

The Strange Politics Of The US 2012 Election

Part 1, What Both Parties Are Up To

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When was it that the most extremely disturbed inmates seized control of the madhouse known as the American political system? We know they are wielding decisive influence within the two-party structure by their destructive antics in Washington and various state capitals, but when and how did this happen?

Some contend that the takeover was accomplished last January, when the new Republican House majority assumed office. Granted that the intransigent buffoonery of the right/far right party is a substantial factor, but it by no means is the only factor, as the Democrats suggest.

The Tea Party (TP) phenomenon is a symptom of one of the more bizarre political moments in American history between the odd couple that constitutes the two-party system, not the principal causative agent. It is a new formation but composed of the old hard core right wing and religious right reinvigorated with conservative populism, anti-government libertarianism, garnished with an element of racism in response to a non-white chief executive, and performing the political equivalent of wilding in the streets.

The larger Republican Party and its leadership may not be as fanatical but is going along with the far right because it's producing positive practical gains for conservative ideology and programs, and seems to have tied the bewildered and misled Democrats into impotent knots. The big danger for the GOP is going so far to the right that it gets trounced in the 2012 elections, which is what the White House is counting on.

Others maintain seizing the asylum was facilitated when President Barack Obama took office in January 2009 — the argument being that he is a weak pushover who doesn't understand how to fight for his beliefs.

Obama, however, is a tough, exceptionally ambitious politician who knows what he wants and goes after it with cool precision. How else could he have migrated to the U.S. Senate and the presidency of the United States in five years after an unremarkable dozen years in academia and the obscurity of the Illinois state senate? With virtually no record of accomplishments he whipped the formidable Hillary Clinton electoral machine, then the McCain/Palin opposition, and then his own party's left wing in the process.

The president does indeed fight for his convictions, much to the dismay of the liberals and progressives — a prominent sector of his own party constituency whom he mocked as the "professional left," then rendered powerless by furling his brows. The problem isn't the president's "weakness" but his now only partially disguised moderate conservative convictions that allow him to pull his party to the right in the name of bipartisanship, even if

it takes humiliating his most fervent supporters.

It wasn't Obama's fear and trembling but self-confident chutzpah during the deficit debates when he gratuitously consigned the greatest achievements of the New Deal and Great Society to the future chopping block, and in House Speaker John Boehner's opinion gave the Republican leadership 98% of what it actually sought.

In fact there was no real debt crisis or probability of default. Raising the debt limit is as American as Thanksgiving dinner, and it's an economic necessity in a recession. Obama had a perfect right to avoid default unilaterally by invoking his 14th Amendment obligation to pay the country's bills. He chose to allow the charade to fester. Wall Street was well aware there would be a last minute agreement to cut programs and not raise taxes, although the mass media converted the farce into a potential national calamity until the end.

Liberal critics and the trade union movement were appalled by Obama's primary focus on reducing the deficit during a severe economic crisis as opposed to recognizing that the first priority should be heavy government investment in creating jobs. The headline over economist Paul Krugman's New York Times column told it all: "The President Surrenders."

Continuing high unemployment is one of the main reasons working class/middle class families may experience a painful double-dip recession, extending the crisis many years. Officially, 9.1% or 14 million American workers are jobless. Black unemployment 16.7%. When the total includes "discouraged workers" who have given up constant job seeking for lack of success, along with part-time workers who cannot obtain needed full-time employment, the pool expands to nearly 30 million workers or 16.2% of the labor force.

Obama responded to intense criticism and dismay about his inattention to unemployment from various quarters by putting forward a jobs program in a major speech to a joint session of Congress Sept. 8. The proposal, titled the American Jobs Act, appeared to offer considerably more breaks and financial incentives to businesses to hire more employees than to the jobless workers.

The chief executive stressed the bipartisan nature of his proposal, maintaining that virtually all of its aspects were supported by conservatives as well as Democrats, and assuring Republicans fixated upon deficit reduction that "everything in this bill will be paid for" through a scheme to increase the amount of money to be sliced from future spending. Part of such reductions will derive from cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, just as the liberals and unions feared. Much of the \$447 billion pricetag will go to tax breaks for business and a reduction in payroll taxes to employees and companies.

