

OBAMA AND THE GREAT PROGRESSIVE DISCONNECT



BY LAWRENCE D. BOBO

Barack Obama came to power as the candidate of hope, promising to bring change to America. Many individuals, causes, and groups tethered their political ambitions to the candidacy of the one-term senator from Illinois, now the forty-fourth—and first African American—president of the United States. Yet, as his first full year in office comes to a close, there are more and more signs of discontent on the left. Indeed, in some liberal quarters, there is rising doubt that Obama has proven to be, borrowing a phrase from the campaign, “the change we’ve been waiting for.”

The critique from the left is as misplaced, self-indulgent, and politically naïve as the critique of Obama from the right has been intransigent, irrational, and corrosive of the democratic process. The attack from the right was more foreseeable and in that narrow sense is more excusable. The rumblings on the left, for me, are harder to fathom and thus need be viewed in context. This is particularly true when viewed through the lens of Obama’s impact on racial and ethnic inequality—an area where Obama and his administration’s policies present a stark break with the failures and inaction of the recent past.

Whither Change?

Obama did stir up high expectations for a new direction in Washington. It is certainly true that Obama's campaign for the presidency advanced an even more pointed critique of the Bush administration than did that of his one-time rival Hillary Rodham Clinton. In hindsight, it seems clear that taking the eight years of Bush leadership to task for a failure of "competence," as Clinton did, was hardly the message of outrage that many Democratic voters, desperate for more fundamental "change," wanted to hear.

Having captured both the Democratic nomination as well as the presidency with a message of hope and change, has Obama's first year done enough to deliver on the promises he seemed to make and the high expectations he so ardently fostered during the campaign season? For me, the answer is an unequivocal "Yes!" Indeed, I'm not just surprised by all the carping on the left, but bewildered and disappointed by it.

In arguing that Obama has (to the extent politically possible) delivered on high expectations, I well realize that, with the recent election of Scott Brown as the U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, the chances of major health care reform are now reduced. And there's no denying that, if health care reform doesn't happen, the first year loses at least some of its luster. But even if major health care reform doesn't happen, my argument is that the carping on the left strangely ignores all the successful initiatives on inequality-related issues that Obama has in one short year delivered. I begin, then, with an overview of his general poverty and inequality initiatives and then turn to his one-year legacy as it pertains to issues of race.

Let us begin at the beginning. The first piece of legislation signed by Obama, after hardly a week in office, was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. This legislation, defeated by Republicans the year before, put back into place basic legal options and protections against pay discrimination faced by women and other workers. Although the third president to nominate a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, Obama is the first to elevate a person of Hispanic ancestry, Sonia Sotomayor, to the nation's highest court. Both of these actions, in quite different ways, can be read as reducing patterns of inequality deeply etched in the American social fabric.

Another example is tax policy. In this regard, Obama has steadfastly maintained his intention to allow the Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthy to expire. It makes practical and political sense, as he proposed during the campaign, to largely maintain the reductions for "middle class Americans," in this instance defined as those earning less than \$250,000 a year. Fortunately for those interested in a more progressive and inequality-reducing tax structure, the claim that high-end tax cuts yield broadly beneficial economic growth has looked especially dubious of late. There are good reasons to expect the Obama administration to continue to strive to deliver on this promise.

Other major actions by the Obama administration have had positive social effects as well. It is increasingly clear that the quick, massive, and unequivocal action of the Obama administration in response to the Great Recession probably averted a cataclysmic economic collapse. Although it is hard to sell voters

on the virtues of something that didn't happen—a counterfactual—Obama's steadfast support for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (or the \$800 billion stimulus package) helped to stabilize financial and credit markets and to pave the way for a gradual economic recovery. Likewise, the financial bailout of General Motors and Chrysler saved thousands of U.S. jobs and mitigated the deepening economic hardship felt in the industrial Midwest.

In most of these cases, the critique on the left is rarely that Obama has done the wrong thing or fundamentally failed. Instead, the argument goes, the Obama administration has not done enough or has proven too willing to compromise. At its most sophisticated, this critique suggests that Obama has variously failed to take sufficiently aggressive leadership, to stake out strongly liberal positions, or else yielded ground too quickly when faced with resistance on his key policy objectives. This critique has been most vociferous on the matter of the massive health care reform proposal, particularly with regard to what now seems the doomed "public option." But even here, we must remember that Obama was on the verge of enacting major health care reform prior to the Massachusetts election, a piece of legislation that would have helped millions of the uninsured, curbed negative insurance industry practices, and cut rapidly rising health care costs. What the left fails to acknowledge, or indeed celebrate, are the enormous progressive accomplishments that Obama and his administration are already achieving. This is perhaps no clearer than in the case of addressing racial and ethnic inequality in America, to which I now turn.

