

Saving Obama, Saving Ourselves

By Tom Hayden, Peace Exchange Bulletin

06 September 12

The threat of a Romney-Ryan regime should be enough to convince a narrow American majority to vote for Barack Obama, including the disappointed rank-and-file of social movements. A widening of economic and racial inequality. Cuts in Medicare and Medicaid. More global warming and extreme weather. Strangling of reproductive rights. Unaffordable tuition. The Neo-cons back in the saddle. Two or three more right-wing Supreme Court appointments to come. Romney as Trojan horse for Ryan the stalking horse and future presidential candidate.

The consolidation of right-wing power would put progressives on the defensive, shrinking any organizing space for pressuring for greater innovations in an Obama second term. Where, for example, would progressives be without the Voting Rights Act programs such as Planned Parenthood, or officials like Labor Secretary Hilda Solis or EPA administrator Lisa Jackson?

But the positive case for More Obama and Better Obama should be made as well. History will show that the first term was better than most progressives now think. A second-term voter mandate against wasteful wars, Wall Street extravagance, and austerity for the many, led by elected officials including Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Barbara Lee, Raul Grijalva, Jim McGovern and Keith Ellison, would be, in the language of the Pentagon, a target-rich field of opportunities.

Why Obama's achievements are dismissed or denied by many on the white liberal-left is a question worth serious consideration. It may only be a matter of legitimate disappointment after the utopian expectations of 2008. It could be pure antipathy to electoral politics, or a superficial assessment of how near impossible it is to change intransigent institutions. It could be a vested organizational interest in asserting there is no difference between the two major parties, a view wildly at odds with the intense partisan conflicts on exhibit every day. Or it could even be a white blindness in perceptions of reality on the left. When African American voters favor Obama 94-0 and the attacks are coming from the white liberal-left, something needs repair in the foundations of American radicalism.

I intend to explore these questions further during the election season. The point here is that they cumulatively contribute to the common liberal-left perception that Obama is only a man of the compromised center, a president who has delivered nothing worth celebrating. The anger with Obama on the left, combined with broad liberal disappointment with the last three years, results in a dampened enthusiasm at the margins, which could cost him the election.

By their nature, the achievements of social movements are lesser versions of original visions. As the venerable socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas used to lament, when asked if he was proud of Social Security being carried out, "they carried it out in a coffin." The limits of the 1935 Social Security Act lay in its token payments, limited eligibility, and lack of health insurance - all a result of political compromises thought necessary at the time. Because paying for the program by taxation was much too controversial, Social Security was based on employer and employee contributions. That is what Norman Thomas apparently meant in describing the program as the death of his original vision.

While the forerunners of social progress are disappointed in the results they achieve, it should be of some comfort that the gravediggers have been trying to bury Social Security for 75 years.

As the Port Huron Statement concluded, "If we appear to seek the unattainable, let it be said we do so to avoid the unimaginable." With dreams like that, it was inevitable that most of us cynically viewed the reforms of the Kennedy and later Johnson administrations as tokenism. Many young radicals of my time - SNCC and SDS - distrusted the Kennedys as too gradual and Martin Luther King Jr. as too accommodating.

But despite all the inherent tensions and faction fights, social movements do achieve significant reforms, which I would define as empowering the powerless, opening up spaces previously closed, and expanding material benefits for those previously denied them. Prominent examples included:

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, which racists and Republicans have attempted to thwart from its passage to the present day;

The enfranchisement of young people who could be drafted but could not vote;

Migrant worker protections achieved by the United Farm Workers;

Medicare and Medicaid (1965);

The US-Soviet nuclear test ban treaty was a response to global pressure for peace (1963);

Creation of the Peace Corps in response to a student campaign;

The birth of opposition to the Cold War (1965 SDS march and teach-ins).

We could neither anticipate nor stop the Vietnam escalation starting in 1965, nor the growth of the National Security State thereafter. The collaboration that existed on domestic issues - cresting in the unity of labor and the civil rights movement in the 1963 March on Washington - did not extend to foreign policy where labor and the Democratic establishment were battling communist-connected insurgencies. But the achievements were not as token as we feared. Under moral and political pressure, Kennedy evolved from early managerialism to become a crucial partner on voter registration, civil rights and the arms race before his 1963 assassination. Were it not for the assassinations of that time, our movements would have been participants in a broad coalition that came to power. A strategy for social change grew from our direct experience, that of outside (often radical) forces taking direct action to awaken and link with establishment insiders to achieve all that was possible, and to lay the foundations for later movements.

