

An Honest Look at Obama's First Year

Review of Paul Street's new book

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Most commentary on President Barack Obama either beats him up unfairly because he's not a Republican or cuts him extra slack because he's not a Republican. If, in the privacy of your own home, you want to pause and review the main events of the first year or more of this presidency, as recorded by someone who obviously doesn't care about partisan boosting, I recommend Paul Street's new book "The Empire's New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power."

This is an excellent detailed analysis from a progressive writer willing to note the good, the bad, and the ugly, and to admit when the bad and the ugly seem to be dominating the scene. It's early, of course, for an overview of this presidency. And it's still early for a lot of potential readers to be able to handle the truth. But this book lays out the highlights and lowlights in a way that should advance readers' understanding.

Paul Street looks first at the bankster bailouts, the auto bailout, the corporatist schools policies (which, through a veto threat, may have played a role in the Senate's decision on Thursday night to reject a war spending bill that recklessly included funding for teachers of non-murderous skills). Street looks at the approach of the Obama administration to the environment, including mountaintop removal, offshore drilling, nuclear power, crap and trade, and a performance in Copenhagen that might be characterized as sabotaging a planetary rescue attempt. Street acknowledges improvements over Bush-Cheney, but moves on to areas where Obama is worsening their misdeeds.

Chapter Two focuses on war and recounts how Obama's support in the Democratic presidential primaries grew predominantly out of his imaginary opposition to war, especially the Iraq War, to which he's now sending [more mercenaries](#). The Iraqi people had been promised a public vote on the Bush-Maliki deal permitting occupation until the end of 2011. Obama successfully pressured the Iraqi government to deny its people that vote, knowing they would vote the treaty down. Street also discusses Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Israel, and South America (where [U.S. ships](#) are now headed). The one thing all these places have in common: Obama's been bad for them.

Chapter Three examines in a way that has been badly needed the tragicomic saga of corporate health insurance reform. Chapter Four looks at race. And Chapter Five delves into more areas in which Obama has adopted and expanded upon Bush's policies (or, in many cases, what we used to call "crimes"). Street reviews the PATRIOT Act, habeas corpus, spying, torture, and the incredible lengths to which Obama has gone in his crusade to fully protect Bush, Cheney, and their co-conspirators, an effort that has included making threats to England should it be so uncouth as to reveal any evidence of wrongdoing.

Chapter Six is called “We Were Warned,” and catalogues the many ways in which we already knew that Obama would not be, or at least was not promising to be, what so many fantasized he might. But knowing that you shouldn’t be disappointed doesn’t always undisappoint you. What’s needed are solutions, and Street’s book is weaker in that area. He’s pretty quiet on the need to shift power away from presidents, as well as the need to eliminate the forces controlling presidents. Street seems to accept that presidents simply have unlimited power, and devotes his investigation to exposing the quality of Obama’s use and abuse of that power.

However, there is this nugget of wise advice in the chapter on health insurance reform:

“Millions of Americans have been led to misunderstand meaningful democratic politics. Many have been conditioned to see making strictly limited choices in the narrow-spectrum, mass-marketed, corporate-crafted election spectacles the power elite stages for them every four years as the only politics that matters. Real issues, public policy, and the need for regular ongoing popular movements and pressure at the day-to-day grassroots level get lost in the fog induced by hypnotic, colored-lights election dramas, focused on the competing, expertly marketed images of crafty politicians who understand very well their subordination to Edward Herman and David Peterson’s ‘unelected dictatorship of money.’”

In other words, expect more from day-to-day agitation and less from elections. Good advice. The entire book implies another bit of wisdom as well: Be loyal to peace, justice, the social good, but not to politicians or their parties. A caller to a radio show I was on this week urged me not to press elected officials to end wars if they were Democrats. Didn’t I realize that the Teabaggers were “the real enemy”? But I don’t view pressuring representatives to represent us as making them into enemies. And it cannot be a foregone conclusion that persuading the less awful of two candidates to take a stand for something popular is going to hurt them in their next election. It just might help.

Street does end his book with a chapter called “Postscript: The Sorry Surrender of the So-Called Radical Left.” This lamentation implies what is needed by bewailing its absence. In an earlier chapter, Street hints at what might be changing for the better:

“By the end of 2009, President Barack Obama seemed to be facing something of a mini-rebellion in the nation’s progressive ranks, much of which had gone to remarkable, sometime even absurd, lengths to support and defend him and his administration against any and all critics, right and left.”

However, if that became a serious rebellion in 2009 I’ve missed it. And I’ve suspected it was almost here in mid-2010, without any solid evidence. Maybe we all just tend to assume that the world is about to come to its senses, whether it is or not.

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