

Wishing and hoping for Franklin D. Obama

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In a series of commentaries published over the past week, liberal media pundits have suggested that two recent speeches by President Obama signal a turn to the left and an embrace of the social reform policies of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.

In his column September 9, *Washington Post* writer E.J. Dionne claimed that Obama's speeches on Labor Day in Milwaukee and two days later in suburban Cleveland represented a significant turning point in the fall election campaign. "President Obama decided this week to raise the stakes in this fall's election by making the choice about something instead of nothing but anger," Dionne wrote.

The columnist faulted Obama for failing to advance a comprehensive or coherent explanation of his administration's policies, leaving the field to his right-wing opponents. "In the absence of a coherent case, Republicans were winning by default on a wave of protest votes. Without this new effort at self-definition, Obama was a blur: a socialist to conservatives, a sellout to some progressives, and a disappointment to younger Americans who wondered what happened to the ebullient, hopeful guy they voted for. That's why the Milwaukee-Cleveland one-two punch mattered."

Dionne claimed that the Ohio speech, in particular, made a case for social spending by the federal government to alleviate the impact of the economic crisis, "highlighting programs Americans believe in, as an antidote to empty and abstract anti-government rhetoric." He continued, "Suddenly, there's a point to this election. Obama is late to this game, but at least he's finally playing it."

In the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, columnist Frank Rich, a frequent hand-wringing critic of Obama's capitulation to the Republican right, likewise professed to find new hope in the president's speeches in Wisconsin and Ohio. "On Labor Day, the fighting Obama abruptly re-emerged," he claimed. "Speaking to workers in Milwaukee, the president finally started giving voice to the anger of America's battered middle class."

Rich conceded that Obama's policies—the Wall Street bailout, a healthcare reform bill driven by corporate interests, a financial regulation package devised in closed-door meetings with the bankers—have had little appeal to

working people. He cited a recent opinion poll question on whether the president "understands the problems of people like you," writing, "There his numbers really have imploded. When he arrived in office, 72 percent answered Yes and 24 percent No. As of last week, Yes had fallen to 50 and No had doubled to 48."

Rich endorsed the more aggressive, anti-Republican tone of Obama's Milwaukee and Cleveland speeches, but appealed for a broader offensive against the corporate interests aligned with the Republicans. He argued that "the obvious political model for Obama this year is Franklin Roosevelt, who at his legendary 1936 Madison Square Garden rally declared that he welcomed the 'hatred' of his enemies in the realms of 'business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering.'"

At this point, Rich, who knows something of history, was compelled to state that Roosevelt's goal in 1936, and throughout the Depression, was to save American capitalism, even if that required stepping on the toes of a few capitalists. He cited an excellent account of that period, *Freedom from Fear* by historian David Kennedy, to that effect. Kennedy described Roosevelt's anti-business rhetoric as "a carefully staged political performance, an attack not on the capitalist system itself but on a few high-profile capitalists."

Rich continued: "Roosevelt was trying to co-opt the populist rage of his economically despondent era, some of it uncannily Tea Party-esque in its hysteria, before it threatened that system, let alone his presidency." The *Times* columnist is clearly concerned that Obama has too closely aligned himself with Wall Street, and that he must establish some distance, with the aid of a few rhetorical flourishes, in order to save capitalism today.

"The best the Democrats can hope for in 2010 is smaller-than-expected losses," Rich concluded. "To achieve even that, Obama will have to give an FDR-size performance—which he can do credibly and forcibly only if he really means it. So far, his administration's seeming coziness with some of the same powerful interests now vilifying him has left middle-class voters, including

Democrats suffering that enthusiasm gap, confused as to which side he is on. If ever there was a time for him to clear up the ambiguity, this is it.”

While the more mainstream pundits were cautious in their optimism and chided the president for not going far enough, the left-liberals in such publications as *Mother Jones* and the *Nation* were unrestrained in their cheerleading for the White House.

Kevin Drum, in *Mother Jones*, gushed about Obama’s Labor Day speech in Milwaukee in a column headlined, “Obama’s FDR Moment.” He admitted, “Sure, he’s delivered some of these lines before. And they’re sort of corny. But I like it anyway. It sounds very FDR-esque to me: a full-throated attack on the opposition party and on corporate interests, but delivered with wit and humor. More like this, please.”

The editors of the *Nation* hailed Obama’s two speeches, declaring the president “got the rhetoric and focus right Labor Day, bringing thousands of Milwaukee workers to their feet with a promise to invest \$50 billion” in infrastructure—an amount that would employ a tiny fraction of the millions of unemployed. The editorial continued: “He got it even more right a few days later, with a blunt rejection of calls to keep Bush’s tax breaks for the rich. But he can’t stop now. Obama must be much bolder if he hopes to take charge of the central election debate.”

The very notion that a few speeches can change the course of an administration is fatuous in the extreme. It evinces a combination of naiveté and unseriousness that testifies to the intellectual poverty of Obama’s cheerleaders. This is a government that has spent nearly two years waging war on working people on behalf of Wall Street and corporate America.

What unites all strands of liberal illusion-making, both establishment and “left,” is the claim that Obama is at heart a progressive Rooseveltian, stymied from carrying out his program by the pressure of the right-wing of the Democratic Party or by undue concern for the reaction of the financial markets or the media. This distorts both Obama’s own political views and the history of the New Deal—which enacted reforms only under the pressure of a mass insurgent movement of the working class.

None of his liberal apologists seriously explores the actual content of Obama’s speeches, which were thoroughly reactionary, despite their demagoguery directed against the Republican opposition. Obama himself mentioned FDR only once in his two speeches—while making an equally favorable reference to right-wing Republican icon Ronald Reagan, saying Reagan was “willing to help save Social Security for future generations—working with Democrats.”

This reference is an ominous one, since Reagan worked

with Democrats like House Speaker Tip O’Neill to raise the Social Security retirement age and cut benefits. Obama is proposing something far more sweeping and reactionary through his appointment of a bipartisan deficit-reduction commission to report back—after the November election—with plans to slash Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Despite considerable demagoguery in the two speeches about the Republicans wanting to extend tax cuts for millionaires, Obama was preaching the “free market” capitalist gospel, touting his ideal of “an America where a rising tide really did lift all boats, from the company CEO to the guy on the assembly line.”

He categorically rejected any significant government role in economic life. “I’ve never believed that government’s role is to create jobs or prosperity,” he declared. “I believe it’s the drive and the ingenuity of our entrepreneurs, our small businesses; the skill and dedication of our workers that’s made us the wealthiest nation on Earth. I believe it’s the private sector that must be the main engine for our recovery.”

More important than Obama’s own political conservatism, however, are the economic conditions under which he came to office. When Roosevelt came to office, in the midst of the Great Depression, American capitalism was still the strongest in the world, and this accumulated wealth made possible certain reformist experiments. Obama entered the White House in the midst of a global economic crisis triggered by the long-term economic decline of American capitalism, now the biggest debtor in the world.

As the Socialist Equality Party explains in its recently adopted party program (See “The Breakdown of Capitalism and the fight for Socialism in the United States”), “The protracted economic decay of American capitalism is, in the final analysis, the principal cause of the assault on the living standards and social conditions of the working class... Today, the Obama administration has no ‘New Deal’ to offer. The ‘Yes We Can’ demagoguery of the campaign trail has become the ‘No We Can’t’ reality of his presidency.”

Given those conditions, the attempts by the left-liberals to portray Obama as a potential Roosevelt are not merely self-deluding, but deeply reactionary.



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