After several historical zigs and zags, a similar progressive moment came in the year 2000, when a popular American majority elected Al Gore president only to be thwarted by the US Supreme Court. Gore would have given us a ten-year head start in facing global warming, tested the limits of an environmental presidency and, arguably, kept us out of the multi trillion-dollar Iraq War.

Some on the left still believe that Kennedy was an imperialist who would have been no different than Lyndon Johnson in sending 500,000 Americans to Vietnam, and that Gore was no different than George Bush. Such opinions are wrong on both the facts and conjectures, driven more by ideology or disdain for two-party politics than by the weight of historical evidence.

What these cynical worst-case analyses leave out is the role of strong social movements and progressive constituencies in shaping the political character of the presidency. Just as Abraham Lincoln was influenced by the slaves and Abolitionists, and just as Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal was shaped by labor and populist movements, so the student, women's, civil rights and environmental movements carved an essential place for themselves in the future that might have been under John Kennedy and, later, Al Gore.

Barack Obama, like Lincoln, FDR and John Kennedy, has been criticized as too incremental by his base and too radical by his enemies. An irate Thomas Frank concluded that Obama will never pursue a second New Deal because "that is precisely what Obama was here to prevent." (Harpers, September 2012) In much analysis, Obama's role seems to be to give austerity and global imperialism an African-American face.

Liberal icons share the disappointment from their perspective, too. Paul Krugman, who supported Hillary Clinton, wrote of the 2009 stimulus package, "Mr. Obama's victory feels more than a bit like defeat." (237) A common complaint from the left and liberals was that Obama was too timid, as if oratory could have achieved the public option in health care.

There is another explanation, as first described in my book, *The Long Sixties: From 1960 to Barack Obama*. It goes like this: Obama was elected on the wings of social movements going back to slavery time and, concretely, by an extraordinary campaign that challenged the Democratic Party establishment and Iraq orthodoxy in 2008. "Hope" and "change" were code words for Obama's signal achievement, becoming the first African-American president. In doing so, he opened the door to the presidency to Latinos, women, Jews, gays and lesbians, and others long assumed to be "unqualified." In victory, however, Obama inevitably fueled emotions ranging from anxiety to hatred among the legions that became the Tea Party counter-movement. Vast numbers of Hillary Clinton Democrats accepted the Obama victory with mixed emotions, while most of the new president's constituency relaxed their energy after two years of grueling campaigning.

This was not the Civil War when slaves and Abolitionists pushed the president towards Appomattox. Not the New Deal with 40 percent unemployment, thousands of workers occupying auto and steel plants, and a rising Left resisting the threat of fascism at home and abroad. Nor was it the Kennedy era when 200,000 marched for jobs and justice under the leadership of civil rights, labor and clergy organizations. Not even close.

In fact, polls as early as 2009 showed that government was as much the enemy as banks and corporations. By a huge margin of 63-28, Americans preferred austerity to stimulus and that cutting taxes was better than government programs. (186) In 2010, a 52-19 majority believed erroneously that Obama had raised middle-class taxes. (393) Surveys by Democratic consultants indicated the same thing: voters pinched in an economic recession were reluctant to part with their tax dollars for a bureaucracy they did not trust. There was a racial dimension that few pundits mentioned: white voters in places like western Wisconsin, the land of Paul Ryan, were less than enthused about sending their tax dollars to black Milwaukee.

The surprising truth, according to Michael Grunwald's book, *The New New Deal*, is that the stimulus program - the American Recovery Act - worked beyond anyone's expectations. Which is true? Krugman's repeated story that the stimulus was inadequate? Frank's claim that Obama's role was to prevent more radical change? Grunwald's conclusion that it was both an historic achievement and all that Obama could achieve? Grunwald's well-documented account, based on two years of writing, holds up - and should be read by any doubters.

