# The “circularity” of hope: The Nation endorses Barack Obama

**Patrick Martin**
**15 February 2008**

In an editorial in its latest edition, dated February 25, the liberal magazine *The Nation* has given its endorsement to Senator Barack Obama in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The brief commentary makes no attempt to demonstrate that Obama’s political program represents a significant shift to the left by the Democratic Party, or even that he is more liberal than Hillary Clinton. Instead, the endorsement is based on the bare assertion that Obama has a better chance to win the presidential election and expand the Democratic majority in Congress.

*The Nation* editorial admits that Obama’s political record in the US Senate is anything but radical: “This magazine has been critical of the senator from Illinois for his closeness to Wall Street; his unwillingness to lay out an ambitious progressive agenda on healthcare, housing and other domestic policy issues; and for postpartisan rhetoric that seems to ignore the manifest failure of conservatism over these past seven years.”

This conventional right-wing orientation is offset, in the eyes of the magazine’s editors, by Obama’s exhibiting “a more humane and wise approach to foreign policy, opposing the Iraq War while Clinton voted for it...”

Even more important, *The Nation* says, is that Obama’s rhetoric about “unity ... embodies a savvy strategy to redefine the center of American politics and build a coalition by reaching out to independent and Republican voters disgruntled and disgusted with what the Bush era has wrought.” They conclude that the Obama campaign “represents the best chance to forge a new progressive majority.”

In the course of this brief declaration—only four paragraphs long—the editors endorse the article published the week before as the cover story of *The Nation*, headlined, “The Choice,” and written by Christopher Hayes, its Washington editor. This article makes a more extended argument for supporting Obama, one that demonstrates the intellectual and political poverty of the magazine that has long been the flagship of left liberalism.

The key argument in Hayes’s article—endorsed as well in *The Nation* editorial—is conveyed by its subtitle: “Why Obama is more likely than Clinton to bring about a new progressive majority.” This refers not to a majority of the American people, but to a majority in Congress that supposedly, in concert with a President Obama, would enact liberal legislation. The argument thus proceeds on entirely pragmatic grounds, based not on Obama’s political program, principles, biography or character, but on his perceived potential to be a successful candidate in the 2008 elections.

In examining Hayes’s arguments, it should be pointed out first of all that he discusses all political issues at the most superficial level—what the candidates think, advocate and do—without any examination of the underlying social forces that condition and ultimately determine the outcome of the political process.

His political universe is limited entirely to the existing two-party system and its political personnel. Hayes conducts a search for the most desirable political alternative within that narrow space, which extends approximately, by any objective estimation, from ultra-conservative to moderately conservative.

*The Nation* shares this political straitjacket. Last fall, the magazine devoted an entire issue to the 2008 presidential campaign. The publication consisted of eight articles, written by eight contributing editors and correspondents, each serving as the advocate of one of the eight candidates then seeking the Democratic presidential nomination. The message was clear: outside of the Democratic Party there is and can be nothing.

That the vast majority of the American people, the working class, are represented by neither party; that there is a political vacuum on the left of historic dimensions; that the deepening social and economic crisis of American capitalism is creating conditions for the development of a mass social movement that must break with the existing political order and take on a radical political dimension: all this is a closed book to *The Nation*. Or rather it is a prospect that fills them with such dread that they seek to suppress it.

In his article of February 18, Hayes admits that he and many others in “the left of the Democratic Party,” as he defines the milieu, had great illusions in Obama when he first entered the US Senate in 2004. Referring to liberal circles in Chicago, he writes, “We thought we’d elected our own Paul Wellstone” (the late populist senator from Minnesota who died in an election-eve plane crash in 2002.)

“That’s not, alas, how things turned out,” Hayes admits. Obama “shaded himself toward the center. His rhetoric was cool, often timid ... His record places him squarely in the middle of Democratic senators.” As a presidential candidate, his program on domestic issues “has been very close to that of his chief rivals, though sometimes, notably on healthcare, marginally less progressive.”

This doesn’t deter Mr. Hayes. On the contrary, he declares, “while domestic policy will ultimately be determined through a complicated and fraught interplay with legislators, foreign policy is where the President’s agenda is implemented more or less unfettered. It’s here where distinctions in worldview matter most—and where Obama compares most favorably to Clinton.”

The pigheaded ignorance of this statement is astonishing. It would be far more correct to say that while domestic policy is an area in which corporate America is occasionally compelled to be flexible, taking into consideration a complex array of countervailing pressures, foreign policy is the area where the interests of the ruling elite operate

© World Socialist Web Site

"more or less unfettered."

Hayes would have us believe that the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were simply the product of the minds of George W. Bush and Richard Cheney, although they were endorsed in advance by the principal leaders of the Democratic Party, and funded for years by bipartisan congressional votes, with the support of the two finalists for the Democratic party's presidential nomination, Obama and Clinton.

