

The Nation and the Obama campaign

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The “special convention issue” of the *Nation* magazine features a lengthy article entitled “Progressives in the Obama Moment,” which seeks to make the case for those opposed to war and the reactionary policies of the Bush administration to rally behind the campaign of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

The authors of the article engage in verbal contortions in an attempt to square the notion that Obama represents a progressive, anti-war impulse of far-reaching dimensions (“The Obama nomination sets the stage for a sea-change election”) with the plain fact that his actual policies are of a thoroughly conventional character and are well within the confines of the right-wing consensus of American bourgeois politics.

The result is a piece laden with internal contradictions and non sequiturs. It exemplifies the combination of self-delusion, cynicism and deceit that is characteristic of the *Nation* and the milieu of left-liberals and ex-radicals who cling to the Democratic Party and concentrate their efforts on keeping social discontent within the safe political channels of the two-party system.

The article, by Robert L. Borosage and Katrina vanden Heuvel, has two essential aims. The first is to quell growing disillusionment with Obama among many initial supporters of his campaign, including readers of the *Nation*, and secure his victory in the November election. The second is to define in advance the legitimate parameters of social opposition and protest that will emerge under an Obama administration.

The authors all but acknowledge that in his campaign, Obama has not advanced an agenda that departs in any significant way from previous administrations—Republican and Democratic—which, they say, were guided by “conservative ideas that have dominated our politics for three decades.”

They try to argue that despite this, an Obama administration will be far more subject to the pressure of so-called progressives, like the *Nation*, to repudiate the right-wing policies of the past and embrace a socially progressive and anti-militarist agenda.

Obama, they say, will be “limited by the constricted consensus of an establishment not yet able to contemplate the changes needed to set this country right again. To be successful, his presidency will have to be bolder and more radical than now imagined.

“A historic candidate, the forbidding conditions and the constricted consensus make it vital that progressives think clearly and act independently in forging a strategy over the next months.”

Why exactly Obama is a “historic candidate” they fail to explain, except by implying—through a fleeting reference to Martin Luther King Jr.—that it is because he is an African-American.

They quickly acknowledge that “many on the left” have been “dismayed” by Obama’s “compromises and backsliding.” But, they add, “Much of the alleged retrenchment has been exaggerated,” attributing this “exaggeration” to the influence of Republican strategists over the media.

Exaggeration? Really?

The record shows that within days of securing the nomination, the Obama campaign began its march to the right.

* Obama’s first major move was the appointment of Jason Furman, a Wall Street insider known for his pro-market views, as economic policy director.

* This was followed by his denunciation of the Supreme Court decision outlawing the execution of people convicted of child rape, and his nod to the pro-gun lobby regarding the court’s decision to strike down Washington, DC’s gun control law.

* In late June and July he embarked on a “Patriotism Tour” to identify his campaign with US militarism, while continuing to back away from his primary campaign pledge to withdraw US combat forces from Iraq based on a definite timetable.

* This was followed by a pledge to substantially expand the Bush administration’s program providing federal funding to so-called “faith-based” service organizations.

* On July 10, Obama voted in the Senate to expand warrantless wiretapping and provide immunity to telecommunications companies that facilitated the White House’s illegal domestic spying operation.

* During his tour of Iraq, Afghanistan and Europe, Obama made clear that his call for withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq was linked to his proposal to dispatch as many as 10,000 troops to Afghanistan to escalate the war and even expand it into Pakistan. At the same time, he praised the results of Bush’s “surge” and made clear that he would leave sufficient US troops in Iraq to maintain a long-term occupation of the country.

* Most recently, Obama joined with Bush and Republican presidential candidate John McCain in threatening Russia and calling for retribution for its intervention against the US client regime in Georgia. He has supported Bush’s military provocations, including the establishment of a permanent US military presence in Poland.

* Finally, in a move made after the publication of the *Nation* article, Obama chose Joseph Biden, a long-time fixture in the US Senate and early supporter of the Iraq war, as his running mate.

Notwithstanding these facts, the *Nation* insists, “These concerns should not distract us from the central reality: this election features a stark ideological contrast.”

Apart from their assertion, which is false, that Obama will end the occupation of Iraq, the authors make no attempt to substantiate their claim that Obama represents a “stark ideological contrast” with McCain.

In fact, they virtually acknowledge just the opposite.

They write: “On national security both candidates have pledged to increase the size of the military, adding billions to a bloated budget that already represents nearly half the world’s military spending. Both assume America’s role as globocop; neither suggests unraveling the US empire of military bases. Both seem intent on deepening the occupation of Afghanistan. Neither has dared to embrace the conservative RAND Corporation’s conclusion that the very notion of a ‘war on terror’ is counterproductive, and that aggressive intelligence and police cooperation

should be the centerpiece of our strategy.”

So much for the “stark ideological contrast” on foreign policy.

What about domestic issues?

