

Pragmatism Obama Style

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May 4, 2009

As candidate and as president, Barack Obama has presented himself as a postpartisan pragmatist. He has generally refrained from speaking in explicitly ideological terms, and earned a reputation as a silver-tongued orator. Yet on important issues he has seemed anything but pragmatic, adopting rigidly left-liberal or progressive views, suppressing salient consequences, and putting forward misleading or incomplete arguments disrespectful of the case on the other side. In fact, Obama is a pragmatist, but of a kind that is anything but postpartisan.

To be sure, distinguished scholarly authority has vouched for the postpartisanship of Obama's pragmatism. In January 2008, writing in the *New Republic*, Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein--a friend and former colleague of Obama's at the University of Chicago Law School, an informal adviser to Obama's presidential campaign, and now head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs--argued that Obama was a "visionary minimalist" who, though "willing to think big and to endorse significant departures from the status quo," would "prefer to do so after accommodating, learning from, and bringing on board a variety of different perspectives." Returning to the topic in the *New Republic* in September 2008, Sunstein emphasized that Obama "prefers solutions that can be accepted by people with a wide variety of theoretical inclinations"; his "skepticism about conventional ideological categories is principled, not strategic"; and his "form of pragmatism is heavily empirical; he wants to know what will work."

Sunstein's idealizing portrait, however, overlooks the influential refinements of pragmatism wrought at our universities over the last two decades.

As befits his successful journey through the academy--Columbia B.A., Harvard Law School J.D., senior lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School--Obama practices a pragmatism that reflects the 1990s revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century school of thought launched by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In its original philosophical, or anti-philosophical, sense--as in its ordinary, everyday sense--pragmatism stands for flexibility in solving problems as opposed to insistence on solutions that conform to religious or metaphysical dogma or rigid moral and political agendas. At its most extreme, philosophical pragmatism denies the very existence of objective truth, arguing that opinions we declare true are merely those that have proved useful to one interest or another.

In the 1980s and 1990s, philosophy professor Richard Rorty--in scholarly papers, learned books, academic lectures, and generally accessible writings--infused pragmatism with a decidedly partisan meaning. Or perhaps, as Rorty suggested, he brought out the original pragmatism's latent partisanship. His synthesis proved popular in philosophy departments, among political theorists, and in law schools. While Obama may never have read a word Rorty wrote, the new pragmatism permeated the atmosphere of the university world Obama inhabited. It proclaimed that philosophical questions were subordinate to political questions, and that the proper political question in America is how to promote progressive ends.

In *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, originally delivered as the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University in 1997 and published the following year as a short book by Harvard University Press, Rorty stated his synthesis most succinctly. Proceeding from the dogma that "nobody knows what it would be like to try to be objective when attempting to decide what one's country really is, what its history really means," Rorty declared that there is no point in asking whether any particular account "got America right." Nevertheless, Rorty seemed to think he got right the nature of right and left in America. The right, he proclaims, is the party of the status quo, defined by the quest to preserve inherited privilege. In contrast, the left, or the left that takes its cue from Walt Whitman and John Dewey--"prophets," proclaims Rorty, of a "civic religion"--is the party of hope; it seeks to bring the reality of America into harmony with democracy's progressive promise.

Although scorning traditional philosophy as obviously refuted and flatly rejecting biblical faith as childish nonsense, Rorty celebrates democracy's progressive promise not as an alternative to religion but as an alternative faith. Agreeing with Dewey that "democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature," Rorty teaches that the proper aim of American politics is nothing less than to embody in social and political life "a new conception of what it is to be human." This new conception rejects all claims to "knowledge of God's will, Moral Law, the laws of History or the Facts of Science." Instead, Rorty concludes, the pragmatist will make "shared utopian dreams" his guide to politics.

To realize its utopian dreams, the new pragmatism makes use of a fundamental deception. Purporting to focus on practical consequences, it equates what works with what works to increase government's responsibility to promote social justice in America. Although it reduces morality to interest and dismisses the distinction between true and false as a delusive vestige of an obsolete metaphysics, it treats the progressive interpretation of America as, in effect, good and true. Under the guise of inclusiveness, it denigrates and excludes rival moral and political opinions.

