

CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

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AN ORGANIZER AND A LEGISLATOR
AT THE SAME TIME.
HE IS RIGHT TO REDEFINE HIMSELF
BUT HAS NOT SUCCESSFULLY MADE
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THE CAREFUL STUDY OF THESE THREE
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BY
ANDREW SABL

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By ANDREW SABL

The arguments among Democrats and progressives over President Obama's tax deal have revealed disagreements over many things: strategy, tactics, principles, history. But some of the most bitter criticisms have involved matters of loyalty and political character. The deal—and even more, Obama's testy criticism of "purist" and "sanctimonious" critics of the deal—were seen as insulting Obama's most fervent supporters. And the insult was compounded because it came from a President whom many activists had once regarded as one of their own. The transformational speaker and former community organizer seemed to be openly disavowing not only his base but part of himself.

In contrast, many of the President's defenders have said that Obama was always at heart a legislative deal-maker, and that followers who expected anything different had only themselves to blame.

I favor a third alternative: that Obama was indeed disavowing a part of himself, but that he was right to do so. In my book, *Ruling Passions*,¹ I extensively examined and compared the roles played by three major kinds of political leaders: activists, organizers and legislators. I argued that all three contribute crucial things to democratic politics—but very different things, normally best performed by very different kinds of people.

One of the book's central conclusions was that the same person was unlikely to be able to play more than one of these roles well, and that those who did move from one role to another would have to radically shift their ways of acting, and perhaps even their character, in order to succeed. Applied to what's happening now, this analysis suggests that Obama has very valid reasons for making a change from one role to another, even at the cost of leaving behind some roles that once helped define him, but that he now needs to clearly define and embrace a new role.

Andrew Sabl is Associate Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at UCLA and the author of *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics* (Princeton, 2002). He is also a contributor to the blog The Reality-Based Community at samefacts.com."

¹Andrew Sabl, *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Moral Activists

Obama's remarks, stressing pragmatism and results over "a purist position and no victories for the American people," took aim at a kind of politics that I called "moral activism." Moral activists—like Frederick Douglass, Francis Willard, and Martin Luther King—channel the prophetic or jeremiad tradition in American thought and rhetoric. They draw organizational strength and moral authority from communities that are religious or quasi-religious in character, focused on morals as much as politics. That said, activists' public appeals are not sectarian but appeal to common and perennial American principles. Moral activists demand that we take seriously the true meaning of our ideals: liberty, democracy, equality, the pursuit of happiness.

The preferred political activity of moral activists is speech; their preferred path to political progress not the brokering of deals but the conversion of souls. Accordingly, while not opposed to all compromise, they deeply suspect the *rhetoric* of compromise, any suggestion that a current half-measure is a final destination rather than a short rest stop on the way to a final goal.

When activists do seek out political allies they demand that those allies' commitment to the cause approach their own (in steadiness if not intensity); they are fond of pledges and promises and take them very seriously. For all their talk of urgency, they typically think of progress on a scale of generations. Their favorite line is taken from Martin Luther King (though not original with him): "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." And uniquely among political types, Moral Activists can and do display a sympathy towards permanent minorities and the politically disenfranchised that politicians who practice majoritarian politics cannot afford to match.

Organizers

Organizers see the world very differently—and the difference between their approach and moral activists' is stressed by no one as much as organizers themselves. Organizers believe that what drives human beings is self-interest, not principle. (In Saul Alinsky's words, it's "a world not of angels but of angles.") They regard politics not as a battle of principles where moral progress may be hoped for but as a struggle for power in which the wealthy few typically win but the unorganized masses may hold their own on some issues, if they organize.

Organizers distrust fine words and long speeches: in the Civil Rights era, they tended to talk not to the local preacher but to the unsung person, often a woman, who actually managed church business. They have no use for moral purity and often take pride in finding local leaders whose past is checkered at best. (Alinsky boasted, whether it was true or not, of "having hookers doing fund-raisers.") They insist on a small-scale, local politics in which everyone is treated as a distinct individual with a story to tell and each member of the organization takes seriously the others' very personal reasons for getting involved.

Organizing ethics stresses substance rather than procedure: the difference between right and wrong isn't which methods are used but which side one is on. Organizers love deals and proudly split differences when tangible goods can be gained. They distrust electoral politics as much as activists do but for totally different reasons—while activists fear that compromise and coalition inherently clash with principle, organizers fear that the love of victory will lead

politicians to back the wrong set of interests. When organizers do deal with elected officials, they bargain and speak the hard-nosed language of immediate electoral costs and benefits. They're not much for exacting promises, which—being talk—are assumed to be cheap.

Legislators

What legislators classically do (in *Ruling Passions*, and with unanticipated relevance to Obama, I took U.S. senators as my example) is much more familiar. They place party first and ideology second, both because parties are what get them elected and because they are seen as the obvious conduits of political information given an electorate with limited knowledge and largely private concerns.

