

Obama and the Steady Drift to the Right

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After Bill Clinton assumed office in January 1993, with promises of “putting people first,” he quickly demoted “the people,” putting his most intense political effort into pushing NAFTA, reducing the budget deficit, “reforming” welfare, bailing out investors in Mexican bonds, toughening crime and terror legislation (and filling the prisons), protecting the military budget following the death of the Soviet Union, and warring against Yugoslavia. He failed to improve the medical care system, but he did finish the deregulation of finance and ending of Glass-Steagall, in this and other ways contributing to the late 1990s stock market bubble. His failures to perform for the people helped bring about the 1994 Gingrich-Republican electoral victory, and his overall performance fed well into the Bush victory and years of accelerated class and external warfare.

The Obama performance confirms that this pattern of Democratic inability to serve popular interests, followed by Democratic political loss, and then further moves to the right, is now built-in to the system. This results in large measure from the steady increase in inequality and business-finance-elite power, the concomitant decline of organized labor, and the absence of any other focal points of power for ordinary citizens. This is reflected in the political system where money rules and candidates to be effective must be able to raise lots of it. There is a de facto money primary in which serious candidates must solicit big money and in the process are vetted by that money. Candidates outside the two party system, even with the prestige of a Ralph Nader, do not even enter the money primary and cannot compete in the U.S. political system. The packing of the Supreme Court with rightwingers, with Democratic help, has helped along this plutocratization, process, recently culminating in Citizens United vs. FEC, which should make corporate domination of politics even more complete.

The now non-serious candidates might compete if there were a democratic mass media that would make candidates newsworthy in accord with their real qualifications for office and the extent to which their programs were rational and in accord with public interests, needs and priorities. But this is not the case. The mass media in the United States have become more centralized, more commercialized, more ad-hungry and ad-intensive, and more closely integrated into the corporate-dominated political economy. The overtly rightwing component of the media, led by Fox, has become larger, more aggressive, and able to set the tone and keep the “liberal media” in line. None of them like “populism” or will challenge the military-industrial complex’s (MIC’s) growth and command over resources and the associated “power projection” of the imperial state. It has been noted that whenever the Democrats suffer political setbacks the mainstream media response is that they must move rightward, away from leftist redistributive tendencies and weakness on foreign policy. A George W. Bush in office faces no such obstructions as he redistributes income and wealth upwards and advances the MIC command over resources and projection of power; his deficits are treated lightly.

Obama seemed to break this pattern, although this was an illusion. He won, helped greatly by the economic crisis in the late Bush era, with mass support, including many who thought he really meant change, although much of that support was based on sheer fear of more Bush-Cheney and a belief that even a compromised Democrat would be a big improvement. But Obama had been vetted, received massive funding from financial and corporate interests, and as is well known made a deal with the insurance and pharmaceutical industries to avoid challenging their dominant role in any health care reform. Of course Obama also got a great deal of money in small contributions from his mass base (somewhat less than half the total), but he made no deals with them, merely promising change and a somewhat vague new era.

Obama has not provided change, but continuity, and has served the financial-corporate community and MIC rather than the interests of his mass base. This was evident in advance of his election, with his support of the Bush financial bailout, his choice of Cold Warrior Joe Biden as running mate, and his explicit commitment to an escalated Afghan war. His cabinet selections and choice of high level advisors and officials were also telling: Geithner and Summers, Peter Orszag, Hillary Clinton, Arne Duncan (an enemy of public schools), and Robert Gates, a direct holdover from the Bush administration. It is notorious that Obama hasn't even tried to restore habeas corpus, removed in the Military Commissions Act of 2006, and he has fought for impunity for the war criminals of the prior administration and the right to hold declared enemy combatants, even U.S. citizens, indefinitely, and also to assassinate them ("Barack Obama, like George Bush before him, has claimed the authority to order American citizens murdered based solely on the unverified, uncharged, unchecked claim that they are associated with Terrorism and pose 'a continuing and imminent threat to U.S. persons and interests.' They're entitled to no charges, no trial, no ability to contest the accusations." Glenn Greenwald, "Presidential Assassinations of US Citizens," Salon, Jan, 27, 2010).

