

The liberals' lament: "Why won't Obama fight?"

David Walsh
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It is difficult for anyone who observes the American political scene not to notice the spinelessness of President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party in the face of the Republican right and its media fronts. The Democrats' capitulation all along the line is a glaring fact of daily life and one of the defining features of the current administration.

In their latest cave-in, White House spokesmen and Democrats in Congress have indicated their willingness to cede to Republican demands for an extension of the Bush administration's tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

This has provoked another round of handwringing from members of the official liberal media who, in one fashion or another, all lament Obama's latest surrender and ask if or when the president will summon the internal fortitude to begin fighting. The collective wailing has become a virtual genre of political commentary.

In a piece entitled "Who Will Stand Up to the Superrich?" *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich notes that while the Republicans have "vowed to fight to the end" over the Bush-era tax cuts, "that may hardly be necessary given the timid opposition of President Obama and the lame-duck Democratic Congress."

Rich writes that in an interview on the CBS program "60 Minutes," "Obama was already wobbling toward another 'compromise' in which he does most of the compromising."

He refers to a new book by political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All-Politics*, which provides evidence that social inequality is not simply the inevitable outcome of various sociological and technological trends, but is instead "the result of specific policies ... championed by Washington Democrats and Republicans alike."

Rich observes that the authors' work "amounts to a devastating indictment of both parties." This is strong rhetoric, from which Rich draws no significant political conclusions.

The *Times* columnist concludes, "You know things are grim when you start wishing that the president might

summon his inner Linda McMahon [the former wrestling promoter and unsuccessful Republican candidate for the US Senate from Connecticut]."

Rich's fellow columnist at the *Times*, liberal economist Paul Krugman, in "The World as He Finds It," grumbles about the Obama administration's pragmatism and opportunism: "The obvious point is the contrast between the administration's current whipped-dog demeanor and Mr. Obama's soaring rhetoric as a candidate."

Krugman asserts critically that Obama did not run on substance in 2008, but on the claim that "partisan divisions and politics as usual had prevented men and women of good will from coming together to solve our problems." Krugman continues: "He could do uplift—but could he fight? So far the answer has been no."

In regard to the tax-cut issue, he writes, "Mr. Obama could and should be hammering Republicans for trying to hold the middle class hostage to secure tax cuts for the wealthy."

Then he gets to his central point: "Here's the thing: Mr. Obama still has immense power, if he chooses to use it." After enumerating the ways in which the president might exercise his authority and influence at home and abroad, Krugman continues, "But none of this will matter unless the president can find it within himself to use his power, to actually take a stand. And the signs aren't good."

Krugman is not, however, abandoning hope.

On his blog, Robert Reich, Secretary of Labor under Bill Clinton and a prominent liberal academic, notes Obama's comments on the tax cuts and frets, "I hope this doesn't mean another Obama cave-in."

After taking note of the degree to which a tax cut extension would benefit the top 1 percent of the population, Reich writes: "The politics are even clearer. Over the next two years, Obama must clarify for the nation whose side he's on and whose side his Republican opponents are on. What better issue to begin with than this one?"

The former cabinet member adds his own whine to the general chorus: "If the President can't or won't take a stand now—when he still has a chance to prevail in the upcoming

lame-duck Congress—when will he ever?”

William Greider of the *Nation* sounds the same theme: “Given the election results, the question Barack Obama has to decide for himself is whether he really wants to be president in the fullest sense. ... What’s missing with this president is power—a strong grasp of the powers he possesses and the willingness to govern the country with them.”

This is all hogwash, and the commentators should know it. The real question is not why Obama doesn’t fight, but why these people are incapable of learning anything?

The liberal pundits at the *Times* and the *Nation*, and various way stations in between, operate on the basis of entirely false premises and conceptions.

They take as a given, which they have no business doing, that because Obama is African-American he’s inherently progressive. This is the absurd and reactionary logic of their identity politics, which became one of the mainstays of the Democratic Party as it turned to the right and away from the social reform politics of an earlier period.

Who is Obama? He doesn’t emerge from any history of struggle, for civil rights or any other progressive cause. His memoir, *The Audacity of Hope*, reveals him to be a quasi-admirer of Ronald Reagan at the time of the latter’s election in 1980. Obama is a thoroughly conventional bourgeois politician, picked up at a certain point by financial interests and the Democratic machine in Illinois, whose inclinations are essentially right-wing.

The pundits also assume that there is some fundamental difference between the Democratic and Republican Parties, an assumption that several decades of bipartisan support for war, budget cuts and social reaction should have put to rest.

To the extent that the liberal critics of the president, such as filmmaker Michael Moore and numerous commentators at the *Nation*, hark back to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, they ignore several salient issues:

First, that American capitalism has undergone a vast transformation since the 1930s and 1940s, including profound economic and industrial decay. The US ruling elite is in no position either financially or ideologically to initiate the major social programs launched by the New Deal administration. There is no leading figure in the Democratic Party today who proposes any serious measures against joblessness, poverty or the foreclosure crisis. The two parties are equally at the beck and call of the super-rich.

Second, Obama’s liberal critics forget that Roosevelt was not acting out of the goodness of his heart in enacting the New Deal, but in response to an upsurge in the class struggle. The Bonus March in the spring and summer of 1932, which mobilized thousands of unemployed and impoverished veterans of World War I, was brutally and violently suppressed by the US military. The handwriting for

social peace in America, under conditions of mass misery, was already on the wall by the time of Roosevelt’s inauguration. He acted to save the profit system from itself.

Rich, Krugman, Reich and Greider are thoroughly respectable figures. The last thing they desire is a revival of the class struggle. They belong to a privileged layer of the upper-middle class, enjoying comfortable and economically untroubled routines. Their cajoling and chastising of Obama and the Democrats proves both their political unseriousness and their distance from the conditions of wide layers of the population.

Some 50 million people in the US live in conditions of “food insecurity,” an estimated 80 to 100 million find it difficult to make daily ends meet. Our commentators are indifferent to that. They long ago abandoned, if they ever adhered to, the category of class. Fearful of the growth of the right, currently in the form of the Tea Party movement, they long for calmer, more restful times. More than anything else, they yearn for conditions in which their “cultural” and lifestyle concerns might be met.

The above-cited pundits and others of their ilk point to certain obvious truths—that while the Republicans fight ferociously, the Democrats are always two-faced, insincere and groveling—but they are incapable of drawing any sharp and politically decisive conclusions. They delude themselves and others with the notion that, subjected to the right arguments, the proper amount of pressure, Obama and his administration can emerge as the champion of the people.

That miracle will never happen before the Day of Judgment, and those who perpetuate such illusions play a reactionary role. This sort of complacent petty-bourgeois politics has disastrous consequences for the working class. Insofar as it reinforces the hold of the big business Democrats over workers, it confuses and paralyzes them politically, and makes inevitable the advance of the ultra-right and ever deeper attacks on social conditions, living standards and democratic rights.

Rich, Krugman, Reich and Greider are at one on this: they seek to prevent an understanding of the class character and history of the Democratic Party and of the need for the working population to break with it, once and for all.



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