

Frank Rich on Obama: Liberal fears and illusions

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In a column published Sunday (“Don’t Get Mad, Mr. President. Get Even”), *New York Times* commentator Frank Rich expresses the mounting frustration and concern of Obama’s liberal supporters over the president’s response to the BP oil spill. Obama’s extraordinary deference to BP, his inability to articulate in any way the anger of millions of Americans, has, warns Rich, raised “serious doubts about his leadership.”

The column is significant, not for any insights it provides into the crisis of the Obama administration, but rather as an indication of the sense within the left-liberal constituency of the Democratic Party that the public mood is shifting against the White House. Among American pundits, Rich is one of the most prominent torch-bearers for Obama. He has written dozens of columns denouncing the right-wing policies of the Republican Party and extolling the supposedly progressive character of the Obama administration.

This political layer fears the growth of public disillusionment and anger toward the administration and Obama’s inability to respond. What is particularly striking about Rich’s column is the degree to which it is addressed directly to Obama, rather than to the public. Rich is offering advice in an attempt to save the administration.

In the process, Rich reveals his own perplexity and the intellectual and political impoverishment of his outlook and that of American liberalism in general. He is unable to understand or explain why Obama is not behaving as he thinks he should.

Rich acknowledges that Obama’s prostration before the oil giant is not an aberration. “But the credulous attitude toward BP is no anomaly for the administration,” he writes. “Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs was praised by the president as a

‘savvy’ businessman two months before the Securities and Exchange Commission sued Goldman.”

He goes on to draw out the parallel between Wall Street’s crashing of the financial system and BP’s poisoning of the Gulf. He notes: “BP’s reliance on bought-off politicians and lax, industry-captured regulators at the MMS mirrors Wall Street’s cozy relationship with its indulgent overseers at the SEC, Federal Reserve and New York Fed.” He fails to mention that Obama appointed the president of the New York Fed as his treasury secretary and nominated the Fed chairman for a second term.

Indeed, Rich avoids drawing any conclusions as to what Obama’s role says about the objective social and class character of his administration. Instead, he attributes Obama’s political difficulties to unfortunate character traits, a flawed management style, bad advisers and a failure to present a convincing “narrative” of the oil spill to the public.

In essence, Rich wants Obama to do a better job of convincing the American people that he is on their side and opposed to BP. He does not propose any concrete policies to deal with the Gulf disaster and evades the issue of private ownership of BP and the rest of the oil industry.

The basic premise of his piece is that—despite the facts Rich himself acknowledges—Obama is at heart a progressive reformer and his government is, potentially at least, a progressive reform administration. “It’s this misplaced trust in elites both outside the White House and within it that seems to prevent Obama from realizing the moment that history has handed him,” Rich writes.

Obama is part of the “elite.” He is doing today—in regard to the oil spill as well as the bank bailout, the restructuring of the auto industry, health care “reform,”

the assault on teachers and public education, and the demand for cuts in basic social programs—precisely what he was groomed to do by corporate backers from the start of his political career in Chicago.

His entire administration has been single-mindedly devoted to protecting the wealth of the financial elite, while he has refused to take any serious measures to provide jobs or relief for millions falling into poverty and social desperation.

Obama is striving to carry out his role as the chief political representative of the American ruling class. Rich evades these class issues as well as any consideration of the economic structure of American society.

He concludes his piece by invoking the example of Theodore Roosevelt as a model for Obama in dealing with the oil spill. “If Obama is to have a truly transformative presidency,” he writes, “there could be no better catalyst than oil. Standard Oil jump-started Progressive Era trust-busting...

“This all adds up to a Teddy Roosevelt pivot point for Obama. ... If he is to wield the big stick of reform against BP and the other powerful interests that have ripped us off, he will have to tell the big story with no holds barred.”

Here Rich evokes an image of American liberalism as the moving force for social progress that is more myth than historical fact. The major social reforms in the US were the result of the struggles of the working class against the most bitter and violent resistance of the bourgeoisie. The predominant role of liberalism was to hold back these struggles and block them from assuming revolutionary forms. In the first two-thirds of the last century, the major means for doing this was the implementation of limited social reforms and concessions to the working class. But over the past 40 years, there have been no such reforms.

The invocation of Roosevelt ignores the vast differences historically between that period and today. Roosevelt’s trust-busting occurred in the midst of immense working class struggles and the growing influence of socialist and revolutionary tendencies within the working class. Eugene Debs won 1 million votes as the Socialist Party candidate for US president in 1912, one year after the antitrust suit brought by the federal Department of Justice was upheld by the US Supreme Court, forcing the breakup of Standard Oil.

Rich, who has written numerous columns warning against the growth of social opposition from the working class, has no desire for a return to such conditions.

The political domination of big business and Wall Street has grown far beyond even what it was in the heyday of the robber barons, along with a staggering growth of social inequality.

Moreover, the middle-class intelligentsia at the turn of the 20th century was far more oriented to the working class and sympathetic to socialist and revolutionary ideas than its counterpart today. Within radical and even certain liberal circles it was taken for granted a century ago that social justice, equality and genuine democracy were incompatible with capitalism.

Via a long historical process since then the political and moral makeup of the middle-class intelligentsia has undergone a profound change—overwhelmingly for the worse.

The embrace by most of the American liberal intelligentsia of anti-communism after World War II, which signified its lining up behind the hegemonic aims of American imperialism, did immense damage to the political life of the country and irrevocably compromised American liberalism.

Over the past three decades, substantial sections of American liberals have seen their incomes rise as a result of the reactionary, anti-working class policies of Reagan and his successors, including Obama. As a result, their political views have shifted further to the right, with the open embrace of “free market” nostrums and repudiation of any social reform program.

Rich is very much an expression of this process. He is an example of contemporary American liberalism, fixated on questions of identity and life-style, indifferent to the fate of the working class. The intellectual and political impotence of his analysis, and its elements of cover-up and evasion, are an expression of the bankruptcy of liberal thought as a whole.



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