The initial reaction to the plan by liberal economists was that it will create jobs but hardly cause a serious reduction in the jobless rate, assuming that it passes Congress without big cuts. The plan envisioned many jobs would derive from a campaign to rebuild a portion of America's decaying infrastructure, but it is extremely doubtful this will get off the ground. More details are expected next week.

There was also no compelling necessity for Obama to decide "you have to put everything on the table" for the budget cutters including Social Security as well as Medicare and Medicaid. That was the administration's political preference, regardless of bitter howling from the 83-member Congressional Progressive Caucus, co-chaired by Reps. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) and Keith Ellison (D-MN). The House Democratic Blue Dog coalition of fiscal conservatives has

only 26 members but patently enjoys considerably more influence in the White House than the marginalized progressives. The GOP controls the House, but the hyperactive Tea Party Caucus, chaired by Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN), has 23 fewer members than the Progressive Caucus, and it has been far more effective because it has leadership support.

The Progressive Caucus has been sharply critical of what the White House and the Democratic political and funding powers are giving away to the conservatives, but few dare speak as frankly as Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) — the best and boldest of the remaining center-left House members — during an interview with Truthdig Aug. 4 in discussing the deficit agreement with the Republicans:

“I think that this idea that somehow the White House was forced into a bad deal is politically naive. When we saw the White House signal early on that it was ready for cuts in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid by actually setting aside bedrock principles that the Democratic Party has stood on for generations, that signal indicated that they were ready for a deal that would involve massive cutting of social spending, and increasing or locking in increases for war, and helping further the ambitions of the Defense Department, not touching the Bush tax cuts. And that’s exactly what happened.”

During his June 8 speech, Obama justified cutting two of the three historic Democratic Party achievements in these words: “I realize there are some in my party who don’t think we should make any changes at all to Medicare and Medicaid.... But with an aging population and rising health care costs, we are spending too fast to sustain the program. And if we don’t gradually reform the system while protecting current beneficiaries, it won’t be there when future retirees need it.”

This is doubletalk, based on catering to conservatism by refusing to consider a number of available alternatives to program reduction. But the case appeared closed, according to an analysis of Obama’s speech in the Sept. 9 New York Times: “Republicans and Democrats are no longer fighting over whether to tackle the popular entitlement programs — Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security — but over how to do it.”

It should be noted that the Obama White House routinely shifts to the right on issues that do not necessarily depend on House votes, undercutting the argument that the Republicans always tie the president’s hands. The administration’s dreadful environmental record, for instance, is largely independent of the antediluvian climate change deniers in Congress. The White House decision to abandon the Environmental Protection Agency’s tough new air pollution regulations Sept. 2 was a concession to big business, which could have lost some excess profits due to reduced emissions of smog-causing chemicals, not the result of a filibuster or lack of votes.

This “betrayal,” as it has been termed by environmental leaders, follows recent Oval Office decrees to allow more oil drilling in the Arctic and Gulf of Mexico, approval of the tar sands Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada to Texas, calls for more nuclear power plants, and increased drilling for polluting natural gas as well as utter passivity toward climate change. None of these decisions were “forced” upon the Obama Administration.

What all this suggests to us is that the White House is dedicating its principal efforts to imposing a more conservative economic and political agenda on the American people, and that part of the process is bending over backward to create an informal but virtual government of national unity between the center right and right/far right ruling parties.

The Obama Administration evidences a breezy willingness to give away the Democratic Party's tattered remnants of liberalism, to weaken some past attainments achieved after years of struggle, and forego fighting for new social programs. The result has been two or three steps to the right, by commission or omission, for every nebulous step to the "left," such as the administration's health care plan, which was based on the moderate Republican effort in Massachusetts.

