

The New Progressivism: Same as the Old Progressivism?

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To understand the sometimes glaring gaps between candidate Obama's promises and President Obama's policies, it is useful to appreciate an old tension in American progressivism between democratic aspirations and aristocratic ambitions, and how the new progressivism at whose head the president stands seeks to conceal it.

Strangely enough, during George W. Bush's presidency, progressives fulminated against neoconservatives, who, they alleged, had learned from political philosopher Leo Strauss to hide their true opinions behind views fashioned to manipulate officeholders and persuade the public. Yet, judging by President Obama's rhetoric and the academic sensibilities he has incorporated in his administration, progressives are enamored of what they consider to be noble lies.

No presidential candidate in living memory has more successfully put forward competing faces than Barack Obama. He was the candidate of hope and change, but also the pragmatic and post-partisan candidate. He ran a relentlessly anti-Bush and anti-Republican campaign, but also proclaimed his determination to heal wounds and bring the country, red and blue, together. He declared his dedication to a new kind of politics and styled himself a new kind of politician. But his inside men — David Axelrod, David Plouffe, Rahm Emanuel — were Chicago-style, brass knuckles, old school political operatives.

A year in office has compounded the contradictions. Candidate Obama ran as a resolute advocate of the Afghanistan war's necessity and justice. Yet President Obama's November West Point speech, announcing the much delayed but welcome decision to send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, was irresolute in tone and indecisive in substance.

Candidate Obama ran as a fierce foe of Bush administration national security law policy. Yet despite a few high-profile decisions — on enhanced interrogation, Guantánamo Bay, and trying 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Muhammad in New York City federal court — President Obama has quietly embraced much Bush policy.

Candidate Obama decried the \$440 billion Bush 2008 budget deficit. Yet in 2009 President Obama promptly proposed a budget whose non-stimulus related spending, according to the Congressional Budget Office, sets the country on course for a decade of substantially

greater deficits.

Candidate Obama promised cost-conscious health care reform. Whatever becomes of the Democrats' comprehensive health care reform now that Scott Brown has swept to victory in Massachusetts' special Senate race, few competent observers believe that government can cover an additional 30 million people and take on massive new administrative obligations without incurring substantial new costs.

And candidate Obama promised to bring a new tone to Washington. But from its vilification of Rush Limbaugh and its sneering dismissals of tea party protesters, to its orchestrated efforts to delegitimize Fox News and its characterization of opponents of Democrats' health care reform legislation as mean-spirited and obstructionist, President Obama's administration has portrayed disagreement as rooted in ignorance or malice.

The discrepancy between candidate Obama's rhetoric and President Obama's policies reflects more than the exaggerations and omissions typical of electoral politics. By carefully crafting the competing faces he put forward in campaign 2008, Obama aggressively cultivated ambiguity about his principles and his policies.

Apparently, Obama and his team believed that clearly explaining the ambitious changes they hoped to enact would lose the election. In fact, it is nothing new for progressives in America to recognize that they are out of step with majority sentiment. What is new is the determination to disguise that democratic deficit.

The original progressivism arose in the 1880s and 1890s and flourished during the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is associated with Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, scholars Fredrick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard, reformer Jane Addams, theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, philosopher and educator John Dewey, and journalist and *New Republic* founder Herbert Croly. And it laid the foundations for FDR's New Deal and the centralized regulatory and redistributive state under which we live today.

At their best, progressives grappled with dramatic social and economic transformations produced by the Industrial Revolution, opposed real Gilded Age abuses, and promoted salutary reforms. In a rapidly changing world, they took the side of the exploited and the weak, and sought to make political institutions more responsive to popular will.

Much also could be said about progressivism's errors. Most damagingly, it argued that because progress had improved humanity and dissolved or overcome legitimate differences of opinion about morals and politics, the Constitution's checks and balances and separation and dispersing of power were no longer necessary to prevent majority tyranny and officeholders' abuse of power.

A central paradox of American progressivism arises from the divergence between its democratic aspirations and its aristocratic ambitions. On the one hand, progressives sought to democratize American politics by putting government in the service of, and giving greater say to, the people. On the other hand, they favored the enlargement of a distant national government, and the creation of an administrative elite that reduced popular accountability.

In the progressive classic *The Promise of American Life* (1914), Herbert Croly identified the source of this paradox with startling candor. Centralization and elite control were necessary to advance democratic ends because American constitutional government was based on “erroneous and misleading ideas,” and “the average American individual is morally and intellectually inadequate to a serious and consistent conception of his responsibilities as a democrat.”

The new progressivism is not so bold. Or rather, it boldly seeks to obscure its awkward combination of egalitarianism and elitism through a rhetoric of reform that presents partisan and eminently debatable goals as dictates of reason, practical imperatives, or truths of the heart. Academic schools have arisen to refine this rhetoric, and President Obama has brought leading representatives into his administration.

For example, former Yale Law School Dean and now State Department legal counsel Harold Koh is a prominent advocate of transnationalism, which purports to derive universal principles of international law from moral reflection on the conduct of states, and vests power to enforce these derivations in unaccountable foreign courts and officials.

Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein, now head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, has championed pragmatism, a theoretical approach popular among law professors and political theorists that overtly reduces questions of principle to questions of what works, and then covertly transforms these into questions of what works to advance progressive goals.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, like President Obama, extols empathy. Law professors have burnished the idea that empathy for the ways of ordinary people based, however, on experiences of exclusion and oppression available only to minorities and women, provides grounds for deciding the hardest constitutional law questions.

All three approaches equate the progressive agenda with justice itself. All three provide rationales for circumventing people’s expressed preferences. And all three present end runs around voters’ wishes as higher, purer forms of democracy.

This is, or ought to be, an awkward orientation for progressives. Among other things, it insults the public by treating us as too simple-minded or bitter to adopt the correct policies for the correct reasons, and it diminishes our freedom by depriving us of responsibility for our choices.

The danger posed by the new progressivism does not lessen a free society's ever-present need for reform. But to secure liberty for all, we should follow the Federalist authors, who believed our experiment in self-government, which is grounded in the consent of the governed, must avoid both pandering to democratic prejudices and despising the people's opinions.