

The apologists for Obama and the Republican “resurgence”

David Walsh

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The outcome of the 2010 midterm elections is an indictment of the apologists for Barack Obama and the Democratic Party.

As a result of the November 2 elections, in which the Republican Party regained control of the House of Representatives and picked up seats in the Senate, the entire political system in the US has shifted farther to the right. The consequences for millions of working people will be severe, as the attack on social conditions and democratic rights is intensified and military violence is employed even more aggressively around the world.

Two years ago, a variety of “left” and liberal forces strove to convince those sections of the population over whom they had influence that the Obama campaign represented a watershed in American politics and that under his administration the policies of war, attacks on jobs and social programs, and the shredding of Constitutional rights would come to an end.

The *Nation* magazine and others painted Obama, a thoroughly conventional bourgeois politician with a track record of subservience to the Democratic Party machine in Illinois and to big business, as a “progressive” who would turn America around. This effort, which combined self-deception and deliberate falsification, helped generate illusions in Obama and lull the population to sleep.

What are the results? Obama, given a free hand by his left-liberal apologists, steered a right-wing, pro-big business course from his first day in office (and even before). In the face of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, the administration bailed out Wall Street while doing nothing for the millions of unemployed and impoverished workers and the legions of families facing the loss of their homes.

Every major action taken by Obama and the Democrats has guaranteed the resurgence of the right. In November 2008, millions of working people went to the polls to repudiate the Bush administration. The Republican Party suffered a humiliating defeat, resulting in Democratic control of the White House and large Democratic majorities

in both houses of Congress.

One could not imagine more favorable political conditions for the smashing of the Republican right, assuming the victorious president and party had any desire to do so. None of those who are now insisting that working people and youth devote their efforts to pressuring Obama to “stand up to the right” address an obvious question: If he was unable and unwilling to do it in 2008, why should anyone believe he will do it now?

As it turned out, the Obama administration worked assiduously to provide a breathing space for, not an alternative to, the Republican Party and the extreme right.

Has any party or any administration in US history ever done so much in so short a time to demoralize their base of supporters as the Democrats and Obama have done between 2008 and 2010?

The upper-middle class liberal apologists for Obama, in the face of the Democratic debacle, continue to deny reality. They are incapable of drawing a single critical conclusion from what has happened. Their comments veer from despair to clutching at political straws, all of it, as always, impressionistic and superficial.

The mainstream pundits claim that the population punished Obama for his “extreme liberalism.” This is false and absurd.

Thirty million fewer people voted for the Democratic congressional candidates in 2010 than in 2008 out of disgust with the party’s right-wing policies. Whatever the inevitable political confusion given such an enormous betrayal of campaign promises and hype and the complete lack within the political system of a genuine alternative on the left, millions of people who stayed away from the polls are moving to the left, not the right.

A few liberal columnists have acknowledged the obvious: that Obama failed to advance any sort of aggressive reform program to tackle the economic crisis. However, their explanation of the causes of this “failure” is utterly banal and unconvincing.

The *Nation*’s Katrina vanden Heuvel, writing in the *Wall*

Street Journal, complains that voters “were alienated because they didn't believe his [Obama's] team had fought aggressively enough for the interests of working- and middle-class citizens... The inadequacy of the recovery program—largely a result of concessions to the GOP—became a political catastrophe for the White House.”

Pathetically, she concludes, “All of this presents an opportunity for Mr. Obama to show he stands with working people and the middle class.” In other words, the working class should extend even more political credit to this right-wing administration!

What did vanden Heuvel say in November 2008? In a piece headlined, “Transformational Presidency,” she wrote, comparing the 2008 election result to that of 2004 (when George W. Bush won re-election), “Four years later, our offices are filled with editors, writers, interns, and colleagues—some crying, this time with joy—all jubilant about the new era of possibility opened up by Barack Obama's victory...”

“Obama's election marks a remarkable moment in our country's history—a milestone in America's scarred racial landscape and a victory for the forces of decency, diversity and tolerance.”

Robert Scheer, longtime left journalist and a contributing editor to the *Nation*, claimed this week in “Payback at the Polls” that “Barack Obama deserved the rebuke he received at the polls for a failed economic policy that consisted of throwing trillions at Wall Street but getting nothing in return.”

But in November 2008, Scheer was also in the mood to celebrate. He wrote then: “It's time to gush! Later for the analysis of all the hard choices faced by our next president, Barack Obama, but for now, let's just thrill, unabashedly, to the sound of those words.”

He went on: “Politics will never be the same. The fat cats and back-office politicians are out, and grass roots—youthful and Internet-connected—will dominate in the future, as they did on Tuesday. President-elect Obama knows that, and, at least on this night, I fully expect him to be true to those who took him on this journey.”

These people foresaw nothing and have learned nothing.

The *Nation's* Eric Alterman is even more brazen, blaming the population for its failure to understand Obama's supposedly far-reaching social agenda. “Well, this being America,” he writes, “a great deal of easily exploitable ignorance is fueling the fire. Obama's healthcare reform, his financial reform, the stimulus, the saving of the auto industry, etc. make these two years among the most consequential in the past half-century.”

In reality, all those initiatives were carefully crafted anti-working class measures which have strengthened the most

powerful sections of the ruling elite and worsened conditions for broad layers of the population.

Alterman is typical of the well-heeled liberal element that makes a profession of spreading illusions in the Democrats. A 2003 piece in the *New York Observer* described an encounter with the *Nation* journalist at a fashionable Manhattan restaurant. “Mr. Alterman reeked of success,” the author wrote. The *Observer* went on to note that Alterman “ordered foie gras, the Kobe beef and a glass of pinot noir. Earlier, he'd said he liked his lunches ‘expensive.’”

The response of the upper-middle class left to the Democrats' defeat underlines the chasm that exists between that social layer and the working class. The questions of jobs, living standards, poverty, retirement, homes and education, as well as current and future wars, mean nothing to the Vandens Heuvels, Scheers and Altermans. They are as callous about the conditions of the American working class as Obama himself. Their interests hinge on “cultural” issues—the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation.

These left-liberals help police the strangulating capitalist two-party system in the US, with its firewall against a socialist alternative.

The danger exists that if mass anger remains bottled up within the present set-up, unable to find a genuinely anti-capitalist outlet, it will turn malignant. The continued subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party creates conditions for the emergence and growth of extreme right-wing and fascist movements.

The critical issue is that the political lessons of the 2008 and 2010 elections and the experience of the Obama administration be drawn. Everything depends on a political rupture by the mass of working people with the rotten, bankrupt Democratic Party and the establishment of the political independence of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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