Much closer political unity with the right wing was the meaning of the continuing mantra during the 2008 Obama campaign about extending his hand "across the aisle," governing "as Americans not as Republicans or Democrats" and insisting that "There is not a liberal America, or a conservative America, but a United States of America."

As we declared in this newsletter a few days before Obama was elected almost three years ago: "Does this mean there is no need for political struggle — that lion and lamb are about to bed down together, solving the problems of the country and world with some pillow talk among all us Americans finally freed from the stressful complications of politics? This notion is preposterous, of course."

Why would President Obama put forward such a policy? There are several factors, but in our view the main one is an effort to address America's declining superpower status globally and domestically, economically and politically. The erosion of U.S. power was hastened during eight years of Bush Administration mismanagement and imperialism, two lost wars, record military spending, tax cuts for the rich, enormous debts and finally the Great Recession.

In his jobs speech Obama emphasized the need to "show the world once again why the United States of America remains the greatest nation on Earth." Retaining world "leadership," i.e., geopolitical economic and military supremacy, has been a constant refrain from Obama since at least two years before winning the presidency, and is obviously a factor in the support he receives from a large sector of those who rule America.

Domestically, the White House seeks to strengthen the capitalist sector, reorganize the economy to confer even greater powers upon the corporations, banks, Wall St. and the wealthy; renegotiate downward the social contract with the working class and middle class by further limiting popular spending, entitlements, and government programs to help the people; and reduce union power even further while mumbling pro-labor sentiments. In addition, there has been an effort to reassert the unifying spirit of national chauvinism, militarism, and warrior worship.

Internationally, the White House policy is to reinvigorate American global domination; refurbish Washington's dilapidated international reputation; retain U.S. hegemonic interests in the Arab world by intervening in the regional uprisings; restore a more subtle form of U.S. dominion in Latin America; and reverse recent history by finally winning some wars for the \$1.4 trillion Washington forks out annually for the Pentagon and national security (i.e., the Afghan "surge" to forestall yet another defeat, extending the war to western Pakistan, crushing tiny Libya and keeping U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan long past the deadline for complete withdrawal).

But if the Democrats are right of center these days and making concessions for functional unity with the right/far right party why are the Republicans creating dysfunction and saying

“no” to everything and creating political havoc? Because they want a lot more and think they can grab it. The GOP is obtaining a good political deal at bargain basement prices. For its part, the White House is selling out cheaply to clear the shelves of old liberal merchandize to make room for new more conservative product of its own. Since Republican antics usefully convey the public impression of “forcing” Obama to make concessions against his will, the Democrats won’t get too much blame for the even more corporate and unequal, even less generous and forgiving, America to come.

Conservatives have wanted to destroy the progressive gains of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Great Depression era New Deal since their inception in the 1930s, including Social Security. And the right wing backlash against the activism of the 1960s, focused on hard fought social and cultural advances as well as the abundant liberal legislation of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society — including Medicare and Medicaid — has been never ending since the 1970s.

The result is a blanket of conservatism that gradually began to cover much of the U.S., along with stagnant wages, the dwindling of the American Dream and the end of significant new government social programs for the people. Now, in the midst of a devastating economic breakdown and cutbacks in essential federal and state government services, the once center left Democratic Party is offering the to put the three crown jewels of the Roosevelt-Johnson period “on the table” to be examined by the new bipartisan Joint Selective Committee for Deficit Reduction, which is due to make decisions before the new year.

One thing is certain about the 2008 election. The American people wanted change, big change from their next government. Candidate Obama promised change they could “believe in.” The people were encouraged to respond in unison by chanting “Yes we can,” entertaining hopes of fewer wars, more secure incomes, greater attention to health, education, job creation and the environment, some help for the poor, and perhaps more equality with an African American in the White House. The Democratic platform was filled with empty generalities, but the campaign remained intentionally vague about what its “change” was all about. This was the tip-off to an impending deception that became obvious after the election, when the changes they hoped for were not what Obama had in mind.

