

Progressives Who Voted For Obama

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Region: [USA](#)

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A Letter I Wish Progressive Groups Would Send to Their Members

Dear Progressives,

With President Obama's second term underway and huge decisions looming on Capitol Hill, consider this statement from Howard Zinn:

“When a social movement adopts the compromises of legislators, it has forgotten its role, which is to push and challenge the politicians, not to fall in meekly behind them.”

With so much at stake, we can't afford to forget our role. For starters, it must include public clarity.

Let's face it: despite often nice-sounding rhetoric from the president, this administration has continued with a wide range of policies antithetical to progressive values.

Corporate power, climate change and perpetual war are running amok while civil liberties and economic fairness take a beating. President Obama has even put Social Security and Medicare on the table for cuts.

Last fall, the vast majority of progressives voted for Obama to prevent the presidency from going to a Republican Party replete with racism, misogyny, anti-gay bigotry and xenophobia. Defeating the right wing was cause for celebration. And now is the time to fight for genuine progressive policies.

But let's be real about our current situation. Obama has led the Democratic Party — including, at the end of the legislative day, almost every Democrat on Capitol Hill — deeper into an abyss of corporate-driven austerity, huge military outlays, normalization of civil-liberties abuses and absence of significant action on climate change. Leverage from the Oval Office is acting as a brake on many — in Congress and in progressive constituency groups — who would prefer to be moving legislation in a progressive direction.

Hopefully we've learned by now that progressive oratory is no substitute for progressive policies. The soaring rhetoric in Obama's inaugural address this week offered inspiring words about a compassionate society where everyone is respected and we look out for each other. Unfortunately and routinely, the president's lofty words have allowed him to slide by many progressives despite policies that often amount to a modern version of “social liberalism, fiscal conservatism.”

The *New York Times* headline over its front-page coverage, “Obama Offers a Liberal Vision

in Inaugural Address,” served up the current presidential recipe: a spoonful of rhetorical sugar to help the worsening austerity go down. But no amount of verbal sweetness can make up for assorted policies aligned with Wall Street and the wealthy at the expense of the rest of us.

“At their inaugurals,” independent journalist I.F. Stone noted long ago, our presidents “make us the dupes of our hopes.”

Unlike four years ago, Obama has a presidential record — and its contrasts with Monday’s oratorical performance are stark. A president seeking minimally fair economic policies, for instance, would not compound the disaster of four years of Timothy Geithner as Secretary of the Treasury by replacing him with Jack Lew — arguably even more of a [corporate flack](#).

On foreign policy, it was notably disingenuous for Obama to proclaim in his second inaugural speech that “enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war” — minutes after completing a first term when his administration launched [more than 20,000 air strikes](#), sharply escalated the use of weaponized drones and did so much else to make war perpetual.

Meanwhile, the media hype on the inaugural speech’s passage about climate change has lacked any indication that the White House is ready to push for steps commensurate with the magnitude of the real climate crisis.

The founder of the Sustainable Energy and Economy Network, Daphne Wysham, points out that the inaugural words “will be meaningless unless a) the Obama administration rejects the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline; b) Obama selects a new EPA administrator who is willing to take action under the Clean Air Act to rein in CO2 emissions from all sources; c) he stops pushing for dangerous energy development deep offshore in the Gulf, in the Arctic and via continued fracking for oil and gas; d) he pursues a renewable energy standard for the entire country; and e) he directs our publicly financed development banks and export credit agencies to get out of fossil fuels entirely.”

The leadership we need is certainly not coming from the White House or Congress. “A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus,” Martin Luther King Jr. observed. The leadership we need has to come, first and foremost, from us.

Some members of Congress — maybe dozens — have shown commitment to a progressive agenda, and a larger number claim a progressive mantle. In any event, *their role is not our role*. They adhere to dotted lines that we should cross. They engage in Hill-speak euphemisms that we should bypass. Routinely, they decline to directly confront wrong-headed Obama administration policies. And we must confront those policies.

If certain members of Congress resent being pushed by progressives to challenge the White House, they lack an appreciation for the crucial potential of grassroots social movements. On the other hand, those in Congress who “get” progressive social change will appreciate our efforts to push them and their colleagues to stand progressive ground.

When we’re mere supplicants to members of Congress, the doors that open on Capitol Hill won’t lead very much of anywhere. Superficial “access” has scant impact. The kind of empowered access we need will come from mobilizing grassroots power.

We need to show that we'll back up members of Congress who are intrepid for our values — and we can defeat others, including self-described “progressives,” who aren't. Building electoral muscle should be part of building a progressive movement.

We're in this for the long haul, but we're not willing to mimic the verbiage or echo the silences from members of Congress who fail to challenge egregious realities of this administration's policies. As Howard Zinn said, our role is to challenge, not fall in line.

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