In the American system, legislators have loyalty to a legislative body as the natural unit of constitutional politics. Legislators see themselves as representatives of diverse places and diverse interests, with political unity being a product less of shared values—the truths held as self-evident in South Los Angeles not seeming so evident in Provo—than of legislative compromise and institutional structures. Legislators see politics as a matter of interests (though they're less comfortable with talk of social or economic power); since even principles are (in their view) shorthand for sets of interests, they see nothing wrong with using principles, or bits of principle, to bargain with. And legislators distrust moral absolutes not just because they get in the way of deals and results but because a focus on absolutes makes it hard to knit together disparate constituencies who may find common interests but who will feel insulted, and draw back, if one questions their core values.

The “division of moral labor”

Ruling Passions argues the case for a “division of moral labor.” Democracy needs all three roles, and we should see and respect each as fulfilling a crucial purpose in its particular domain. That this position seems like common sense does not make it popular. Most political observers, whether journalistic, scholarly, or in the arena, not only favor one of these models over others but grant it exclusive legitimacy, regarding it as a model for what all politics should be and how it should always be conducted.

In response one can make both a structural argument and a sociological one.

Structurally, the American polity has a built in need for all three roles and resources. A nation founded on revolution and Reformed Christianity can use moral activists to redeem its sense of purpose (and, given our lack of socialist and egalitarian traditions, to vindicate the interests of the “least of these our brethren.”) A Tocquevillian nation of local volunteers and church bake sales can use organizers to actualize the latent power and egalitarian pride of citizen groups and their members. A huge nation divided by geography and cultural diversity can use national legislators to mold one set of laws, with acknowledged authority, from many voices.

Sociologically, those who think their own preference for one role over others is obvious should realize that these preferences predictably track culture and experience. The moral activist has a prophetic, Protestant appeal; organizing, with its stress on the constancy of sin and the priority of community, has always been more a Catholic taste. Those who instinctively trust

elites naturally favor a politics based on legislating more than those who distrust them. And of course, most ordinary Americans, skeptical of government on principle, avowedly distrust *everything* smacking of “politics—even when relying on politics or even practicing it.

The Case of Obama

Obama is a fascinating case: he has practiced all three roles with talent, often great talent, without fully welcoming any of them. He abandoned community organizing for electoral politics, not only because the latter promised a steady income but because organizing’s localism and distrust for party coalitions left it unable to bring about “major changes in poverty or discrimination.”² Though he has mastered the inspirational speech, it’s not his natural medium. He is more comfortable by temperament with a reasoned, point-by-point style (think of Clinton’s State of the Union addresses, not Kennedy’s inaugural), and sees himself as part of the Joshua generation whom activists like King made possible—unlike King’s generation, who had to do politics as King did because, as political outsiders, they had no currency except faith and hope. As for electoral politics, Obama has never found campaigning energizing—he’s an introvert—and when in the U.S. Senate expressed impatience with its Byzantine operations to the point of openly mocking them.

Still, it’s now clear that the senator role was, and probably still is, the one of those three that Obama finds most congenial. His impatience reflected how fast the Senate moved, or didn’t, not what it aspired to be. His call for bipartisanship reflects less the naivety he’s sometimes accused of than his actual experience—in Springfield as well as Washington—that specific pieces of legislation could find supporters from both parties. In *The Audacity of Hope* his reverence for the Senate’s traditions is as palpable as his feeling that the Senate in his time, gridlocked, ideological and hyper-partisan, has failed in its historic task of building consensus around national legislation.

When his party commanded a majority larger than any in memory, providing a shot at overcoming gridlock and legislating once more, his administration—packed with legislative insiders—played the Master of the Senate role so zealously as to obscure the other roles entirely. As a result, Obama achieved historic, though deeply flawed, legislative results at the cost of giving many voters, especially Democrats and progressives, the impression that he no longer knew how to articulate their principles or to fight for their interests against those of the powerful.

Can Obama play all three roles?

Must Obama therefore rediscover the organizer and activist sides of his nature, and of his political appeal? That, I submit, is not possible. Organizing is a *local* activity—there’s a reason that the units of a nationwide labor unions are called what they are—and exists to give voice to individual grievances long effaced by hopelessness and the accustomed disuse of power. Organizing relies on face-to-face interactions and mutual appreciation of personal stories. A nationwide community organization run by the President is a contradiction in terms. Organizing for America, despite the name, has nothing to do with community organizing; it is

²John Judis, “Creation Myth,” *The New Republic*, September 10, 2008. Recent repetition of the first of these reasons, omitting the second, has left a deeply misleading impression.

instead a sustained and fairly successful attempt to build a national political *machine* (that's not necessarily a criticism: we could use one). Likewise, moral activism is an inherently sectarian activity. The problem with speaking truth to power on a national level is that the nation doesn't agree on the truth.