Now, following several grave concessions to conservatism before, during and after the early summer deficit fiasco with more to come, President Obama has began to indulge in populist rhetoric about jobs and infrastructure to galvanize the faithful into providing campaign dollars and innumerable volunteer hours to defeat the “evil doers” in 2012.

Part 2 below will focus on liberal and labor misgivings about Obama’s policies and on what these forces will end up doing, among other election points.

THE STRANGE POLITICS OF THE U.S. 2012 ELECTION

Part 2, Problems Ahead for Obama?

By Jack A. Smith, Sept 9, 2011

The New Yorker magazine published a memorable front cover a year after President Barack Obama assumed office. It was a four panel cartoon-like drawing by artist Barry Blitt of a man walking on water, a reference to the Apostle Paul. In panel one, the walking figure,

illuminated by a heavenly shaft of light, shows a small unidentifiable figure in the background. By panel two the tall, thin man is clearly Obama. By number three, a still walking confident, serious president dominates the panel, looking sternly at the viewer. And in panel four he sinks.

He is still sinking today. According to the Pew Research Center poll released Aug. 25: "For the first time in his presidency, significantly more disapprove than approve of the way Obama is handling his job as president (49% vs. 43%), and.... 38% strongly disapprove of Obama's job performance while 26% strongly approve." The poll shows that 22% approve of the job performance of Republican congressional leaders while the figure is 29% for Democratic leaders. At 43%, the Democratic Party is viewed more favorably than the GOP at 34%.

At issue now is what the important and very disappointed liberal, progressive and labor union sector of the Democratic constituency is going to do during the 2012 election campaign, which already seems well under way 14 months before the voting.

Many Democratic Party supporters, especially those of the center-left, virtually venerated their candidate during the 2008 campaign. Liberals and unionists not only chanted slogans on cue at rallies but volunteered and donated money to elect him. The union movement invested a few hundred million dollars. Obama was not only viewed as the anti-Bush redeemer but the rescuer who would bring the party left wing back to relevance after being exiled to the sidelines when the leadership began its nearly four decade trek to end up right of center.

During the earlier campaign in Des Moines, Oprah Winfrey — who is arguably the most influential woman in the world — declared to a crowd of 15,000 enthusiasts, "I am here to tell you, Iowa, he is the one. He is the one!" But in her New York Times column Sept. 3 titled "One and Done?," Maureen Dowd devilishly observed, "The One is dancing on the edge of one term."

Even though Obama will occasionally pretend to liberal populism to mesmerize selected audiences during this campaign, his first term record of concrete concessions to conservative ideology cannot be camouflaged. As viewed from the party center left, and even from the center, the Obama Administration's record is lamentable when matched against reasonable Democratic voter expectations in 2008.

Most Democratic voters, liberal or not, expected a reduction in U.S. military violence, not the increase Obama produced. They preferred a strengthening of civil liberties, not a continuation of the Bush Administration's Patriot Act and additional erosions of rights. They sought progress on reducing environmental despoliation and global warming, not policies that produce opposite results. Many anticipated at least moderate efforts to mitigate the appalling increases in economic inequality, and to alleviate the hyper-inequality afflicting some national minorities, but nothing has been forthcoming.

So far, it is premature to anticipate how many defections are expected from the Obama camp due to increasing malaise and anger from much of the liberal sector and its further left cohorts who usually end up on the Democratic Party treadmill every four years. They are caught once again — although by surprise this time for many — in the familiar lobster-like pincers of the lesser evil/greater evil dilemma.

Most fear that voting for existing small third party progressive alternatives will help elect the “greater evil” right/far right half of the ruling duopoly, so they will vote for the center right Obama, who occupies political territory once claimed by the now extinct “moderate” wing of the Republican Party. The White House inner circle, Democratic Party bigwigs and the main sector of the ruling class are counting on it, and seek to raise a record-setting \$1 billion dollars to keep their man in the Oval Office.

The Democratic Party strategy for gaining a second term in the White House seems based on two main assumptions about the Republicans, as well as blaming the GOP for everything except Hurricane Irene, and putting forward a popular program that after the elections may never see the light of day.