The just announced new freezes on discretionary spending reportedly exempt the Pentagon (and other "security") budget(s), and speaking at a recent gathering of large military contractors Defense Secretary Gates has pledged, according to his spokesman, "to work with the White House to secure steady growth in the Pentagon's budgets over time" (Jen Dimascio, "Robert Gates meets defense industry heads," Politico, January 13, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0110/31482.html>). These are violations of principle and injurious to the Obama mass base beyond all but the most cynical expectations.

Obama's continuity with George W. Bush's foreign policy is also under-rated. His Iraq "withdrawal" is a phony, just as his expansion of the Afghan-Pakistan war is real. His collapse in supposedly pushing for a just settlement in Palestine has been complete, ending up with a crude attack on the Goldstone report and no resistance whatever to escalated Israeli ethnic cleansing. Israel is once again threatening to attack Lebanon and Syria, with no constraining response from Washington. Obama and his Secretary of State are once again threatening Iran with intensified sanctions, if not more. On these matters he and his political party serve as a virtual arm of the pro-Israel lobby.

Less well recognized is the extent to which Obama's militarization of foreign policy continues and may even exceed Bush's bullying and power projection. The U.S. collaboration in the overthrow of the elected, populist government of Honduras was a throwback to the era of U.S. sponsorship of National Security States in Latin America. Bush could hardly have surpassed Obama's atrocious performance in Haiti, where the U.S.

response was almost completely military — a lagged occupation, with minimal food-water-medical-shelter aid, and even obstruction to aid as airports were preempted for the U. S. military occupation forces (and the main airport closed for three hours to secure it for the landing of Mrs. Clinton). (See John Pilger, “the Kidnapping of Haiti,” *New Statesman*, January 27, 2010; Jesse Hagopian, “Occupation in Humanitarian Clothing,” *CommonDreams.Org.*, Jan. 24, 2010; Ben Ehrenreich, “Why Did We Focus on Securing Haiti Rather Than Helping Haitians?,” *Slate*, Jan. 21, 2010.) And elsewhere in Latin America the Obama policies have been regressive, with more open hostility to the left regimes in the region, the collaboration in the Honduras coup, and the acquisition of seven new military bases in Colombia, that all send a message of “change” for the worse.

Across the globe, also, U.S. military bases are expanding, not contracting, the encirclement of Russia and steady stream of war games and exercise in the Baltic. Caspian. Mediterranean and Western Pacific areas continue, the closer engagement with Georgia and effort to bring it into NATO moves ahead, as does the plans for placement of missiles along Russia’s borders and beyond. (See Rick Rozoff, “Bases, Missiles, Wars: U.S. Consolidates Global Military Bases,” *Stop NATO*, Jan. 26, 2010).

Obama is showing he is no wimp, but perhaps more to the point, he is showing himself to be a coward, a captive of the MIC and pro-Israel lobby, and a betrayer of his mass base.

Couldn’t Obama have changed course, betrayed the establishment instead of the public interest, and really altered the structure of national priorities? Couldn’t he have used his powerful platform to make the case for real change, mobilizing the masses, and with their support moving us in a new direction? Of course there is no evidence that he really wanted to do this, but I don’t believe he could have done it even if he had wanted to and was prepared to take heavy risks in the process. The institutional obstacles are too great. Not only the Republicans but a large fraction of the elected Democrats are in thrall to the financial and business community, MIC, and pro-Israel lobby, and they would have refused to go along with any severe cutbacks in the Pentagon budget, massive outlays for public works and subsidies-bailouts for ordinary citizens, or a single payer health care system. The business community would have gone on strike, with probably serious capital flight and layoffs. Cutbacks in military operations abroad would have resulted in hysteria in the media about Democratic weakness and betrayal, possible disorder, and the possibility of a military coup to restore order. Even slow and careful moves along these lines would be furiously opposed and would likely precipitate a political crisis.

The institutional constraints on even moderate liberal change are, I believe, very great at this point in U.S. history. The sequence that seems now built-in is for the Democrats to win occasionally after Republican rule that effectively serves the rich and MIC, but naturally disaffects the underlying population; and in the Obama case, winning with the great boost of an economic collapse during the election season. But the Democrats are now chronically unable to serve the middle class and poor or contain the MIC, because of their own dependence on the rich, MIC, and the Lobby, and the work of the media in support of those same elite interests. With nowhere else to go for effective service to their own interests, ordinary citizens will abandon the Democrats and the system will move further to the right. This is a trajectory that bodes ill for the future.

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