

Frank Rich on the “mystery” of Obama

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New York Times columnist Frank Rich on Sunday published a bitter critique of President Obama’s Oval Office speech last week announcing the supposed end of US combat operations in Iraq. The piece is the latest in a series of columns by Rich reflecting the growing dismay and disappointment with Obama within the left-liberal constituency of the Democratic Party.

Obama’s speech was a full-throated endorsement of the Iraq war. Its reactionary content was summed up in the president’s glorification of the American military as “the steel in our ship of state.”

Rich is often quite perceptive in his observations about American political life. Perhaps reflecting his previous role as the *Times*’ theater critic, he brings to bear a certain sensitivity that is generally lacking in the other *Times* columnists. In Sunday’s column he takes Obama to task for trivializing the war and its associated crimes and downplaying their impact on American society.

“What was grievously missing from Obama’s address was any feeling for what has happened to our country during the seven-and-a-half-year war whose ‘end’ he was marking,” Rich writes. He derides Obama’s “tidy homilies about the war’s impact... as if all those bygones were now bygones and all the toxins unleashed by this fiasco had miraculously evaporated once we drew down to 50,000 theoretically non-combat troops.”

He cites the more than 4,400 Americans and “some 100,000 Iraqis (a conservative estimate)” who have been killed, the 32,000 Americans wounded, the over 2 million Iraqis driven into exile, the use of torture, and the \$750 billion in US taxpayer money squandered in the criminal enterprise.

He suggests that Obama is complicit with the Pentagon in “the whitewashing of our recent history.” Of the political legacy of the war, he says, “The other American casualties of Iraq include the credibility of both political parties, neither of which strenuously questioned the rush to war and both of which are still haunted by that failure, and of the news media, which barely challenged the

White House’s propaganda about Saddam’s imminent mushroom clouds. Many pundits, quite a few of them liberals, stoked the war fever as well.”

To his credit, Rich was not among those liberal pundits who promoted the war. But he diplomatically fails to mention in his column that his newspaper, the *New York Times*, and many of its leading reporters and commentators were.

Rich’s critique struck a nerve with many readers. Letters poured into the *Times* web site, some deeply emotional, reflecting disillusionment, anger and, to some extent, despair over the results of Obama’s election.

Joe, from Ann Arbor, Michigan, begins his comment as follows: “I am a 35-year-old man who had an interesting set of perspective shifts from 2001-2002. I started 2001 a Republican; I ended 2002 a vocal anti-Bush anti-war Democrat. And now I’m not sure I even want to be an American anymore. I speak for many of my friends.”

He speaks of the transition from the “disgusting crimes of the Bush years” to the “Dems’ despicable capitulation to corporations,” where “a ‘liberal’ president convenes secret meetings to dismantle the last shred of fairness in American society, Social Security.” He concludes that America can no longer satisfy his wish to live “in a humane place where democracy still means something.”

Another contributor writes, “Obama’s whitewashing of Iraq—a war he himself said he would have voted against—further erodes his credibility for many of us who proudly call ourselves liberals.” Still another says, “I am terribly disappointed. America needed a great president after eight miserable years. I thought we had gotten lucky with Obama. Boy, was I wrong.”

Judy from Chicago writes: “Like so many, I worked hard to ensure that our president was elected. I even took a six-week unpaid break from my jobs to work exclusively for the Obama campaign. I was so hopeful... like so many others, I believed that Obama could begin to heal us and get us back to the America we love and were proud of. He has not done so and, honestly, I can’t understand why.”

Rich's column and perhaps even more the letters it evoked reflect the extent to which the illusions that attended Obama's election have been shattered.

Rich is too perceptive a drama critic not to know that great crimes cannot simply be white-washed away. But he is far better at describing events than explaining them. As with most of his commentaries, his argument in last Sunday's column ends where it should begin. When he attempts to account for Obama's cover-up and complicity in war crimes, he lapses into banality.

In the most revealing line in his column, Rich writes, "It's a mystery why a candidate so attuned to the nation's pulse, most especially on the matter of war, has grown so tone deaf in office."

No, it is not a mystery. It appears mysterious only if one ignores the class character, history and record of the Democratic Party and the multiple signs that that the entire Obama campaign was an exercise in fraud and deceit.

A central purpose of the promotion of Obama by those in the ruling class who financed and supported his campaign was to utilize his persona to refurbish the image of the United States internationally after the foreign policy disasters of the Bush years, while exploiting the popular illusion within the US that Obama's ethnic background would make him more sensitive to the needs and interests of ordinary working people.

Much about Obama could have been foreseen, and, indeed, much was foreseen. Rich can speak of Obama as a "mystery" only in so far as he chooses to ignore the socialist analysis that accurately predicted the basic trajectory of the Obama administration.

Rich speaks as though there were nothing to the left of him. He joins in the decades-long collaboration of American liberalism in the efforts of the US ruling elite to exclude socialist thought from public discussion and debate—a process that has deepened immeasurably the intellectual and political poverty of liberalism.

He could have found a comprehensive analysis of the Obama campaign and a highly accurate prognosis of his course of action once in power in the innumerable articles and statements posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party did not join in the "left" promotion of Obama prior to his election, and our opposition to the Democratic as well as the Republican candidate was rapidly vindicated after Obama's victory.

To cite just one statement, entitled "One week since the election of Obama" and written in part in response to a

column by Rich reflecting the liberal euphoria over Obama's victory, we wrote the following: "Virtually without exception, liberal commentators and 'left' political tendencies have ignored or downplayed all such indications that Obama intends to pursue a conservative course and reject anything that suggests a more democratic and egalitarian restructuring of American capitalism. This has been facilitated by their interpretation of the election almost entirely in racial terms. The obsession with race, which for 40 years has been the mainstay of liberal politics in America, has, if anything, been accentuated in the aftermath of the election..."

"Typical is the column in the Sunday *New York Times* by Frank Rich, which begins, 'On the morning after a black man won the White House, America's tears of catharsis gave way to unadulterated joy.'"

We went on to warn: "This indicates that Rich and others of his political stripe will be prepared to tolerate policies that they considered unacceptable under Bush when they are carried out by Obama—which was precisely the point of the promotion of Obama by his establishment backers. To the extent that Obama is able to exploit his identity to politically disarm workers, his administration becomes all the more dangerous to the social interests of the working class."

The political bankruptcy of liberalism and all varieties of so-called "left" politics oriented to the Democratic Party underscores the need for a new political perspective. The real question facing workers and young people is the fight for the independent political organization of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

Amidst growing social distress, endless wars, and the debasement of every aspect of political life, the way forward is to be found in the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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