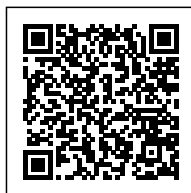


THE US NEED FOR A 'GIANT LEAP', ANTONIO GARRIGUES WALKER

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It is not possible to understand the issues driving the campaigns ahead of the forthcoming US presidential elections by adopting a 'European' view, says Antonio Garrigues Walker. Conversely, US voters need to understand the global significance of where the results may take them.

No es posible entender las fuerzas que dirigen y las posiciones de los candidatos en las inminentes elecciones en Estados Unidos desde un punto de vista puramente europeo, opina Antonio Garrigues, Presidente de Garrigues. El papel del estado en los EE.UU. se percibe de manera muy diferente, y sus ciudadanos son mucho más conservadores que en Europa. Sin embargo, la elección electoral tendrá un impacto considerable en la imagen del país, independientemente del resultado. Julián Marías once remarked that the Americans were not yet ready for philosophy. They are a young, dynamic and optimistic people with a healthy naivety, still somewhat unschooled in some

areas, although enormously capable in almost all others.

This is the fundamental difference that must always be borne in mind when attempting to judge events in the US from a European perspective. The Americans have a substantially different concept of the role of the State and of civil society and its citizens are considerably more conservative, patriotic and religious than the Europeans. All of which helps justify and explain attitudes and preferences that we in Europe may find difficult to comprehend objectively.

In spite of the parlous state of the US economy and the Iraq war, the last presidential elections saw George W. Bush defeat Senator Kerry with ease. He knew how to make political capital out of the absolute priority given to national security, and played up his opponent's inability to meet such challenges. As things stand, the economy has taken a serious turn for the worse, while Iraq has become a disaster.

To what can the Republican candidacy now turn? National security will once again have a pivotal role to play. McCain will continue to do everything he can to distance himself from the legacy of President Bush while also emulating him. Putting himself forward as the only person able to guarantee security, while blowing any risks out of all proportion, including the threat posed by a more powerful, ambitious and aggressive new Russia. This conflict will undoubtedly play into the hands of McCain, who will centre his line of attack on the inexperience and incompetence of Barack Obama.

Nevertheless the US is not having the best of times. Despite the financial rescue package recently launched the economic situation remains uncertain with no easy, or quick, solutions. The US business community is also aware, albeit not overly worried, about its responsibility on a global scale. Elsewhere, the 9/11-induced trauma is starting to lose, if only slightly, its emotional force and it will no longer be as easy to exploit external threats. McCain arguably has too much out-dated experience, suggest some. Like Obama, Kennedy and Clinton were also accused of being young amateurs.

What may be most beneficial to Obama however is the widespread collective perception that the US needs to turn a new page. His 'change' slogan hit the nail on the head. We have gone from elections that were the exclusive preserve of WASP males, to seeing candidacies by Hispanics, an African-American and a woman. From now on, all electoral scenarios will be possible.

The ability of the US to face up to difficult situations has until now been admirable. But as we view events, patriotism and nationalism cannot be allowed to prevent civilised, ethical and united global governance. They can acknowledge mistakes, identify strategies and, above all, align resources with their objectives until market forces again function efficiently. This was the case with the dotcom and accounting bubbles, and will be the case with the real estate bubble, even though it looks likely to be more intense, longer-lasting and dangerous. A decisive effort must be made to seek a positive and even healthy solution to this economic quandary, which has regrettably coincided with a complex and delicate electoral process that still has some surprises in store.

The important thing is that it remains a country with a crucial role to play in world affairs, and can yet modify patterns of behaviour and aspects of its modus operandi – particularly its unilateralist zeal and weakness for autocracy and isolationism.

Obama or McCain will have to accept that their country can and must lead the globalisation process, and back global institutions that have independence and room to manoeuvre. While they may not be fully aware of it, this is the true 'giant leap' that America will be voting on in November.

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