The media and Obama: Image and reality

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For the past two weeks the US media has been pumping out admiring commentaries on the "comeback" of Barack Obama. As if on signal, the man widely portrayed before and immediately after the November midterm elections as presiding over a failing presidency is being depicted as the protagonist of a political tour de force that has turned defeat at the polls into a triumph of reform legislation.

The key to this remarkable turnabout, according to the media narrative, is Obama's turn to bipartisan collaboration with the Republicans, who will control the House of Representatives and have a larger presence in the Senate in the incoming 112th Congress. The stroke of genius that set the stage for ensuing legislative victories in the outgoing "lame duck" Congress was Obama's announcement December 6 of a deal with the Republican leadership in the Senate to extend Bush-era tax cuts for the rich.

Many commentaries go even further, equating the measures enacted by Obama and the Democratic-led 111th Congress—fiscal stimulus, overhaul of health care, financial regulatory reform, repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't tell" in the military—with the major social reforms enacted under Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s and Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s.

All of this media mythmaking is ludicrously at odds with reality. Ignored is the fact that Obama has embraced a whole series of measures that he himself previously denounced as boondoggles to big business and the rich, including health care "reform" that excludes a public option and the extension of tax cuts to the top 2 percent of American earners.

The actual content of Obama's supposedly newfound bipartisanship—in reality, Obama has sought from the day of his election to rehabilitate the Republican Party—is his wholesale capitulation to the demand of the ruling class for even bigger cuts in its taxes.

The historical analogies to Roosevelt and Johnson are absurd. All of Obama's "reform" measures are, in fact, aimed at rolling back the social reforms passed in the 1930s and 1960s. His health care overhaul, for example, will slash health coverage for tens of millions of working people and reduce Medicare spending by $500 billion. It will boost the profits of the insurance companies by compelling people to purchase insurance on the private market.

Roosevelt, under the pressure of an explosive growth of working class struggles, sought to save the discredited capitalist system by instituting massive public works programs that hired hundreds of thousands of workers. He won the hatred of large sections of his own class by establishing government-owned and run enterprises such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought electrical power to large sections of the South and Appalachia.

Obama and the Democratic leadership have adamantly rejected any government hiring programs and insisted on the primacy of the "free market."

The financial regulatory reforms that Roosevelt instituted have since been dismantled, and nothing in Obama's overhaul restores them, leaving the big banks free to continue their speculative activities.

One fact says a great deal about the reality of Obama's policies: the reduction in the estate tax included in his tax-cut deal with the Republicans brings the tax on inherited wealth to its lowest level since 1931, prior to Roosevelt's coming to power. Roosevelt during World War II pushed for the tax rate on the highest income tax bracket to be raised to 91 percent and imposed a cap on executive salaries.

Obama's measures will provide an estimated $70 billion a year in tax breaks for the rich and hand over an additional $23 billion in estate tax cuts to 6,600 families.

The shift on Obama exemplifies the ceaseless efforts of the corporate-owned and controlled media to artificially create political realities by means of image making. Obama's election was largely the result of a media marketing operation, backed and financed by sections of the ruling class that saw the need for a change in image and personnel after the foreign policy disasters of the Bush years and in the face of public hatred for Bush and

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the Republicans.

Now, the media is seeking to repackage and repair the badly discredited Obama administration. Why? Because it is dutifully doing the bidding of the financial aristocracy.

Obama is presently being built up because he has made clear that his cave-in on tax cuts for the rich is only the prelude to a further shift to the right on social policy. Appearing Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" program, Obama aide Valerie Jarrett, a multimillionaire Chicago real estate investor who is described as Obama's liaison to business, said Obama would focus in the immediate future on reining in the deficit and improving his relationship with American business.

The administration has already called for a freeze on non-defense discretionary spending and federal employee pay and backed proposals for cuts in Social Security benefits, increased taxes on consumption, and a broad "reform" of the tax system that will sharply reduce income taxes for the rich as well as corporate taxes.

The content of Obama's so-called rebound is an accelerated attack on ever-broader sections of the working class.

Not accidentally, the media has in recent days largely dropped the Tea Party movement. Built up by the media in the pre-election period as a mass movement on the right reflecting popular angst over budget deficits and coercive government interference in the market, the Tea Party was used to shift Obama and the Democrats further to the right and engineer the Republican victory in November.

For the present at least, with that mission having been accomplished and Obama making all of the right moves, the Tea Party is being pushed to the background. It stands ready to be revived by the media when the ruling elite deems it politically expedient to do so.

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