(1) The first assumption is that the GOP will be perceived by much of the electorate as having moved too far to the right, alienating independent voters who will now vote for Obama in greater number, and keeping the dissident Democrats in line. There is also the possibility of splits between the Tea Party stalwarts and the less doctrinaire parent party as a whole and possibly within the TP itself.

(2) The second assumption is that the GOP simply does not have a broadly attractive presidential candidate if the field remains narrowed to Tea Party favorites such as Texas Gov. Rick Perry, Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann, and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, or flagrantly opportunist conservative former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, backed up by secondary candidates including libertarian Texas Rep. Ron Paul and longshot mainstream Republican former Utah Gov. John M. Huntsman. At this point Perry (an aggressive climate change and evolution denier, who thinks Social Security is a Ponzi scheme) and Romney (who probably was the last of the “moderate Republicans” until raw ambition and hypocrisy drove this multimillionaire to the farther right) have the inside track. Palin hasn’t announced yet.

For his part, President Obama will strive to convince the American people that the Republicans are entirely responsible for the political gridlock in Washington. He will charge the GOP with putting petty party interests ahead of “American,” not merely Democratic, interests, intentionally conflating the two to imply the Republicans are lacking patriotism. The White House will propagate the notion that Tea Party extremists left Obama with “no choice” but to cut social programs to lower the deficit instead of fighting harder for taxing the rich, and “no option” but to put Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid up for grabs — concessions that were in fact entirely voluntary. It is highly doubtful for obvious reasons that the Democratic candidate will repeat his most stirring crowd pleaser from the 2008 campaign — “Our time has come, our movement is real, and change is coming to America.”

The Democratic domestic platform will be a glistening cornucopia of promises and good intentions for every sector — the right, center, and even a trifle for the left. In essence, however, it will tilt toward conservatism. There will be elevating talk about needed programs, but it is highly doubtful a viable social agenda that serves the needs of an increasingly desperate American people will emerge from an Obama triumph, including anything more than token gestures toward rebuilding infrastructure or protecting the environment. Foreign policy will remain the same, as will military/national security strategy and its ruinous price tag. Full spectrum power and global domination remain the name of the imperial game.

This may keep the bulk of Democrats content and attract independents. Most rank-and-filers

have followed their party into the center right over the years, consciously or often not even aware of the political shift, and remain comfortable with Obama even though the blush has departed the rose. Most liberals are no longer sanguine and some will fight back within the party and may be able to wrest small favors.

Obama will be traveling on a bumpy campaign road, however, and there will be some potential Democratic voters who stay at home, probably including younger and first time voters who played a big role in 2008, and Latino voters dismayed by the Obama Administration's George Bush-like immigration policies, among others.

Several score liberal, progressive and labor organizations are complaining loudly, from Move-On, Campaign for America's Future, and Progressive Democrats of America to the AFL-CIO federation of 56 unions. It is expected that a developing coalition of such forces will exert considerable pressure on the Democratic Party leadership to include at least a few key liberal programs in the platform, although most campaign priorities are ignored or delayed indefinitely after the election.

Nearly 70 groups that describe themselves as progressive sent a communication to President Obama Aug. 30 insisting that he fight for a jobs program "that does not just tinker around the edges." Similar groups are pushing for a legislative drive to "Restore the American Dream."

Some groups are threatening to withhold campaign contributions should Obama ultimately agree to making cuts in federal entitlement programs. A grassroots group called the Progressive Change Campaign Committee composed of liberals who raised money for the Democrats in 2008 brought 200,000 signed pledges to Obama's national campaign headquarters in Chicago in July with precisely that message.

The most important critic is the 10.5 million-member AFL-CIO and its new community affiliate, the 2 million members of Working America. Total U.S. union membership may have suffered a precipitous decline since its apogee in 1954, when it constituted 33% of the workforce, compared to 11.9% this year — but the unions are key to the Democrats' existence, although the party has given very little in return.