The Case in Black and White

As with other issues, the Obama administration has come under criticism from some segments of African American leadership, including, on some matters, elected officials such as the Congressional Black Caucus. Activist and actor Danny Glover was quoted as saying, "I think the Obama administration has followed the same playbook, to a large extent, almost verbatim, as the Bush administration. I don't see anything different." Television journalist and commentator Tavis Smiley accused Obama of a disabling "gradualism." Likewise, Congressional representatives John Conyers and Maxine Waters, among others, charged that Obama was not doing enough and suggested that too many of his advisors did not understand the needs of Black America. The criticism has a special edge to it at a time when Black unemployment is acutely high and when many believe that segments of the Black community were targeted by predatory home mortgage lending practices.

It is no surprise that Obama has defended his actions. In general, however, he rejected seeking any legislation and policies "that say I'm just helping Black folks. I'm the president of the entire United States," he said. "What I can do is make sure that I am passing laws that help all people, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need." And in language directly reminiscent of sociologist William Julius Wilson's call for emphasizing universal policies that would be of disproportionate benefit to the most disadvantaged, Obama said, "That, in turn, is going to help lift up the African American community."

Wilson has been a strong defender of Obama in this regard as well. He recently told Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the *DuBois Review*, "I have listened with some irritation to critiques by Black intellectuals that his stimulus package does not address issues that affect the poor, including poor Blacks. Such critiques show how ill-informed these critics are." In particular, Wilson pointed to a series of features of the stimulus package, such as extension of unemployment benefits, health insurance coverage, a temporary increase in the earned income-tax credit, and other tax credits for low-income workers, that would benefit the poor, including the Black poor. The stimulus package also provided substantial additional funds for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly know as food stamps), \$2 billion for neighborhood stabilization efforts, and nearly \$4 billion in job training and workforce enhancement programs.

Obama has also signaled through the stimulus package that an important priority of his administration is education reform. And these education-related features of the stimulus are likely to be of special benefit to the poor, including poor Blacks. These features include \$5 billion for a variety of early education programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start. Moreover, the administration has made it clear it wants to encourage proven strategies for reducing disparities in achievement. This includes another \$5 billion in funding intended to spur innovative projects, inspired by Geoffrey Canada's successful Harlem Children's Zone efforts, to improve education for the most disadvantaged. A critical ingredient here that sets the Obama effort apart from earlier Bush administration No Child Left Behind policy is that the aim is more than just the testing, identification of poorly performing schools, and eventual sanctioning of teachers and administrators who lag behind. The purpose of this funding, without diminishing the emphasis on performance and accountability measures, is to find intervention strategies that make a real difference in what children, especially the most disadvantaged students, get out of schooling. This all goes virtually unheralded on the griping left.

Even less heralded than the Obama administration's directly economic and health-related progressive efforts have been the changes with regard to civil rights and law enforcement. It is also too easy to forget, as the the *New York Times* pointed out in an editorial on September 2, 2009, that "[t]he Bush administration declared war on the whole idea of civil rights, in a way that no administration of either party had since the passage of the nation's civil rights law in the 1960s. It put a far-right ideologue in a top position at the civil rights division and, as the department's inspector general said in a scathing report, he screened out job applicants with civil rights sympathies." A Government Accounting Office report released in December 2009 documented reduced enforcement efforts and a major shift in priorities within the civil rights division under Bush. Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder and recently confirmed Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Tony Perez have promised a return to traditional civil rights division priorities and enforcement efforts.

Many analysts now believe that one of the most serious policy

priorities of the past several decades with negative consequences for Black Americans has been the so-called war on drugs. A shift in the likelihood of arrest and formal incarceration for non-violent, drug-related crimes is substantially responsible for the sharp rise in incarceration rates in the United States, particularly among low-income Black men. Federal policy has played an important role in this trend, especially in terms of setting a model for states, providing states with financial incentives for enhanced antidrug law enforcement efforts, as well as by directly enhancing and federalizing a number of drug-related offenses.

The Obama administration has made it clear it intends to change direction in this arena. In particular, in its appointments, policy declarations, and early actions, the Obama administration has clearly signaled a move away from a number of practices that tended to result in the unwarranted, disproportionate incarceration of African Americans. Important aspects of these efforts include a renewed priority on treatment, as opposed to incarceration, as a response to drug-related crime and direct efforts to eliminate the crack versus powder-cocaine sentencing differential.

Thus, across virtually all areas, and especially in areas affecting low-income people and racial and ethnic minorities, there is unambiguous evidence of an administration that has charted a profoundly different course from that of its predecessor. Yet the left is still disappointed with Obama. Why?

Progressive Disconnect

Obama the candidate raised high expectations for change. These expectations are much of the current problem. A good portion of Obama's first year in office was also spent in an almost completely futile effort at obtaining bipartisan support for administration initiatives. Some thought he should never have worried about seeking Republican support. I disagree with this position. He campaigned on trying to change the political culture in Washington, D.C. Obama was thus as correct in making this bipartisan effort at the outset, I believe, as he is now in judging that Republican obstructionism, at least on domestic social issues, knows no bounds of reason or decency.