At the beginning of the Obama administration, the American economy was losing a net 700,000 jobs per month. In the first month alone of Obama's presidency, 818,000 jobs vanished. "The shocks of 2008 were nastier than the crash of 1929," Grunwald asserts, citing the eight trillion dollars in housing wealth that vanished overnight. (Grunwald, 427) That terrifying situation only began to improve when stimulus dollars began to flow. The Recovery Act funded direct employment for people in 100,000 projects including:

"roads, bridges, subways, water pipes, sewer plants, bus stations, fire stations...federal buildings, Grand Canyon National Park, trails, libraries courthouses...hospitals, Ellis Island, seaports, airports, dams, locks, levees, Indian reservations, fish hatcheries, coral reefs, passport offices, military bases, veterans cemeteries, historically-black colleges, particle accelerators, and much more." (Grunwald, 13)

The green stimulus package transformed the Energy Department into the "world's largest green energy investment fund." (Grunwald, 17) The US Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy grew from \$1.2 billion to \$16.4 billion in two years. Ninety billion in stimulus funds were invested in green energy programs, which leveraged another \$100 billion in private funds. An advanced battery industry was built from

scratch, and 680,000 low-income homes have been weatherized, 120,000 buildings retrofitted for energy efficiency, ten million smart meters have been installed, and 400,000 LED streetlights and traffic signals. (Grunwald, 425, 439) Renewable electricity doubled in three years, as promised. Wind, solar and geothermal projects approved on federal lands grew from zero to 29. (Grunwald, 435) Solar installations went from 280 megawatts in 2008 to 1,855 in 2011. Just five years earlier, the Clinton administration barely pushed through a five-year \$6.3 billion clean energy initiative, just three percent of Obama's \$200 billion. Two Obama administration mandates on fuel efficiency, one in 2009 and another last week, will increase the standard from 29 mpg to 54.5 mpg by 2025.

In addition to providing unemployment benefits to millions of Americans, the Recovery Act,

"pushed 39 states to rewrite their eligibility rules in order to qualify for stimulus bonuses, dragging the New Deal-era unemployment system into the computer age (and) permanently extending the counter-cyclical safety net to part-time workers and domestic abuse victims." (Grunwald, 435)

Grunwald sums up as follows: the Obama Recovery Act, in constant dollars, was the biggest and most transformative energy bill US history, the biggest and most transformative education bill since the Great Society, a big and transformative health care bill, too, the biggest foray into industrial policy (the auto bailout) since FDR, the biggest expansion of anti-poverty programs since LBJ, the biggest middle class tax cut since Ronald Reagan, the biggest infusion of research money ever, and it extended high-speed Internet to under-served communities, a twist on the New Deal rural electrification program. And it contained virtually no earmarks.

And, Grunwald adds, the stimulus became a huge liability in the face of nine percent unemployment, the rise of the Tea Party, and a Republican Party strategy to punish any Republicans who cooperated with Obama. The Republican obstructionism was unprecedented: whereas the Gingrich-era Republicans sought to stop the Congress during the Clinton era, the new Republicans had no qualms in trying to stop the president from acting at all during the worst economic and credit crisis in 70 years.

Democrats flinched. They stopped talking about the stimulus. They even let Jay Leno get away with joking that it was communism, "or, as we call it in this country, a stimulus package." A CBS-New York Times poll in February 2010 revealed that only six percent of Americans believed the stimulus had created any jobs. More Americans thought Elvis was alive.

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

Perhaps more than any other policy, Obamacare fed the disillusionment of the liberal-left with the new administration. They agonized in watching Obama retreat over months from his preferred single-payer position to a public option and finally to the only option which could pass the Congress, a huge subsidy to private insurers that resembled the bailout of banks. Liberals blamed Obama for his retreat more than the dinosaur Democrats and obstructionist Republicans who insisted on the final outcome. Thus, Obama received no liberal credit for being the first president to sign the biggest expansion of coverage since 1965.

Obamacare adds 32 million more people to the rolls, including those with pre-existing conditions, women seeking birth control options, and young people up to the age of 26. The provisions of Medicaid in the Obama budget will support elderly and disabled people, and children, as well as middle-class people needing future nursing home care. These Medicaid expansions will be slashed under the Romney-Ryan administration, in addition to Medicare being degraded into a voucher program.

