

Has Obama Become Bush II?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Barack Obama's election seemed an anomaly, but clearly it was disgust with his predecessor that drove him from obscurity to the presidency.

Obama's "outside-inside" strategy inspired millions of new voters. He organised, rallied new voters, used social networks and invoked change orientated slogans with more symbolism than substance.

But once in office, the office took over, co-opting his populist inclinations and burying his grass roots movement in a miasma of paralysing pragmatic centrism rationalised as the 'politics of the possible'.

Supporters became recipients of emails, not potential activists to lobby for his agenda. He allowed his "army" to dissipate while he moved into using the Oval Office as a bully pulpit. His followers were demobilised as he gave speech after speech.

Obama realised that the Bush era had not ended in the bureaucracies or in the media and halls of congress. To undercut its lingering impact, he moved right possibly to later move left.

He embraced some of Bush's tough-guy national security boilerplate. He got along with Pentagon power by going along. Compromise began to become his mantra.

Miniscule reforms were presented as great victories. Withdrawal from Iraq was delayed as was the closing of Guantanamo. He seemed to be on a short leash as the real power brokers checked and check mated initiatives.

Had he become a Bush II? Many think so. Was he selling out or buying in?

Ross Douthat argues in the New York Times that Obama is a knee-jerk liberal who believes in working within institutions for change.

According to Douthat, "that makes him ... an odd bird who seems a Machiavellian willing to cut any deal juxtaposed with the soaring rhetoric of fairly ideological big government liberalism".

The problem with institutions is that they rarely change without media scandals or outside pressure.

People power versus polemics

It was not that Obama owed anything to 'the left' once his radical preacher Rev Wright and

one time buddy Bill Ayers had become albatrosses.

He was now trying to appear non-partisan and non-ideological, but progressives read into his victory much more than was ever possible to achieve, much more than even he pledged.

He took the liberals for granted with lip service, not major policy shifts.

As the blogosphere blathered and the unions splintered, there was very little leverage or organising underway to reach out to his campaign activists.

As the right built people power, the left built polemics.

As his opponents – those that hated him and denied his legitimacy – seized the initiative, the Obamacrats moved into defensive bunkers keeping up appearances, one step forward, two back. They cultivated congressmen, not constituencies.

Once he realised that the most ‘powerful man in the world’, only had the power to propose while congress disposes; once he realised that the right not only would not play bi-partisan games and that the GOP had been taken over by the bully boys; once he realised that they would intimate their own to enforce ‘discipline’; once he realised that they would not even accept the legitimacy of his election or citizenship; once he realised that to survive he needed to embrace the Pentagon’s logic and the dictates of the Wall Street donors who had backed him; once he realised he was virtually alone in the Big House (yes, that is a metaphor, too, for a prison), the die was cast. He was captured, with a noisy chorus of naysayers on the right and left limiting his options.

He was trapped by the logic of his choices and the limits of his vision.

Disillusion

Which is not to say he was ever a man of the left. He told us that he would escalate the Afghan war during the campaign. He showed us where he stood on the economic collapse with his appointees like Summers, Geithner et al.

To fight off the right, he needed the centre and the media on his side.

He is by nature cautious and cunning, moving step by step, winning some battles, losing or giving up others. He knows that a president cannot pitch a perfect game. He is a perception manager, not a street fighter. For many he is a big disappointment.

For others, the question is ‘did you expect Che Guevara?’

The challenge now is not to walk down memory lane but to strategise about building the future in an imperfect world.

What lessons can we learn and apply? How can the progressives reenergise an outside-in strategy, how can they/we start re-framing issues, building a base and then mobilising it? Will there be a return to the streets or more co-optation by the illusions of power in the suites?

Perhaps the disillusion now building on the left, will lead to more direct challenges to the Obama style and approach. On the other hand it could lead to fatalism and a dropping out of

politics by people who were mesmerised by his charisma and naïve about how politics really works.

If that happens, the right will dominate the discourse and try to retake congress.

We have seen this before - with Lyndon Johnson forsaking butter for guns, with Bill Clinton taking refuge in the corporate centre.

The media is central to this because liberals, who have more money than conservatives, have not invested in media institutions to reach out to the mass audience. They have not rallied, for that matter, to the realisation that the US needs channels like Al Jazeera to build awareness about the larger world on television where parochialism and propaganda is rife.

So a new strategy is needed, to remake the Democratic party into something more democratic, to resist the power of big money in politics and to readopt a populist message along economic lines to champion the millions out of work before they become millions out of hope.

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