“Obama,” they continue, “has called for a second stimulus plan focused on new energy and rebuilding America, but he hasn’t suggested anything like the major public initiatives—the combination of public investment, revised global economic strategy, industrial policy and financial regulation—that would be essential to get the real economy moving again while responding to the threat of catastrophic climate change.

“Obama has made affordable healthcare for all a centerpiece of his agenda, but he has not addressed the unraveling of the private social contract once delivered through corporations and unions... [He] laid out promising principles for financial reform in his Cooper Union speech in March, but he hasn’t challenged the Wall Street bailout, nor has he mobilized support for policing the shadow banking system that has proved so destructive in its greed.

“Obama defends liberal social reforms, but a serious war on poverty—or an initiative to transform our brutal criminal system of injustice that is devastating the lives of young minority men—is not yet on the agenda.”

This entirely conventional and conservative agenda can hardly be characterized as a “stark ideological contrast” with the right-wing social policies of his opponent.

The authors fare no better on the question of democratic rights. “And while Obama is a former professor of constitutional law,” they write, “he hasn’t called for dismantling the imperial presidency.”

The Democratic candidate “may not be a ‘movement’ progressive,” Borosage and vanden Heuvel admit, “and he may have disappointed activists with his recent compromises,” but, they insist: “[M]ake no mistake: his election will open a new era of reform, the scope of which will depend—as Obama often says—on independent progressive mobilization to keep the pressure on and overcome entrenched interests.”

Despite everything, they insist, Obama is at heart either a genuine progressive or a politician who can, through public pressure, be transformed into a progressive. Those opposed to war and social reaction have to win the battle for his soul and counter the influence of “the entrenched power of the established order,” consisting of “aggressive lobbies—the military-industrial complex, Wall Street, corporate interests.”

By implication, Obama—a multi-millionaire and veteran of the Democratic political machine in Chicago—is in some mysterious way separate from this “entrenched power.”

Rejecting any class analysis of the Democratic candidate and his party, the *Nation* presents him as some kind of disembodied force, floating above class interests and at least potentially free of political and economic entanglements. He may surround himself with Wall Street advisors and Washington insiders and rely on hundreds of millions in corporate cash for his campaign, but somehow, through popular pressure, he can be forced to wage battle against this established order.

One particularly glaring example of the double-talk that permeates the article is the following contradiction: At one point, when they are seeking to rally the wavering to fight for an Obama victory, the authors assert that the election could produce “increased reform majorities in both houses of Congress.” But later, when they are laying down the parameters of legitimate “progressive” political action under an Obama presidency, they write that “while Democrats are likely to enjoy larger majorities in both houses, their caucuses are likely to be less progressive as they pick up seats in very conservative, formerly Republican districts.”

The latter point—a shamefaced admission of the rightward trajectory of the Democratic Party as a whole—is intended to buttress their call for the development of a movement “independent of the administration or the Democratic leadership in Congress” to overcome the constraints of the establishment, which will try to block Obama from implementing his “reform agenda.”

“Progressives will enjoy their greatest strength,” they continue, “mobilizing independently to support Obama’s promises. We can organize constituent pressure on politicians who are blocking the way, something even a president with Obama’s activist network would be loath to do. We can expose the lobbies and interests and backstage maneuvers designed to limit reforms.”

Leaving aside the fact that they have already virtually conceded the emptiness of Obama’s promises, the prospect of so-called “progressive” struggle they outline is worth considering.

The coalition they hope to build will include “progressives in the Senate and House, many grouped around the Progressive Caucus.” Also listed are the AFL-CIO and Change to Win union federations and a host of pressure groups and think tanks attached to the Democratic Party.

In other words, their “independent” movement will incorporate large sections of the Democratic Party and remain entirely within the party’s political orbit.

The *Nation* is no more able to explain how such a movement represents an alternative to the “entrenched order” than they are able to establish Obama’s reformist credentials. Both in their support for Obama and their insistence that all social opposition after the election remain oriented to the Democratic Party, the *Nation* reveals itself to be a critical prop for precisely the reactionary order they claim to oppose. They themselves are simply its “left” flank.

Of course, the political milieu for which the *Nation* speaks has a direct and personal stake in the outcome of the election. They count on the arrival of a Democratic administration as an opportunity for many in their ranks to secure choice positions and enhanced status within the apparatus of power in Washington DC, whether as congressional staffers, trade union functionaries or researchers at Democratic-linked think tanks in the capital.

In the end, after all the verbal contortions and mumbo jumbo, their argument, stripped down to its essentials, is that Obama is the spearhead of a progressive reform agenda because—he is a Democrat, with the added filip that he is black.

What is the essential political agenda of the *Nation*? It is to prevent, at all costs, the emergence of a mass movement of social opposition that breaks out of the deadly grip of the Democratic Party and the two-party system. They see their role as blocking and delegitimizing in advance the emergence of a genuinely politically independent movement of the working class against the capitalist system.



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