No serious struggle can be waged against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the basis of such illusions. These wars are the product, not of individual decisions of presidents and generals, but of the drive by the American financial aristocracy to seize control of the most strategically critical region on the planet, the oil-rich territories of the Middle East and Central Asia.

A President Obama, whatever his antiwar rhetoric today, would find himself confronted by the same strategic imperatives that now face President Bush: American imperialism cannot withdraw from the Middle East and cede regional domination to Iran or allow other major powers—Russia, China, Japan, the European Union—to displace the United States.

The principal difference between Obama and Bush is of a tactical, not a principled, character. It is not over whether the United States must maintain access to oil and control of strategic territory, but over what methods should be used. Obama advocates a greater emphasis on diplomacy, economic penetration, covert action and political subversion, in combination with military force.

Hayes's article goes on to discuss Obama's strategy in the election, and in the course of this makes his most revealing declaration. Attributing the following political assessment to Obama, and then endorsing it, Hayes writes:

"... the reason progressives have failed to achieve our goals over the past several decades is not that we didn't fight hard enough but that we didn't have a popular mandate. In other words, the fundamental obstacle is a basic political one: never having the public squarely on our side and never having the votes on the Hill. In this respect the Obama campaign is uniquely circular: his political appeal is rooted in the fact that he's so politically appealing."

The first half of this argument is typical of the once-radical sections of the American upper middle class who constitute the main readership of *The Nation*, and from among whom the magazine's personnel and contributors are drawn. They blame the failure of liberalism on the essential conservatism of the American population, i.e., of the working class. And they cite, as proof of this supposed conservatism, the success of the Republican Party in presidential elections and its control of Congress from 1994 to 2006.

In reality, the dominance of the ultra-right in official American politics is largely due to the prostration and rightward drift of what passes for liberalism. The Democratic Party abandoned any association with significant social reform, to say nothing of redistribution of the wealth, as long ago as the presidency of Jimmy Carter more than 30 years ago.

Bill Clinton first came to prominence as a spokesman for the Democratic Leadership Council, which advocated the adaptation of the Democratic Party to Reaganism, and then governed, from 1994 on, in collaboration with a Congress dominated by the Republican right. As Clinton himself admitted, his policies were dictated by the bond market, not by the needs of working people.

The rot and political decay of liberalism was further demonstrated in its impotent response to the attempted political coup against Clinton, through the series of manufactured scandals that led to impeachment, and then in the collapse of November-December 2000, when the Democratic Party and the liberal establishment as a whole stood by while the presidential election was hijacked by a 5-4 majority of the Supreme Court, and Bush installed in the White House.

The second half of Hayes's argument is its political heart: "the Obama campaign is uniquely circular: his political appeal is rooted in the fact that he's so politically appealing."

This statement deserves to be engraved on stone tablets as a monument to political opportunism and worshipping of the accomplished fact. Obama's campaign appeals to Mr. Hayes, not so much because of the policies Obama advocates, but because—finally, at long last!—a Democratic candidate has discovered how to be successful in electoral politics. Hayes waxes enthusiastic about the crowds at rallies, the attendance at caucuses, the increased voter turnout, even the massive fundraising (much of it from the Internet, but much of it also from traditional corporate sources).

This argument is only a slightly more convoluted version of the cynical maxim that "nothing succeeds like success." If Hillary Clinton and not Obama were drawing the popular attention, Hayes and *The Nation* would be rallying just as quickly to her side, notwithstanding their criticism of her past support for the launching of the war in Iraq. It is noteworthy, in that respect, that the editors only made up their minds to come out for Obama after he had surged into the lead in popular vote totals and delegate count.

And finally, after saluting Obama's campaign and the prospect of expanded Democratic majorities in Congress, Hayes concludes that there's really no guarantee that any change will take place as the result. "Whoever is elected in November, progressives will probably find themselves feeling frustrated," he writes. "Ultimately though, the future judgments and actions of the candidates are unknowable, obscured behind time's cloak."

Hayes even claims it was impossible to know that the "George W. Bush of 2000, an amiable 'centrist' whose thin foreign-policy views shaded towards isolationism, would go on to become a self-justifying delusional and messianic instrument of global war".

In other words, politics is not a science, it's just a guessing game to be played by political dilettantes from the upper middle classes for whom the outcome is not all that serious. In the circles in which the writers of *The Nation* move, there are very few who have lost sons, brothers or fathers in Iraq or Afghanistan, who face layoffs, foreclosures or bankruptcies, who fear deportation or arbitrary arrest.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party entirely reject such political complacency. In the final analysis, it is only a screen for prostration before the supposedly invincible ultra-right. The struggle against war and social reaction requires, first and foremost, a break with liberalism and the straitjacket of the Democratic Party. The working class must build its own political party, based on a socialist program, and seeking to unite working people on an international basis against imperialism and war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**


© World Socialist Web Site