Like the stimulus package, however, Obamacare fueled the Tea Party's massive protests against the bogeyman of "big government," even producing hallucinatory right-wing calls to save "our Social Security" from the State. Timid Democrats retreated from their legislative product again, at least for one year. The media headlined polls showing that Obamacare was wildly unpopular (though a closer reading would show that a slight majority either supported the legislation or didn't think it went far enough.)

Was this an optical problem? Did the passage of Obamacare appear to be a step backwards when viewed against the original single-payer proposal? Or did the liberal-left actually think the spectrum of American politics ranged from themselves to Obama, leaving out the inconvenient truth that hordes of right-wingers were both numerous and highly-organized. It had taken 75 years to add health insurance to FDR's original Social Security concept, but the politics had changed scarcely at all.

IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Obama was the first presidential candidate to succeed on a platform of pulling US troops out of an ongoing war (unless you count Richard Nixon's secret plan for peace in 1969 and "peace is at hand" promise of 1972). By any rational standard, Obama fulfilled that pledge when the last American troops departed Iraq last year.

Many in the peace movement did not believe it then and dismiss it now. To the extent this is a rational objection - and not blindness - it rests on two arguments. First, some claim that Obama was only following the withdrawal plan already agreed to by George Bush. It is an interesting question for future historians to uncover what shadow entity orchestrated the Iraq-US pact between the end of Bush and the coming of Obama. That aside, it is logical to conclude that the immanence of Obama's victory pushed the Bush administration to wrap up the best withdrawal agreement possible before the unpredictable newcomer took office. In addition, Obama increased his previous withdrawal commitment in February 2009 to include virtually all American forces instead of leaving behind a "residual" force of 20-30,000. It is true that as the endgame neared, Obama left open the possibility of a residual force after American ground troops departed, saying he would be responsive to the request of the Baghdad regime. Here, some on the left seized on these remarks to later claim that Obama had to be forced by the Iraqis to finally leave. There is no evidence for this claim, however. It is equally possible - and I believe more credible - that Obama was simply being Obama, knowing that the Iraqis could not possibly request the Americans to stay.

Dissecting diplomacy, like legislation, is like making sausage, in the old saying. Obama certainly knew that he would gain political cover if he could say with credibility that he was only following Bush's withdrawal plan and Iraq's request.

A more bizarre left criticism of Obama on Iraq is that the war itself never ended but instead morphed into a secret war with tens of thousands of Americans fighting as Special Ops or private contractors. Why it would be more effective to continue a losing war with fewer troops has never been asked. After all the talk of tens or hundreds of thousands of US personnel being left behind, the most recent numbers are these: in June of this year there were 1,235 US government civilian employees in Baghdad (down 10% since last quarter) along with 12,477 employees of U.S.-funded contractors and grantees (not all Americans; down 26% since last quarter). (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report and Semiannual Report to the United States Congress." July 30, 2012) The personnel are for intelligence, embassy security and customary logistical support; not an extraordinary number in a country seething with anti-Americanism. South Korea allows up to 28,500 US military personnel, and Japan some 34,000, not including thousands more dependents and civilian employees - that is what a post-war occupation looks like. (Chanlett-Avery, Emma and Ian E. Rinehart, "The U.S. Military Presence in Okinawa and the Futenma Base Controversy."

Congressional Research Service. August 3, 2012)

AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN AND THE LONG WAR

Like many who campaigned for Obama in 2008, I opposed the continuing US wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the military doctrine of the "Long War" against Islamic fundamentalism. Obama has proven true to his word, the critics have been proven right in our warnings.

According to Bob Woodward's book, *Obama's Wars*, Obama granted his generals an increase of 33,000 troops for an Afghan surge, but drew the line there and insisted that those troops would start coming home in 2011, a pledge he has kept. The 33,000 figure was disappointing to those of us, including Rep. Barbara Lee, who demanded that at least 50,000 be pulled out by the end of this year. Instead, Obama has promised the pullout of US ground troops and an "Afghan lead" by 2014. In doing so, Obama has triggered a dynamic towards the exits favored by overwhelming numbers of Americans and NATO citizens (Mitt Romney has opposed deadlines while at the same time accepting the 2014 framework).