Criticism of the Democrats of any kind is a fairly new attitude for the AFL-CIO, after many decades of conservative, pro-war, Cold War, pro-business leadership from former AFL and AFL-CIO presidents George Meany and Lane Kirkland from 1952 to 1995. The more militant John Sweeney, federation president 1995-2009, broke with many of the earlier right wing practices while remaining close to the Democratic leadership.

Former United Mine Workers leader Richard Trumka, who was part of the now-retired Sweeney's winning New Voices reform team, succeeded to the presidency. He has been remarkably vocal this year about the failure of the Obama Administration to fight the right and to support progressive programs for jobs, the Employee Free Choice Act, a public option for healthcare, and raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$9.50 an hour as Obama promised in 2008. Free Choice was the labor movement's key legislative priority. It would have removed several barriers to increasing union membership — but the White House didn't even bring the bill to a vote, knowing conservative Democrats would join anti-union Republicans to defeat the measure, not that Obama twisted any arms on behalf of labor.

In addition to public criticisms, Trumka has been suggesting that the AFL-CIO intended to

declare a certain independence from the Democratic Party. In early June he told union nurses meeting in Washington that “We want an independent labor movement strong enough to return balance to our economy, fairness to our tax system, security to our families and moral and economic standing to our nation....We can’t simply build the power of any political party or any candidate. For too long we’ve been left after the election holding a canceled check and asking someone to pay attention to us. No more!”

In the equivalent of aiming a hefty whiff of grapeshot across the White House lawn, Trumka declared Aug. 25: “This is a moment that working people and quite frankly history will judge President Obama on his presidency. Will he commit all his energy and focus on bold solutions on the job crisis or will he continue to work with the Tea Party to offer cuts to middle class programs like Social Security all the while pretending the deficit is where our economic problems really lie?”

Some other indications of the labor movement’s more active stand include the recent federation announcement that it is organizing a nationwide week of demonstrations for jobs in 450 locations in October. On Sept. 4 it was reported that union donations to federal candidates at the beginning of this year were down about 40% compared with the same period in 2009. In August, a dozen trade unions, including the 2.5 million member AFL-CIO building trades division, said they would boycott next year’s Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., because of “broad frustration with the [Democratic] Party” and to protest the event’s location in an anti-union right-to-work state.

Despite some unprecedented criticism, and positive evidence of a tilt toward labor independence, a break with the Democratic Party is not in cards for the 2012 election. But it is a long delayed warning that has a powerful potential should it be ignored. A token of opposition may transpire next year by union refusal to back selected Blue Dog Democrats; perhaps labor candidates will run against some conservative Democrats in primaries or in some cases stand as third party election entries against anti-union candidates of the two ruling parties. Some money may be withheld and there may be fewer volunteers.

When President Obama took office on Jan. 20, 2009, the news media often compared him favorably to Dr. Martin Luther King, suggesting, in effect, he was the fulfillment of King’s “Dream,” a reference to the great civil rights leader’s “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington. On the anniversary of the march Aug. 28, Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), who was a civil rights fighter in his youth and who at spoke at the historic event, speculated on what King would say to Obama were he alive today, in a public statement that was both a plea and a sad censure:

“Dr. King,” Lewis wrote, would tell President Obama “that it is his moral obligation to use his power and influence to help those who have been left out and left behind. He would encourage him to get out of Washington, to break away from handlers and advisers and go visit the people where they live.... He would urge Obama to feel the hurt and pain of those without work, of mothers and their children who go to bed hungry at night, of the families living in shelters after losing their homes, and of the elderly who chose between buying medicine and paying the rent....

“[He would tell him] to do what he can to end discrimination based on race, color, religious faith and sexual orientation.... There is no need to put a finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. There is no need to match each step to the latest opinion poll. The people of this country recognize when a leader is trying to do what is right.... Let the people

of this country see that you are fighting for them and they will have your back.”

This is no doubt true, but fighting for the people is simply not among Barack Obama chief priorities.

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