

What lies behind the liberals' lamentations over Obama?

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President Barack Obama's groveling before the Republicans and his lurch to the right, highlighted by his deal to extend tax cuts for the rich, have evoked a new outpouring of hand-wringing commentary by his supporters on the liberal left.

Reading the various articles, one does not know which is more repugnant, their stupidity or their cynicism.

The general theme of these commentaries—amidst the pleading, scolding and whelps of despair—is that Obama must reclaim his “core values” and start fighting the Republican right. It is summed up by Adam Green, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, who writes: “At this point, the strategy is to shame [Obama] into fighting.”

Among the notable examples of such lamentations is Frank Rich's column in the December 5 *New York Times*, which makes the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Obama has been taken hostage by the Republicans and his behavior is best explained by reference to the Stockholm Syndrome.

Rich writes: “The captors will win this battle [over extending Bush-era tax cuts for the top 2 percent of US households], if they haven't already by the time you read this, because Obama has seemingly surrendered his once-considerable abilities to act, decide or think.”

Liberal economist Paul Krugman, in a December 2 *New York Times* column written in response to Obama's announcement of a two-year freeze on federal workers' pay, is harsher:

“After the Democratic ‘shellacking’ in the mid-term elections, everyone wondered how President Obama would respond. Would he show what he was made of? Would he stand firm for the values he believes in, even in the face of political adversity?...

“It's hard to escape the impression that Republicans have taken Mr. Obama's measure—that they're calling his bluff in the belief that he can be counted on to fold. And it's also hard to escape the impression that they're right.”

David Corn, the Washington bureau chief of *Mother Jones* and a columnist for PoliticsDaily.com, writes, more in sorrow than in

anger:

“President Obama, in the instance of this apparent tax cut compromise, seems to be settling without waging a principle-driven battle, and that is puzzling many of his progressive loyalists... His reasons for eschewing a showdown remain a mystery... A deal like this ... will drive many progressives crazy, for they're looking to Obama to lead a charge against the Republicans, not yield to their threats.”

Michael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun*, suggests that the best way to “get Obama to become the candidate whom most Americans believed they elected in 2008” is to challenge him from the left for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2012. The idea is not to defeat the incumbent, but to “pressure Obama toward much more progressive positions and make him a more viable 2012 candidate.”

As Eleanor Clift notes in *Newsweek*, “MoveOn.org is running ads with the theme ‘Bring Obama Back,’ calling on the president to ‘be the president we fought to elect’ and to hold firm on his promise to end tax breaks for the richest Americans... It's a chance to reclaim his convictions, and Obama should seize it.”

Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor and publisher of the *Nation*, bemoans “Obama's Disastrous Path” in her December 7 column in the *Washington Post*. Defining herself as a “progressive supporter” of Obama, she lists the president's right-wing moves since the mid-term election debacle, ranging from his abject apologizing to the Republicans to effectively abandoning his July 2011 date for beginning to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

Vanden Heuvel objects to Obama's leaning toward the notion that “we should impose austerity now, instead of working to get the economy going.” The operative word here is “now,” as it implies her agreement with the official line of the administration that whether sooner or later, austerity must be imposed.

Absurdly inflating Obama's stature, she declares: “This president has a historic mandate. Just as Abraham Lincoln had to lead the nation from slavery and Franklin Roosevelt from the Depression, this president must lead the nation from the calamitous failures of three decades of conservative dominance.”

This, she continues, “is the necessary function of a progressive president... If he shirks it, [Obama] risks a failed presidency.”

This, of course, assumes that we should all devoutly wish for a “successful” Obama presidency. Reading such nonsense, one is struck by just how conservative and conventional these ladies and gentlemen are. And how intellectually impoverished!

They all proceed from the premise that Obama is a “progressive.” Why? On what basis? There is nothing in his political career either before or after his election that suggests anything other than a conventional—i.e., right-wing—American bourgeois politician.

In the end, they brand Obama a progressive on the grounds that he is Democrat and an African-American. Here on full display is the political bankruptcy of the rejection of social class as the basic criterion in politics and its replacement by race and other forms of personal identity.

These elements are puzzled, bewildered, even indignant over Obama’s recent cave-ins to the Republicans. But there is nothing new in this entirely predictable response to an electoral defeat that was itself the result of the abandonment of past promises and the pursuit of uniformly pro-corporate, war-mongering, right-wing policies while in office.

They seem to assume that the American people are suffering from collective amnesia—that no one recalls Obama’s relentless efforts from the day of his election to rehabilitate the Republicans, after that party had been repudiated by a population angered and disgusted by years of political reaction.

But it is fact that Obama took the unprecedented step of keeping on Bush’s defense secretary—who had overseen the “surge” in Iraq—and packing his administration with Wall Street insiders and former military officers. He even attempted to appoint the right-wing Senator Judd Gregg as his commerce secretary.

What are the “core principles” that Obama has supposedly abandoned and must now reclaim? The only principles he has evinced are the defense of the global interests of US imperialism and the wealth and power of the American financial aristocracy. Aside from occasional cheap demagoguery, he has shown nothing but indifference and contempt when it comes to the American people.

The apotheosizing of Obama by this political milieu is ultimately a function of their own social being. They represent a very privileged, comfortable and complacent layer of the upper-middle class, and their pro-Obama, pro-Democratic Party politics reflects very real, material interests—interests that are sharply at odds with those of the working class.

One need only ask, in precisely what does their “progressiveness” consist? They do not advocate serious social or

political reforms, let alone socialist policies. On the contrary, they tenaciously uphold a political system dominated by two utterly corrupt and reactionary parties of the American plutocracy.

They do not, for the most part, even call for an end to the US wars of aggression that are killing hundreds of thousands and destroying entire societies in the Middle East and Central Asia.

What really upsets them about the crass manner in which Obama prostrates himself before the Republicans and Wall Street is how thoroughly it exposes their own role in promoting him and aiding the marketing campaign that was used to get him elected. They are terrified that their political dog and pony show built around Obama has so quickly and ignominiously collapsed.

This only makes them wedded all the more firmly to Obama. They twist and turn and engage in all manner of sophistry and outright lying to try and convince the people that, despite everything, Obama can be made to “fight” and act on his “progressive” inclinations.

In this they have the agreement of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization. The ISO’s web site of December 5 carries a lengthy article by Alan Maass listing the various campaign pledges Obama has broken and the right-wing policies he has pursued, only to conclude: “Don’t expect political leaders to bring the ‘change we need’ without being pressured to do so.”

Above all, the liberals, left-liberals and fake-socialists are fearful that the Obama experience is exposing before the American people the fraud that the Democratic Party in some way represents or is responsive to them. They fear not so much the Republican right, as the prospect of a popular movement of working people developing outside the Democratic Party and its agencies, including the trade unions.

They have good reason to fear. Not the least of their worries is the growing audience for the *World Socialist Web Site* and the socialist and revolutionary program of the Socialist Equality Party.



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