While it will take years to know the truth, I believe there is a strategic and political reason for Obama's 2014 timetable. He knows that Afghanistan is a lost cause, though this cannot be acknowledged and dealt with during the election season. Between 2013 and 2014, Obama will have a narrow window to replace Hamid Karzai with a power-sharing arrangement, and make enough deals with the Taliban, the Haqqanis, Pakistan, China and yes, Iran - to salvage and perhaps partition Afghanistan. At present, the neo-cons running Romney's foreign policy team will not permit any diplomatic contacts with the insurgency even if it means leaving an American soldier, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, in Taliban captivity. An ultimate political agreement to try stabilizing Afghanistan will require diplomacy with several countries at the top of the neo-cons enemies' list. Even then, implosion and defeat are Afghan possibilities which Obama dares not mention.

Others in the peace movement, along with civil libertarians, rage against Obama because of his secret escalating drone attacks. They are right morally to keep making righteous noise, especially about the official cover-up of casualty rates. But it will take a political-diplomatic strategy of ending the Afghan war in order to stop the drones. Civil liberties and human rights groups who are vociferous against the drones still refuse to oppose the Afghan war itself, which is the primary cause of the drone killings. Such groups also oppose the assassinations of Al Qaeda leaders and the prosecution of whistleblowers without opposing the underlying wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen.

In summary, Obama's withdrawal from Iraq has been clouded in left disbelief and overshadowed by criticism of his policies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and beyond. On the merits, these criticisms are entirely justified. When they lead to opposing Obama's re-election, they help Romney and the return of the neo-cons.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

The white liberal-left, however modest in numbers, is hugely important in a close presidential election, where the margin of difference may be one percent or less in states with large progressive constituencies. If Obama loses, it will be unfair to blame the left, but they will be blamed nonetheless. As a consequence they will become more marginal, far less able to connect with the progressive constituencies and mass movements with vital stakes in Obama's re-election.

The potential toll can be glimpsed already, in the current decline of the radical left amidst the greatest economic meltdown in seven decades. Of course radical movements will rise again, but more likely from the

activist networks who tried to stop Romney and re-elect Obama, not from those who sat on their hands and believed it was all another circus.

There is plenty of time to still make a difference. First, some people on the left will have to become used to the idea that partial power only brings partial results. While we can establish enclaves for dreamers from Mendocino to Brooklyn, from Madison to Austin, we have to win support from the center in battleground states or risk losing decades.

The second lesson is for self-defined radicals to be immersed in the everyday problems of the mass constituencies that depend on presidents to make a small margin of difference in their lives.

One small example of how it works: there would be no federal consent decrees over brutal police departments were in not for Al Sharpton hammering at Bill Clinton to include lawsuits for unconstitutional "patterns and practices" in his otherwise draconian Omnibus Crime legislation in 1994.

Third, election seasons are perfect organizing moments when large numbers of people are open to persuasion on public issues. It may be springtime before the next cycle of activism comes around again. Now is the time to build local lists and structures for voter turnout in November and street turnouts thereafter.

This particular election offers the perfect moment to build opposition to Citizens United and "corporate personhood," for renewed movements for a constitutional right to vote, the deeper regulation of Wall Street, and a constitutional right to vote for campaigns down the road. Does anyone seriously believe that the Dreamers and marriage-equality movements will accept a return to second-class status without the fight of their lifetimes?

It can be time to begin a realignment of the electoral left as well. The active Green Party networks need to shed their reputation as "spoilers" just as the Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) needs to shed its appearance of only "tailing" the Democrats. Labor insurgents like National Nurses United, and even the formidable SEIU, are demanding a more independent role in coalition politics. One can almost feel a new politics trying to be born in the so-called womb of the old, a third "party of the people" both inside and outside the two-party system. What if the Green Party decided to invest in places of the richest electoral opportunity instead of campaigning vigorously where the stakes are 50-50? Why not a negotiated merger of the Greens and PDA in the close races, and PDA support for Green candidates where they are most viable? It is entirely possible to visualize creative leaps out of electoral traps while strengthening an independent left within the institutions of state power. Protestors in the streets should serve as a permanently challenging - and threatening - disruptive presence in constant orchestrated interaction with forces on the inside, too, not simply serve as occasional "street heat" to be enlisted when pressure is needed by the insiders.

Now through November, the radical left can be the effective One Percent. The 99 Percent will be appreciative.