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EVIAN, FRANCE

PREPARE for a new America: That's the message that the Rev. Jesse Jackson conveyed to participants in the first World Policy Forum, held at this French lakeside resort last week.

He promised "fundamental changes" in US foreign policy - saying America must "heal wounds" it has caused to other nations, revive its alliances and apologize for the "arrogance of the Bush administration."

The most important change would occur in the Middle East, where "decades of putting Israel's interests first" would end.

Jackson believes that, although "Zionists who have controlled American policy for decades" remain strong, they'll lose a great deal of their clout when Barack Obama enters the White House.

"Obama is about change," Jackson told me in a wide-ranging conversation. "And the change that Obama promises is not limited to what we do in America itself. It is a change of the way America looks at the world and its place in it."

Jackson warns that he isn't an Obama confidant or adviser, "just a supporter." But he adds that Obama has been "a neighbor or, better still, a member of the family." Jackson's son has been a close friend of Obama for years, and Jackson's daughter went to school with Obama's wife Michelle.

"We helped him start his career," says Jackson. "And then we were always there to help him move ahead. He is the continuation of our struggle for justice not only for the black people but also for all those who have been wronged."

Will Obama's election close the chapter of black grievances linked to memories of slavery? The reverend takes a deep breath and waits a long time before responding.

"No, that chapter won't be closed," he says. "However, Obama's victory will be a huge step in the direction we have wanted America to take for decades."

Jackson rejects any suggestion that Obama was influenced by Marxist ideas in his youth. "I see no evidence of that," he says. "Obama's thirst for justice and equality is rooted in his black culture."

But is Obama - who's not a descendant of slaves - truly a typical American black?

Jackson emphatically answers yes: "You don't need to be a descendant of slaves to experience the oppression, the suffocating injustice and the ugly racism that exists in our society," he says. "Obama experienced the same environment as all American blacks did. It was nonsense to suggest that he was somehow not black enough to feel the pain."

Is Jackson worried about the "Bradley effect" - that people may be telling pollsters they favor the black candidate, but won't end up voting for him?

"I don't think this is how things will turn out," he says. "We have a collapsing economy and a war that we have lost in Iraq. In Afghanistan, we face a resurgent Taliban. New threats are looming in Pakistan. Our liberties have been trampled under feet . . . Today, most Americans want change, and know that only Barack can deliver what they want. Young Americans are especially determined to make sure that Obama wins."

He sees a broad public loss of confidence in the nation's institutions: "We have lost confidence in our president, our Congress, our banking system, our Wall Street and our legal system to protect our individual freedoms. . . I don't see how we could regain confidence in all those institutions without a radical change of direction."

Jackson declines to be more concrete about possible policy changes. After all, he insists, he isn't part of Obama's policy team. Yet he clearly hopes that his views, reflecting the position of many Democrats, would be reflected in the policies of an Obama administration.

On the economic front, he hopes for "major changes in our trading policy."

"We cannot continue with the open-door policy," he says. "We need to protect our manufacturing industry against unfair competition that destroys American jobs and creates ill-paid jobs abroad."

Would that mean an abrogation of the NAFTA treaty with Canada and Mexico?

Jackson dismisses the question as "premature": "We could do a great deal without such dramatic action."

His most surprising position concerns Iraq. He passionately denounces the toppling of Saddam Hussein as "an illegal and unjust act." But he's now sure that the United States "will have to remain in Iraq for a very long time."

What of Obama's promise to withdraw by 2010? Jackson believes that position will have to evolve, reflecting "realities on the ground."

"We should work with our allies in Iraq to consolidate democratic institutions there," he says. "We must help the people of Iraq decide and shape their future in accordance with their own culture and faith."

On Iran, he strongly supports Obama's idea of opening a direct dialogue with the leadership in Tehran. "We've got to talk to tell them what we want and hear what they want," Jackson says. "Nothing is gained by not talking to others."

Would that mean ignoring the four UN Security Council resolutions that demand an end to Iran's uranium-enrichment program? Jackson says direct talks wouldn't start without preparations.

"Barack wants an aggressive and dynamic diplomacy," he says. "He also wants adequate preparatory work. We must enter the talks after the ground has been prepared," he says.

Jackson is especially critical of President Bush's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

"Bush was so afraid of a snafu and of upsetting Israel that he gave the whole thing a miss," Jackson says.

"Barack will change that," because, as long as the Palestinians haven't seen justice, the Middle East will "remain a source of danger to us all."

"Barack is determined to repair our relations with the world of Islam and Muslims," Jackson says. "Thanks to his background and ecumenical approach, he knows how Muslims feel while remaining committed to his own faith."

Amir Taheri's next book, "The Persian Night: Iran Under the Khomeinist Revolution," is due out next month.

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