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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

DEFINING OBAMA'S POLITICAL STRATEGY:

RADICAL PRAGMATISM, GRASSROOTS BIPARTISANSHIP

AND THE ABANDONED CENTER

BY ED KILGORE

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:***Defining Obama's Political Strategy:*****Radical Pragmatism, Grassroots Bipartisanship and the Abandoned Center**

As Barack Obama prepares to take office on January 20, 2009, after a remarkable ten weeks of quasi-presidency, a debate continues to rage inside and outside his Democratic Party. Does this man have a firm ideology, a governing philosophy, or even a “theory of change?” Is he a “progressive,” a “liberal,” or a “pragmatist?” Is his rhetoric of “hope and change,” of “post-partisanship and common purpose” a core value, a political asset, or a smoke-screen? Is he FDR, or Jimmy Carter, or Bill Clinton, or something else entirely?

My hypothesis is that there is a discernable approach to the presidency that is distinctively “Obamaism,” and that its more problematic—or even dialectical—features happen to make it remarkably well-fitted to the circumstances facing the country, and the coalition supporting him, at this particular moment of history.

I would define Obamaism as a commitment to pursue broadly-shared progressive policy priorities through an inclusive, grassroots-driven political strategy that focuses on mobilizing public pressure on government to meet big national challenges. Because public understanding of those challenges has grown in scope and urgency at the precise moment the new president is taking office, and because institutional barriers to change are rapidly losing their strength, this strategy can not only succeed, but can potentially have a politically transformative effect with time, skill and luck.

Any meaningful understanding of “Obamaism” probably requires indifference to the usual ideological labels, for two reasons: Obama’s own well-documented resistance to ideological shoe-horning, and just as importantly, the circumstances that make them less than a useful guide to future behavior. In a **December 10 meditation** for *The Nation* on the frequent descriptions of Obama as a “pragmatist,” Christopher Hayes wrote these very pertinent lines:

In the weeks since his election, people in the press and in politics, the Beltway and the netroots have been sifting through the scraps of leaked information, and awkwardly reading these entrails for signs of the administration's future direction, to come to understand just what this pragmatism will look like. Several factors make the project difficult. The onrush of events, with the tidal waves of economic distress, make it nearly impossible to predict policies. Who would have imagined the Bush administration overseeing a state takeover of the nation’s largest insurance conglomerate? If things keep going in the direction they’re headed, the most “pragmatic” policy options—for instance, a wholesale nationalization of the financial sector—may very well make the most fevered fantasies of radicals seem quaint.

So if “Obamaism” represents anything other than pure improvisation, understanding it requires going back at least to that recent but psychologically remote period prior to the financial collapse of September 15.

The Obama Paradox: Visionary Post-Partisanship

When state senator Barack Obama first exploded on the national political scene, at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the unusual and even paradoxical nature of his appeal was immediately apparent.

On the one hand, his use of sweeping, metapolitical, “high common purpose” rhetoric was welcomed as a tonic to listeners weary of the crabbed, poll-tested, and targeted language of the convention as a whole.

But at the same time, his speech cut against the grain of a Democratic party, and particularly a Democratic activist base, that hungered and thirsted for a more combative partisanship and a sharper ideological appeal.

It’s interesting that the speech that gained more immediate roars of approval than Obama’s was delivered by another and better-known African-American politician, Al Sharpton, who broke all the message rules of the convention along with its carefully scripted time constraints, with a savage assault on the values and policies of the GOP. Yet Obama’s speech became the best-remembered moment from Boston.

The combination of “high common purpose” and pan- or post-partisan rhetoric, of course, became a staple of Obama’s presidential campaign, from beginning to end. And from beginning to end, it aroused continuing controversy among progressives.

The Obama “Theory of Change:” Which Different Kind of Politics?

This controversy was probably best expressed in the debate over Obama’s “theory of change” as opposed to those of his Democratic primary rivals. Early in the nomination contest, when John Edwards was still a viable candidate, Hillary Clinton memorably summed up the three front-runners’ “theories of change” as follows:

Some believe you can get change by demanding it. Some believe you can get change by hoping for it. I believe you get change by working hard.