In fairness, Obama tried to reign in the high expectations now plaguing him, both on election night and especially in his inaugural address. Indeed, many on the left seem to have missed entirely the tone set by Obama's inaugural speech and, for that matter, the full array of circumstances he faced by the time he actually took the oath of office. Of course, the bottom had not fallen out of the economy when the 2008 campaign season got under way (and when those lofty expectations were first put into place). The Great Recession changed all priorities and the political context in profound and far-reaching ways. Although Obama's inaugural address did return to his themes of hope, new directions, and change, it also sounded a note of sober assessment that can be summed up in one word: responsibility.

Hemmed in by almost a decade of an administration that ignored mounting crises, ranging from the federal budget, global warming, misspent American stature on the international stage (as well as by two ineptly waged wars), to a deep, urgent



Feb. 17, 2009. Aboard Air Force One, a close-up of the President's signature on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which he had just signed in Denver. OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

economic emergency, Obama did his best to establish a tone of more reasonable expectations and, above all else, of responsibility. As he neared the end of the speech he said, "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship."

Despite all of this, there are those on the left who cannot be satisfied that Obama is even seriously trying, much less actually doing enough, to chart a different policy agenda. This strikes me as politically naïve navel-gazing. The criticism of Obama and his team is misplaced. I see no signs of a politically potent left that has made the intellectual, mass popular, or grassroots case for any of the initiatives on which Obama stands accused of having let us down. For example, I do not think a savvy politician like Obama would let go of the public option in the health reform legislation if there really was an effective and mobilized constituency for it. Certainly nothing on the left that rivals the public profile or intensity of the Tea Party movement has emerged to help politically sustain a more progressive policy thrust than the one Obama has actually attempted and delivered on. When at its best, politics is the art of the possible.

Obama cannot snap his fingers and pass legislation. Some frustration with the pace and direction of change is understandable, though most of this anger should be focused on the dysfunctional nature of national politics rather than on the Obama administration. As *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson put it, "But he's a president, not a Hollywood action hero." Applying a more realistic "presidential" (rather than superhero) standard, Obama has actually been remarkably successful. A *Congressional Quarterly* study gave Obama the highest success rating in House and Senate voting achieved by any president

in the past five decades (96.7%), exceeding even that of Lyndon Johnson (93%) in 1965.

If his popular approval ratings are any gauge, then most Americans are more appreciative of the challenges Obama faces and the successes he has enjoyed than are the pundits. At the end of his first year in office, the Gallup Organization reports that Obama's approval rating hovers around 50%, down from the near historic high rating of approximately 70% when he took the oath of office. Yet Obama's average approval rating for the first year of his presidency came in at 57%. This puts him ahead of Bill Clinton (49%) at this juncture and tied with that of Ronald Reagan. Given the depth of the Great Recession and the persistent acute unemployment, he arguably has, in fact, sustained an unexpectedly high level of popular approval.

Of course, a careful look makes it clear that popular assessments of the Obama presidency to this point show a real measure of polarization by race. When he took office, Gallup surveys showed that 88% of African Americans approved of the job Obama was doing as compared to 75% of Latinos and 62% of White Americans. His approval rating among Blacks remained at roughly 90% for the remainder of the year. Likewise, his approval among Latinos never fell below the high 60s and ended the year at 71%. However, his approval level among White voters fell into the mid-40s by August 2009 and has remained there ever since, ending the year at 42%.

With respect to the matter of race, and to race relations specifically, the mass perception is far more ambiguous, if not contradictory. A recent *Washington Post*-ABC News poll suggests that Americans are less optimistic today about Obama's likely impact on race relations than they were at the time of the inauguration. In January 2009, nearly six in ten Americans thought Obama's election would improve race relations. By January 2010, however, that number had slid back to only four in ten. The *Post*-ABC poll also suggested that African Americans in particular had become more pessimistic about race, returning to pre-election levels in their assessment of the amount of progress in race relations. Looking at different questions and a much wider array of issues, however, a major Pew Center survey suggests a generally more optimistic view of race issues among African Americans in the wake of Obama's ascension to the presidency.

Obama is the best hope for a progressive agenda in these times, particularly on those issues likely to be of greatest concern for African American and Latino/a voters and communities. The left needs to figure that out and direct its criticism and its efforts where it will do more good: debunking the worn-out Republican pieties of the past (i.e., cutting taxes, reducing the size of government, and always trusting in a benign, self-regulating marketplace) and mobilizing on behalf of substantive policy agendas that will make a difference. The drumbeat of nit-picking and complaints against the Obama administration just plays into a right-wing agenda of negativity, polarization, and political paralysis.

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