Hailing 111th Congress, Obama prepares further shift to the right

Joseph Kishore
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As the 111th congressional session came to a close, the Obama administration and the US media have stepped up the propaganda offensive over the past two days to justify an even further shift to the right by the political establishment next year.

The "narrative" being constructed takes the following form: The two years of the Democratic-controlled Senate and House of Representatives, along with the Obama administration, carried out historical social reforms on a scale not seen in decades. For some unexplained reason, these measures led to a defeat for the Democrats in the 2010 elections. Since the elections, and supposedly in response to popular pressure, Obama has shifted into a more "bipartisan" spirit, which has already produced fantastic results in the "lame-duck" session since the election.

This eruption of self-congratulation was led by Obama himself at an afternoon press conference on Wednesday. The lame-duck session, the president declared, was "the most productive post-election period we have had in decades, and…it comes on the heels of the most productive two years that we have had in generations."

The overriding theme of the conference was Obama's pledge to work with Republicans more closely in the coming year. As a *Time* magazine article noted (under the headline, "Obama's Lame-Duck Comeback: Hello, Bipartisanship"), "In his 34-minute press conference on Wednesday [Obama] used the words 'common ground' three times, the word 'bipartisan' twice, the phrase 'other side of the aisle' twice, 'came together' three times and 'across party lines' twice."

"A lot of folks in this town," the president declared, "predicted that after the midterm elections, Washington would be headed for more partisanship and gridlock. And instead this has been a season of progress for the American people."

By "American people," Obama evidently means the most wealthy sections of the population, which will benefit enormously from the principal measure adopted by the Congress over the past month: the extension of the Bush administration's tax cuts for the rich. The top income bracket will get on average $70,000 out of the deal, with the wealthiest netting much more. The bottom 40 percent of the population will actually see their taxes increase.

The *New York Times* added its reflections in an article published Thursday. In "111th Congress, One for the History Books," Carl Hulse and David Herzenhorn hailed the actions of the Congress' two years, including what it described as a "landmark health care law and a sweeping overhaul of Wall Street rules."

The authors added, "As many Democrats cast their last votes on Wednesday, top lawmakers said that most of them considered their defeat [in the 2010 elections] well worth the price considering the legislative victories they wrote into the history books, accomplishments that have prompted comparisons to the progressive glory days of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society."

The *Times* was not alone in this bout of mythmaking. The *Christian Science Monitor* published a column extolling the "six big achievements of a surprisingly 'do something' Congress" (the initial stimulus package, the health care legislation, financial regulation, the extension of tax cuts, an end to "don't ask, don't tell" in the military, and the passage of the START treaty). Reuters declared that "never before has a US Congress done more and been less liked. " Bloomberg News added its own cumbersome headline: "No Congress Since '60s Makes as Much Law as 111th Affecting Most Americans."

Comparisons of the past two years to the New Deal period (which established among other things a whole network of federal jobs programs, as well as Social Security) and the Great Society programs (Medicare and Medicaid) are ludicrous. Far from introducing a new era of social reform, the measures passed under the leadership of the Democratic Party have initiated a major attack on the reforms implemented in the 1930s and 1960s.

The principal aim of the health care bill, passed under the guidance of Obama, was to cut corporate expenditures on health coverage, along with federal spending, beginning with

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Medicare. It mandates that individuals purchase private insurance, handing millions of captive customers to the giant insurance companies.

As for what is invariably described in the media as a "sweeping overhaul" of Wall Street, this measure was dictated by the interest of the banks, doing nothing to alter their overwhelming power over the financial system and American society as a whole. In the form of a "resolution authority," the bill institutionalizes government bailouts of the banks.

As for the initial "stimulus" measure passed in the early months of the Obama presidency, it was crafted to prevent a complete collapse of the capitalist system while ensuring that the wealth of the corporate and financial elite would remain untouched. In the face of persistent mass unemployment, the administration and Congress have rejected any government-hiring program, insisting that the "free market" is the engine of job growth.

These policies have made possible an unprecedented rebound in corporate profits. The nationwide attack on wages and benefits was given the lead by the administration and the Congressional leadership. The forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler last year was predicated on a massive attack on auto workers.

Coming to power after the departure of the Bush administration—the most hated government in US history—the Democrats oversaw the expansion of war, including Obama's "surge" in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They have intensified the attack on democratic rights, including the reauthorization of the Patriot Act. Democrats in the Senate declined to use their subpoena power to carry out any investigations of the criminal actions of the Bush administration, including the use of torture and the expansion of domestic spying. Guantanamo Bay and the network of US-run gulags remain in place, a fact underscored this week when Congress rejected any funding for closing the prison in Cuba. This was quickly followed by reports of a planned executive order to institutionalize indefinite detention without charge.

As for the "lame-duck" session, aside from the tax cuts, Congress passed in its closing days a measure aimed at cementing support for the Democratic Party among better off sections of the middle class committed to identity politics: the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" in the military. This was followed by the ratification of the START nuclear arms treaty with Russia, a key component of US foreign policy strategy.

The gushing in the media and political circles over this record is a prelude for even more rightwing policies. In another article published in the *New York Times* on Thursday, the newspaper makes clear that for the liberal establishment the Democrats' debacle in the 2010 midterm elections—a product mainly of mass disillusionment with the Obama administration—is seen as a welcome opportunity to escalate attacks on the working class.

In "A New Chance for Bipartisanship, All Posturing Aside," Matt Bai raised the hope that, as a result of the elections, "President Obama and newly empowered Republicans may actually find more to talk about in the next Congress than they did in the last." The large Democratic majorities over the past two years "made Mr. Obama a powerful president when it came to enacting his agenda," but "probably made it almost impossible for him to realize his stated goal of building cross-party coalitions with Republicans in Congress."

The newspaper reports, "White House aides are hoping that the bipartisan tax accord reached with Republicans this month will form the basis for similar agreements on deficit reduction next year. Mr. Obama has already called for freezes in discretionary spending and federal salaries, and the feeling inside the White House is that if the president can establish that he is serious about reining in federal spending, Republicans will have no choice but to negotiate over how much and how to do it.'

The chairmen of Obama's bipartisan budget deficit commission have already released recommendations for major cuts in Social Security and other federal programs—extending the measures already introduced as part of the health care overhaul. These are accompanied by plans for a "reform" of the tax code to significantly reduce taxes on corporations and the wealthy.

Among the other policies to be implemented in the next session, the newspaper cites "education reform"—that is, an escalation of the administration's attack on public education. This is "an issue that divides the president from a lot of his allies because of his support for performance-based teacher pay and testing for both students and teachers," the *Times* writes.

The mythmakers in the mass media can do little to cloak the essential lesson of the past two years: that the entire political system, including the Democratic and Republican parties, is under the iron grip of the corporate and financial aristocracy, allowing no expression of the interests of the vast majority of the population.

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