This formulation reflected not only HRC’s claim that her experience would provide the best path forward for progressivism, but a response to Edwards’ “demand change” argument that HRC was too accommodationist, and Obama too naïve and bipartisan. This characterization of Obama’s position was widely shared, as a fear if not a conviction, among self-conscious Democratic progressives.

Once the contest became a one-on-one competition with Hillary Clinton, it was an easier call, if only because of her totemic status as the representative of a “centrist” Democratic Establishment. But prior to the Iowa Caucuses, when John Edwards remained a viable candidate, many progressives often compared him favorably to Obama on “theory of

change” grounds, as reflected in this December 2007 *New York Times* [column on health care](#) by Paul Krugman:

At one extreme, Barack Obama insists that the problem with America is that our politics are so “bitter and partisan,” and insists that he can get things done by ushering in a “different kind of politics.”

At the opposite extreme, John Edwards blames the power of the wealthy and corporate interests for our problems, and says, in effect, that America needs another F.D.R.—a polarizing figure, the object of much hatred from the right, who nonetheless succeeded in making big changes.

Do Obama supporters who celebrate his hoped-for ability to bring us together realize that “us” includes the insurance and drug lobbies?...

[It’s] actually Mr. Obama who’s being unrealistic here, believing that the insurance and drug industries—which are, in large part, the cause of our health care problems—will be willing to play a constructive role in health reform. The fact is that there’s no way to reduce the gross wastefulness of our health system without also reducing the profits of the industries that generate the waste.

As a result, drug and insurance companies—backed by the conservative movement as a whole—will be implacably opposed to any significant reforms. And what would Mr. Obama do then? “I’ll get on television and say Harry and Louise are lying,” he says. I’m sure the lobbyists are terrified.

Similar concerns were aroused by Obama’s insistence that there is a “crisis” in Social Security—regarded as a particularly dangerous concession to the conservative “entitlement reform” meme—and by a remark expressing appreciation for Ronald Reagan as a scourge of liberal excesses. And while Obama’s progressive supporters acknowledged the political value of endorsements by such party “centrists” as Governors Tim Kaine, Kathleen Sebelius and Janet Napolitano, and former senators Sam Nunn and David Boren (who had earlier flirted with a consensus-oriented third-party movement), they were a constant reminder of the ideologically ambivalent nature of his appeal. At any given moment, it was clear the Obama coalition included people who interpreted his call for a “different kind of politics” in two very different ways: as an indictment of Washington for failing to embrace bipartisanship in the face of big national challenges, or as an indictment of Washington for a bipartisan failure to meet big national challenges. An added note of confusion was provided by the conviction of many “centrists” that Republicans were primarily responsible for the breakdown in bipartisanship, and the conviction of many progressives that Democrats were complicit in the change-averse status quo.

Finally, in developing his campaign platform, Obama and his advisors made choices that often offended progressive sensibilities. His health care plan not only eschewed the sort of individual mandate necessary to produce immediate universal coverage; it also adopted private health insurance as the primary vehicle for expanded coverage, at a time when elite

support for a government-run “single-payer” system was at an all-time high. Similarly, his approach to climate change involved embracing the market-based “cap and trade” approach even as enviro-wonks began to warm to a more straightforward carbon tax. His insistence on a middle-class tax cut to accompany a repeal of high-end Bush tax cuts (eventually a centerpiece of his general election campaign) was right out of the 1992 Clinton-Gore playbook. And even in foreign policy, Obama’s right-from-the-start position opposing the Iraq War was modulated by aggressive talk about potential U.S. military action in Pakistan.

For many netroots activists, the Obama campaign’s historic success in using internet-based methods to raise unimaginable amounts of small-dollar contributions, and to organize a national following, was a bittersweet accomplishment. His message simultaneously reinforced (by demanding fundamental change in Washington’s political culture) and undermined (by touting bipartisanship and civility) the prevailing netroots point of view, which in the early going was faithfully channeled by John Edwards. In some respects, the Obama campaign bypassed and even intimidated netroots activists, who often publicly and privately worried about his true nature.

