

The liberals' lament: What's wrong with Obama?

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The first week of March has seen a number of commentaries in the American media, mainly from liberal pundits, worrying over the declining public standing of President Obama and the growing signs of disarray in the Democratic Party.

Typical is the column in Sunday's *New York Times* by Frank Rich, who writes that the problem facing Obama is that "there is no consistent, clear message to unite all that he is trying to do."

"Obama needs to articulate a substantive belief system that's built from his bedrock convictions," Rich advises. "That he hasn't done so can be attributed to his ingrained distrust of appearing partisan or, worse, a knee-jerk 'liberal.'"

Similar laments have come from the *Times*' economic columnist Paul Krugman, E. J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* and other commentators who have deplored the failure of the administration to rally popular support. Dionne warned last month that if Obama and the Democrats continued on the current path, "they'll be washed out by a tidal wave" in the November congressional elections.

The underlying premise of this opinionating is that Obama heads a progressive administration that suffers from a "communication problem" and is somehow unable to explain the benefits of its policies to the American public.

Obama does not, however, suffer from a failure to communicate. He heads a right-wing, big business administration whose policies and performance are rapidly dispelling the popular illusions that accompanied his runaway election victory only 16 months ago.

Working people have seen the bailout of Wall Street and the continuing slide in jobs and living standards. They understand that when the administration speaks of

cutting health care costs, it will be the elderly and the lower-paid who will pay the price. They have heard Obama praise the firing of public school teachers in Rhode Island, while not a banker or speculator has been held accountable for the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.

They have seen Obama continue the Bush administration's assault on democratic rights, including military tribunals, indefinite detention without trial, rendition and assassination—the full panoply of the Bush "war on terror." Sunday's *New York Times* carried a full-page ad from the American Civil Liberties Union, appropriately showing the face of Obama morphing into that of Bush.

In foreign policy, the public has seen Obama, who postured as an opponent of war when a candidate, don the mantle of commander-in-chief with a vengeance, escalating the war in Afghanistan with the dispatch of 30,000 additional US troops and a doubling of missile strikes into Pakistan, and continuing the US occupation of Iraq, with nearly 90,000 troops still in that country, 14 months after Obama's inauguration.

Such a record can be defended as "progressive" only on the basis of the complacent perspective of upper-middle-class liberals who are indifferent to the colossal impact of the economic crisis on working people and bloody destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan.

They see Obama through the rosy prism of the rise in their stock market portfolios. This week marks the anniversary of the stock market bottom, and the 4,000-point rise in the Dow Jones Industrial Average since then is proof enough to this privileged layer that the Obama administration's policies have "worked."

The inversion of reality is particularly apparent on the health care question, where the liberal pundits suggest that the Obama administration is on the brink of

engineering a great social advance, like Social Security in the 1930s and Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s. At the same time, they are forced to admit that the bills adopted by the Senate and House are deeply unpopular, and that the Democrats are likely to pay a price in the November congressional vote.

The liberals don't ask the obvious question: if the health care reform plan is a progressive reform that will benefit the American people, why do its right-wing opponents, like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell on Sunday, vow to turn every House and Senate campaign this year into a referendum on Obamacare?

Roosevelt did not pay a price at the polls for the passage of the Social Security Act. On the contrary, the bill was enormously popular and the program that it established led to a significant improvement in the living conditions of millions of elderly people. Medicare and Medicaid won similar public support, and remain the only enduring social reform enacted in the 1960s, guaranteeing the elderly access to decent medical care for more than a generation.

If the Obama health care plan is unpopular, it is not because of the White House's failure to communicate, or the ravings about "death panels" and "socialized medicine" from the Republican right. It is because the American public has seen through the rather threadbare rhetorical fig leaf of "reform," and correctly identified the essential purpose of the legislation as cost-cutting, with the working class and the elderly to pay the price.

Within the straitjacket of the US two-party system, the only alternative to the right-wing, anti-working-class policies of the Democratic Party is the even more right-wing policies of the Republicans. That is why the central task facing all working people and youth who want to oppose the policies of social reaction and war, advocated by both big business parties, is the building of an independent mass political movement from below.

This political movement must be based on a socialist and internationalist program, rejecting American imperialist domination of the globe and capitalist domination of America. All working people and youth who want to take this road of independent political struggle should make plans to attend the Emergency Conference on the Social Crisis and War, called by the Socialist Equality Party, to be held April 17-18 in Ann

Arbor, Michigan. (For information on the conference and to register, click [here](#).)

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