Presidential moral activism can succeed only in exceptional cases when our usual cultural and moral divisions either fall away (war) or break along such lines that one position is marginalized and discredited and a moral monopoly accrues to the other (Civil Rights). Nor would activism on a national scale necessarily succeed even if we did have more cultural consensus than we do. While almost all American acknowledge certain social and governmental responsibilities, most are not seeking social justice and are not looking to awaken their social conscience. When accused of injustice, they respond with outrage at the accuser, not guilt.

There's a reason why Obama has sold the Affordable Care Act as a matter of common sense and self-interest, not altruism. And there's a reason why the idea of President as moral leader is a specialty of the Right. The Right is perfectly willing to marginalize, or even demonize, those opinions that they regard as non-mainstream, and those Americans who hold them. Democrats should be proud of the fact that they are not.

So I would argue that Obama can be forgiven for playing the legislative game—affirmatively when he had big majorities; in the future largely defensively, through veto threats, now that he doesn't. But a president must represent something more than the de facto passel of sixteen senators and seventy-odd Representatives that the veto allows him to be. My book, suspicious of President-worship, avoids the question of what that something more is. But David Bromwich's recent description of the President's new task as "to defend the law and vindicate justice" points towards one excellent answer.

A distinct role for Obama in an era of legislative deadlock: "defender of justice under law"

If the Right prefers presidents to define themselves through moral leadership and military assertion, the Left's systematic alternative might be the President as defender and executor of equal justice under law. Once this would have been a conservative notion; now, with plenty of outstanding laws on the books but a scarcity of will to take them seriously, it isn't. "One law for all" is at root a radical notion: in the face of radical differences in power one crucial good, justice, is to be distributed equally.

- By aggressively enforcing equal opportunity laws, Obama can please his strongest supporters—while vindicating a form of justice uncontroversial in theory but long deferred in practice.
- By strictly and very publicly enforcing of health, safety, and environmental laws, he can remind Americans, famously ideological conservatives but ideological liberals, that government can provide plenty of concrete protections that they want and benefit from—provided a Democrat's in charge.
- By enforcing laws of all kinds against powerful special interests trying to place themselves above the law, and against their Congressional allies doing their best to abet

that, Obama could tap into public anger against corporate self-dealing and corruption of government without having to resort to the explicit populism that so clearly makes him uncomfortable (and that Americans, as Ishmael Reed and others have pointed out, are probably not ready to hear from an African-American).

- And by defining himself overall as chief law-enforcer, Obama could provide moral and rhetorical heft to proposals, like that of the Center for American Progress, for achieving progressive goals through executive action.³

“Regulatory” or “administrative” governance—or even the making of “policy”—sounds wonky and meddlesome, in any case small-scale and unexciting. Law-enforcement sounds tough, and if one stresses the link between law and justice, even inspiring. There’s a reason the Right calls the health reform law “Obamacare”: that label makes it seem personal and partisan. That’s an equally good reason for Obama to call it by its proper name, the Affordable Care Act, and to—accurately—portray Republicans who would cut off funds for its rule-making processes as taking the side of insurance companies against the law of the land. One popular campaign t-shirt portrayed Obama ripping off his shirt to reveal Superman’s cape underneath. It’s not a bad role to aspire to: the White House as Hall of Justice.

There’s no guarantee that Obama will find the role of chief law-enforcer congenial. And even if he did, it would be by necessity one role among many. Presidents, whether they like it or not, must be party leaders, commanders-in-Chief, heads of state, chief diplomats, and legislative negotiators, in addition to whatever they really want to be. But one thing is guaranteed: Obama will not practice in the White House the kind of moral witness or attention to particular grievances that he would have been free to practice had he stayed in South Chicago. He won’t, because no one could.

Finally, everyone should try to recognize that the division of moral labor cuts both ways. When criticized by the Obama administration, activists and organizers have responded that their job is to keep politicians honest and responsive, not to fall into line for the sake of a unity imposed from the top. That’s absolutely right. But the converse is also the case. The President’s main job is neither to wage rhetorical warfare nor to further exclusively the interests of his strongest supporters (to the extent that they fail to track the broader interests of all who voted for him or the country as a whole).

The President must lead a party that the fissiparous opinions of the street and the blogosphere couldn’t possibly unite. He must govern a whole country in the interests of all citizens. And he must listen not only to the beliefs of activists, however deeply held and eloquently stated, but to the tacit wishes and preferences of those who pay little attention to politics. Above all, he must protect the rights and interests of millions too miserable and discouraged to follow what government does, but still in great need of what it provides.

³*The Power of the President: Recommendations to Advance Progressive Change*. Washington: Center for American Progress (compiled by Sarah Rosen Wartell), November 2010.
http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/11/pdf/executive_orders.pdf