The most commonly heard progressive rationalization for supporting Obama was that he was the only Democratic candidate who might (because of his relatively strong appeal to independents and even Republicans, and his turnout-boosting support among first-time voters and African-Americans) win a big enough victory to change the usual power dynamics in Washington in a way that would be impossible for the “polarizing” Hillary Clinton.

A sophisticated version of this argument, articulated early in the nomination contest by by [Mark Schmitt in *The American Prospect*](#), was that Obama’s rhetoric was primarily tactical, veiling a steely progressivism that took into account the power of conservative opposition to any “transformative” agenda:

[P]erhaps we are being too literal in believing that “hope” and bipartisanship are things that Obama naively believes are present and possible, when in fact they are a tactic, a method of subverting and breaking the unified conservative power structure. Claiming the mantle of bipartisanship and national unity, and defining the problem to be solved (e.g. universal health care) puts one in a position of strength, and Republicans would defect from that position at their own risk. The public, and younger voters in particular, seem to want an end to partisanship and conflictual politics, and an administration that came in with that premise (an option not available to Senator Clinton), would have a tremendous advantage, at least for a moment.

(This “tactical” take on Obama’s appeals to unity and bipartisanship was, quite naturally, popular among conservative commentators as well, who in the course of the campaign devoted themselves with ever-mounting passion to the task of exposing Obama’s “true” radicalism through a variety of associations and assertions, often borderline racist or nativist.)

The Decline and Rise of Great Progressive Expectations

It's important to remember, however, that the entire context of these assessments of Obama's ideology was a set of expectations that in retrospect seem very modest. Any Democratic president, it was assumed, would to some degree be willing and able to bring the Bush Era to an end: to briskly liquidate the war in Iraq; reanimate U.S. diplomacy amidst a relaxation of anti-American sentiment abroad; restore a sense of purpose and priority to such domestic concerns as public education and affordable housing; pare back Bush-Cheney civil liberties abuses and expansions of executive-branch powers; reintroduce oversight and regulation of corporations and the financial system; repeal top-end tax cuts; modestly encourage unionization; and recalibrate trade policies to soften the impact of globalization.

The big and difficult agenda items, it was generally assumed, would be a new drive to end Washington gridlock on universal access to health insurance, and on climate change legislation. And much of the talk about Obama's "theory of change" or openness to bipartisanship revolved around how these principles would affect these big-ticket items.

Then came September 15, and everything changed.

The financial meltdown instantly obscured almost every non-economic issue on the presidential campaign trail, and almost certainly guaranteed an Obama victory, particularly in the wake of John McCain's inept and erratic handling of the initial bailout legislation.

But initially, the cost of the bailout, along with the impact on federal revenues of the deepening recession, appeared to have crushed progressive expectations of an Obama presidency. In an NPR interview on September 22, Democratic economist Robert Shapiro summarized the consensus view that any "transformational" presidency **had just died a premature death**:

Whatever we do, this bailout will use up virtually all of the resources the next president needs to bring about whatever changes he's envisioning.

And that leaves the next president facing a deficit of \$600 billion to \$700 billion, maybe more.

There goes the money for President Obama to expand health care coverage, or for President McCain to cut corporate taxes or extend President Bush's tax cuts for wealthy people.

And next, President Obama may have to trade off a major push on alternative fuels against those new tax cuts for the middle class.

It wasn't clear from Shapiro's analysis whether an Obama administration would simply fail to offer "transformative" legislation or that health care, energy and/or tax legislation would succumb to Republican and Democratic "deficit hawk" opposition. But in either event, prospects momentarily looked sobering or even bleak.

It turned out, of course, that the depth of the economic crisis swept away virtually all Democratic and some Republican short-term concerns about deficits. And the margin of

victory for Obama and for congressional Democrats was sufficiently large to revive and then greatly expand expectations of positive legislative prospects.