So too it seems for Obama's pragmatism: It appears to be another name for achieving progressive ends; flexibility is confined to the means. This helps explain the sometimes glaring gap between Obama's glistening postpartisan promises and his aggressively partisan

policies. Judging by his conduct--as pragmatism officially instructs--Obama appears to have concluded that the best way to maintain public support for progressive programs is to divert attention from the full range of their consequences and, where possible, to refrain from making progressive principles too explicit.

Consider the inattention to consequences in Obama's adamant opposition to the surge. As a senator, he rejected the idea in October 2006, months before President Bush adopted it as policy; again in January 2007 after the president presented his bold plan to the nation; and throughout 2007 and into 2008, as America's innovative counterinsurgency strategy produced steady and then dramatic gains, substantially reducing violence and bringing Sunni tribes into the political process. Throughout 2007 and through much of 2008, even when violence in Iraq remained in his own words "intolerable," Obama neither wavered in his call to withdraw American combat troops according to a rigid 16 month timetable nor gave weight to the humanitarian and strategic costs of the slaughter that his own analysis implied would ensue.

Or take his decision to lift restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. The memorandum that accompanied President Obama's March 9 executive order accused the Bush administration of creating "a false choice between sound science and moral values." But whether to use taxpayer money to finance the use and destruction of nascent human life, even for scientific research that may someday provide cures for "devastating diseases and conditions," is not a scientific question but a question of moral and political principle and consequences.

Nevertheless, Obama refused to publicly credit the principle--human life should never be treated only as a means--that supported the restriction on federal funding. And his official statements do not contemplate the coarsening of moral sensibilities that opponents have argued is a likely long-term consequence of using and destroying human embryos for medical research.

Then there's Obama's \$3.5 trillion 2010 budget. On the campaign trail he was a deficit hawk who railed against Bush deficits. As president, in his February 24 nationally televised address to a joint session of Congress, he claimed that he was not "a believer in bigger government"; that his budget "reflects the stark reality of what we've inherited--a trillion dollar deficit, a financial crisis, and a costly recession"; and that he would "have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars." Similarly, in February 26 remarks he stressed that his budget makes "hard choices" and that he was dedicated to "restoring fiscal discipline over the long run."

Alas, such traditionally pragmatic concerns are invisible in his actual budget. At a moment of economic peril, it spends recklessly, hugely increasing the size and scope of the federal government by promising, in one great leap, quality health care for all citizens, a significant increase of higher education grants and loans, and much more extensive taxing and

regulation of energy production and use. The staggering cumulative deficits of \$9.3 trillion over the next decade that Obama's budget will generate, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, dwarf the Bush deficits that Obama denounced.

A truly postpartisan pragmatist--or a pragmatist in the ordinary, everyday sense--would pay attention to the long-term economic consequences of massive government costs and expansion. He would also show interest in the full range of moral consequences of his policies, in particular the practical impact on citizens' incentives for responsibly managing their lives of a great enlargement of government responsibilities for managing their lives for them. But a pragmatist for whom it is second nature to measure all policy by how well it promotes a progressive agenda might well ignore or deflect consideration of these awkward consequences.

To be sure, nobody familiar with Obama's career as a community organizer, his eight years in the Illinois state senate, bestselling books, brief record in the U.S. Senate, presidential campaign speeches, behind-closed-doors crack to wealthy San Francisco donors about working class voters who bitterly cling to their guns and religion, and unguarded remark a few weeks before the election to Joe the Plumber about his intention to "spread the wealth around" could reasonably doubt Obama's progressive bona fides.

How to understand his postpartisan and pragmatic credentials was another matter. Little more than three months into his presidency, Obama's claim to transcend partisan divisions stands revealed as an effort to disguise the size and scope of his progressive ambitions.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama deplored a politics in which "narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth." He would pursue "a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans." As president, however, Obama has skillfully exploited the American hunger for a politics of compromise and accommodation to ram through Congress an extremely partisan transformation of American government.

The problem is not partisanship, but a deceptive form of pragmatism, where pretending to be nonpartisan is a pragmatic strategy for imposing far-reaching progressive policies on an unwary public. This pragmatism is unpragmatic because it suppresses inconvenient consequences, and disrespectful of citizens because it obscures its governing principles and ultimate intentions.

It is also a threat to our freedom, which depends on a lively understanding of our constitutional principles and an informed and robust debate about the full range of consequences--social and economic, moral and strategic--of our political choices.

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