Critical to the role of civil society in what historians may someday call “the Age of Obama” will be the unfurling of several major themes, at point in tension with each other within the Obama movement and the President himself.

This paper identifies the present state of “civil society policy” as engendered by the Obama administration. Seven dimensions of that policy are explored: 1) National Service; 2) Faith-based social service; 3) Social entrepreneurship; 4) Regulation of nonprofit organizations; 5) Dealing with the crisis of unemployment; 6) The global impact of the Obama approach to civil society; and 7) the potential emergence of a fourth sector.

Three major concluding themes emerge from the paper, reflecting Obama as 1) a public policy specialist; 2) a pragmatic administrator; and 3) a charismatic leader in civil society development.

The paper employs the approach of presenting a “wiki” construction of the authors and their students at three universities, two in the United States and one in Hungary. Each university team began with the text of lecture delivered earlier in the year in both the United States and Europe by the lead author of the present paper. Then, working in teams, they constructed a “wiki”, which allowed for the team members to access their writing at all hours and build the essays presented in this submission.

The essay we propose to present to ISTR 2010 is authored by two senior scholars, themselves representing three nationalities (U.S. and Hungary). The combination of the wiki mode of presentation allows for continuous updating of the empirical reporting of the various policy initiatives. And the presence of an experienced editor in the authoral team assures the operation of the wiki approach.

Moreover, an operating internet blogsite surrounding the research effort permits scholars and other interested readers to share observations and critiques of the project on an ongoing basis. Cf. http://civilsocietyintheageofobama.blogspot.com/ for this resource.

Our work indicates that Obama the policy specialist places great belief in the substantive development of public policy and the careful and intelligent resolution of social and economic issues. An inveterate pragmatist, he aims to resolve problems, whatever the ideology represented by the resolution, and whatever organizations are required. If capitalism works in a particular case, if voluntarism works in another, if governmental action is required in yet a third, and if a stronger family is needed for a fourth—that will be the approach and the institution selected. Obama clearly recognizes, as we have asserted for years (Van Til 1988, 2000, 2008) that society requires all four of its major sectors to succeed—business, government, the third sector, and family/kin/church/.
Obama’s social policy parallels the thinking of such earlier Chicago reformers as Jane Addams and John Dewey, as the current director of the Hull House museum observes when she says: “Jane Addams would have identified with the sensibility that it’s not just red states and blue states, but about the solidarity of the human race.”

Secondly, and this approach may well conflict with his pragmatism (at least at times), Obama is inclined to speak the language of global transformation. He directly addresses his listeners, and urges them to take the lead in building society and creating the change they see as needed. He remains, as Sarah Palin memorably observed, a community organizer. And to the community organizer, the community comes first in the setting of goals and the orienting of policy. The organizer exists to serve the community, to give it voice and facilitate its ability to act.

Thus Obama says: “We need your service, right now, in this moment—our moment—in history. I’m not going to tell you what your role should be; that’s for you to discover. But I am going to ask you to play your part; ask you to stand up; ask you to put your foot firmly into the current of history (Obama, July 2, 2008).”

Finally, we would observe that the vehicle that reconciles pragmatism with transformational organizing in the Obama vision is not the nonprofit organization—slow and bureaucratic and cautious as it so often is. Rather he and his followers seek to support the wider range of individual actions and more loosely formed groupings that constitutes the essence of the contemporary civil society. Here Obama finds the primordial glue that forms itself into an electoral campaign one season, voluntary service the next, and social enterprise thereafter. Or, if a depression threatens, it may transmute into a vast employment venture, addressing issues of green development or infrastructure repair.

A civil society cannot be built by a President or his administration acting alone, but it can be nurtured by their leadership. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Barack Obama will not lie solely in the policies or legislation he brings into being, but also in the quality of the social forms that he and his followers engender and facilitate. Such a movement, should it take form, throughout his country and beyond, may truly come to merit the identification of its time—our time—as an era of significance, an Age of Obama.