The Obama Transition: Radical “Pragmatism”

It’s taken the chattering classes a while to absorb the radically different context we now face in understanding Obamaism. An enormous amount of ink has been spilled in assessments of his early appointments, particularly in the economic arena, with some progressive grumbling about the number of players with Rubinomics backgrounds—often adjudged as having contributed crucially to the Wall Street-friendly mindset of Washington before the financial meltdown. Indeed, during the presidential campaign, Robert Kuttner devoted a whole book to a plea that Obama reject “centrist” economic advice. But as **Jonathan Chait argued persuasively** in *The New Republic* on December 12, the veterans of the Clinton economic team have been radicalized not only by the current economic crisis, but by the experience of the Bush administration, and are firmly on board for an aggressive and expensive economic strategy:

[I]t’s as if they gave a war for the soul of the Obama presidency and nobody came. Deficit hawks and deficit doves are living together in perfect harmony. A few weeks ago, longtime ideological adversaries Jared Bernstein, from the prototypically liberal Economic Policy Institute, and Wall Street darling Robert Rubin actually authored a joint op-ed arguing that the liberal-moderate split no longer mattered. “[H]ow real are these differences?” they wrote, poignantly if not poetically. “Our view—and we come from pretty different analytical perspectives—is that in many important ways, they are false, and serve as more of a distraction than a map.”

Moreover, there is every indication that the relatively “centrist” Obama team is planning a legislative agenda that couldn’t be much further from the restricted playing-field that Rob Shapiro worried about back in September. Aside from an economic “stimulus” package that is likely to cost three-quarters-of-a-trillion dollars, and could even go higher (by contrast, the controversial stimulus package that bedeviled the first months of the Clinton administration bore a price tag of \$15 billion), Obama will apparently move straight ahead on the health care front, and perhaps on climate change as well (there’s even been talk of Obama imposing a cap-and-trade system via executive order under powers granted the executive by the Clean Air Act). Compare this with Bill Clinton’s careful multi-year phasing of his economic, health care and welfare reform priorities, and you see the difference. Yet even as it expanded beyond anything that progressives had ever dreamed of, Obama’s agenda earned initially strong and deep public support beyond the ranks of those who voted for him in November.

Grassroots Bipartisanship: Obama Prepares to Occupy the Abandoned Center

There remains the complicated question of Obama’s appeals to “bipartisanship.” Aside from a handful of Republican holdover appointments, and a slightly larger number of relatively positive conservative editorial assessments of his conduct during the transition,

there's not much in the air to suggest an Era of Good Feelings is about to break out between the two major parties. Should Obama simply ignore the other party, or become uncharacteristically partisan?

On this front, I believe, Obama's distinctive approach to bipartisanship (see a [separate analysis](#) on this subject of "grassroots bipartisanship" that I wrote for *The Democratic Strategist*) could actually pay off in both short-term and long-term political benefits—not because Republicans are rushing into his arms, but because they are rushing in the opposite direction.

To an astounding extent, the dominant Republican post-mortem on the 2008 elections—and for that matter, on the 2006 elections—is that the GOP has failed because of insufficient fidelity to "conservative principles," particularly in terms of the size and cost of the federal government. Both George W. Bush and John McCain are viewed as "moderates" who betrayed the party's conservative base by excessive accommodation of the partisan enemy, and by a reflexive willingness to support government activism, especially now that the economy is collapsing due to (they believe) government meddling. It's no accident that the human incarnation of the 2008 Republican campaign, Joe the Plumber, has decided to reveal his "disgust" at McCain and his affection for Sarah Palin as "the real deal." And it's no accident that the small number of voices (such as Ross Douthat and David Frum) calling for a reconsideration of conservative orthodoxy on economic and role-of-government issues are being ignored or shouted down.

In recent weeks at least [two notable Republican leaders](#)—House Republican Conference chairman Mike Pence, and Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty—have argued that Republicans should again champion a constitutional Balanced Budget Amendment. And the auto-industry bailout fight in Congress showed that only those Republicans whose constituents desperately and self-consciously need federal assistance will support any broad-based or targeted relief. Anything other than a strategy of total obstruction of Obama's larger legislative agenda is increasingly remote. And even if Obama does try to "reach out" to congressional Republicans, they will for the most part slap his hand away.

But Obama may be in a unique position to make them pay for this attitude. All the months and years of eschewing partisanship on Obama's part can now make him especially credible in espousing a *grass-roots bipartisanship* that appeals directly to persuadable Republican and independent voters who may well disagree with the neo-Hooverite recession strategy of GOP leaders. And in conducting that campaign of persuasion, Obama's decision to build and then maintain a large and well-funded personal political organization that is distinct from the Democratic Party could be a valuable asset.

