succeed, not least because a coalition of anti-slavery organizations has prepared clear and realistic guidelines. Here are some of the highlights.

For the fight against modern slavery, government interagency oversight should reside in the White House. Obama needs to take an active and informed leadership role to improve interagency collaboration, and provide oversight and accountability because of the broad and complex interagency jurisdictional nature of this issue. The relevant agencies – despite coordinating task forces – have not been effective without direction and leadership from the White House.

Given the fact that many of the products we consume – coffee, cotton, steel, shrimp and fish, cocoa and many others – have some level of slave labor in their production, it is important that the new administration convene discussions between businesses, trade unions, anti-slavery and anti-child labor organizations, and governments to develop anti-trafficking policies, programs and initiatives domestically and internationally. As part of this effort, Obama should work with the private sector and human rights groups to develop joint strategies to address slavery in corporate supply chains.

The last administration often portrayed itself as the world leader in anti-slavery efforts, and while it accomplished many good things, this wasn't strictly true. On a number of key measures, Brazil is doing the best job of eradicating slavery within its borders. For that reason, the new administration should consider ways that the United States might learn from, and build on, the example of Brazil in combating trafficking within its borders and slavery in its supply chains. Unlike the United States, Brazil has a National Plan for the Eradication of Slave Labor, with a "slavery czar." The work rests on a foundation of aggressive federal-enforcement activity (with highly trained anti-slavery squads in the national police), extensive supply-chain research, and corporate education and engagement. Companies or individuals found to be using forced labor are subject to civil sanction and oversight; companies pledge through the counterpart National Pact not to source from these entities. The International Labor Organization has played a key role in shaping this initiative, work that the United States has supported. Building on the Brazil model could include, among other initiatives, sensitizing U.S. companies to the issue and raising awareness about the program, encouraging U.S. corporate adoption and implementation of anti-slavery training tools and materials, and U.S. corporate participation in Brazil's National Pact.

These suggestions are just an opening, setting the stage for much greater efforts. The sad truth is that there has never been a day in the history of the United States without slavery, whether legal or, after the Civil War, as a hidden crime. A conservative estimate is that there are 40,000 slaves in America today, yet this is a country that

could rid itself of this crime. With proper leadership, training for law enforcement, resources and increased public awareness, this could be a slave-free country for the first time since 1492.

America was founded on the principal that personal liberty is a natural right. Without question, our attempts to embody this concept have been flawed. We established ourselves as a slaveholding republic, and this inherent contradiction has plagued us ever since. Yet for all our faults, and even in times when partisan bitterness and confusion are at their worst, the thread that binds us all together is the concept of freedom. It is the rock upon which our nation was built, and the light that has guided our good laws and progress. Now, if we choose to accept the challenge, we can end slavery in America once and for all; and if we are true to our ideals, anything less would be unacceptable.

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