Direct pressure on a small but crucial number of Republican members of Congress to avoid obstructing Obama's agenda—especially those representing states or districts that turned blue this year—could have an immediate short-term effect, at a time when Democratic margins in Congress, and Democratic unity on domestic issues, are unusually high. But to the extent that Republicans resist this pressure, they will make their party vulnerable to further erosions of their base of support, and to Democratic majorities that could soon constitute a

major political realignment. That is, you might recall, what happened in the early years of the New Deal, when Democrats made major gains in three consecutive elections, after making major gains in the last Hoover midterm.

Republicans will no doubt comfort themselves with hopes that Barack Obama, like Bill Clinton, will “overreach” and produce a backlash from what they self-deceivingly regard as a “center-right” electorate that simply got fed up with George W. Bush’s distinctive brand of “moderation.” But there’s not much reason to think that the cultural issues that helped trip up Clinton have any significant salience at present, especially given Obama’s strong instincts for careful and inclusive steps on the cultural front. Sizable majorities of the population, no matter what they think on the subject of gay marriage, now support a repeal of “don’t ask don’t tell” policies in the military, and virtually every other non-marriage element of the equal rights agenda. With the withdrawal (for the time being) of the threat of a decisive Supreme Court appointment to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, there won’t be much purchase for abortion as a wedge issue, and there’s already strong bipartisan support for federal stem cell research (the quietly corrosive efforts of Bush administration appointees to undermine both abortion rights and science-based policymaking will just as quietly be ended the day Obama takes office).

In terms of economic policy, of course, it’s a bit hard at present to determine what would represent a fatal “overreaching,” particularly when the opposition party is fighting for an actual reduction in the size and regulatory power of the federal government. Emergency economic legislation aside, there’s already a pent-up public demand for action on health care costs and access, and increasingly, for action on climate change and alternative energy. And barring a flare-up of relations with Iran or Russia, Obama’s foreign policy is likely to produce both an international honeymoon and solid domestic support, at least in the crucial short term.

Conclusion: Obama and FDR

The depth and global nature of the current recession, and the circumstances surrounding Barack Obama’s electoral victory, have naturally spawned comparisons with FDR’s accession to power in 1933. In a much-discussed November 17 *New Yorker* piece, **George Packer compared FDR to Obama**, and suggested that Roosevelt’s willingness to exert “moral leadership” in the defense of an explicit philosophy of liberalism was what made him transformational. But after intelligently ruminating for several thousand words in search of Obama’s ideology, without much success, Packer seems to have missed the fact that the president-elect’s rhetoric isn’t just about “post-partisanship.” Whether or not you judge it as “philosophical,” Obama’s rhetoric is full of purported “moral leadership” in its constant invocation of common purpose as the lodestone of government and politics. And whether is a reflection of the intellectual bankruptcy of conservatism or the vast backlog and exceptional urgency of big national challenges, a willingness to use government to redeem the “common purpose” has become the essence of progressivism and liberalism—and even occasional radicalism.

Christopher Hayes gets to a **similar point** from a different direction in his recent essay on Obama’s “pragmatism:”

[P]ragmatism requires an openness to the possibility of radical solutions. It demands a skepticism not just toward the certainties of ideologues and dogmatism but also of elite consensus and the status quo. This is a definition of pragmatism that is in almost every way the opposite of its invocation among those in the establishment....

“The country needs,” Roosevelt said in May 1932, “and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands, bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

Everything we know about Barack Obama suggests that he has the temperament to be bold in his experimentation, and the leadership style to bring as many Americans along with him as is rationally possible. He has at present popular support, a personal political machine, a united party, a self-marginalized opposition, and an environment in which hope relies on audacity.

His long-term impact on the political life of Americans will obviously depend on the real-life success or failure of his governing agenda. If the experience of the New Deal is any indication, however, Americans will give him time to succeed so long as he’s perceived as moving things in the right direction and the other party persists in promoting policies that have so visibly failed. But Obamaism, for all its paradoxes and generality, is sufficient to his cause.