

Obamancholia

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This newsletter has long touted the productive possibilities of disillusionment. Most recently, that meant there might be some potential for radicalization when the left-liberal version of Obamania crashed into his ardor for capitalism and imperial war. Things haven't worked out that way yet. So it's time to ask, as Sarah Palin put it, how is that hopey-changey thing working out?

Not so well for Obama's ratings. Despite the huzzahs of the pundits after the health care thing passed, Obama's standing with the public eroded slightly by Gallup's measure. At 48%, Obama's approval rating is 11 points below the average for a president 16 months into his term. His trajectory of approval is way below average, and matches fairly well that of Ronald Reagan, who also took office in a deep recession and suffered for it. Reagan's popularity bottomed in January 1983, two months after the recession ended, then tacked on 25 points over the next two years. Obama's popularity hasn't bottomed yet, nine months after the recession's putative end—though, in a spot of bad luck for him (not to mention 15 million unemployed), the job market doesn't bounce back like it used to.

Let's savor some disappointments of a regime characterized, as Tariq Ali nicely put it, by “sonorous banality.” Let's start with foreign policy. Few but the most deluded Obama voters expected any change in the U.S. stance towards Israel-Palestine relations. There's been perhaps a slight, barely measurable change in tone, but the cash and weapons will continue to flow the way they always have. But many did expect a change in direction in Iraq; that has not been forthcoming. It's hard to imagine a third Bush administration, or a first McCain, doing anything much different. Permanent bases have been secured, and an embassy compound the size of Vatican City has settled in for the long haul.

Troops that have been removed from Iraq—basically on the same timetable as Bush's—have been effectively redeployed to Afghanistan. Of course, this is exactly what candidate Obama promised during the campaign, but a lot of his enthusiasts wouldn't listen. What has been a bit of a surprise is the way he's jacked up the drone attacks—which have a habit of killing lots of civilians alongside their putative military targets—in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There were more of those during Obama's first year in office than in Bush's full eight-year term. Instead of arresting “terrorists” and throwing them in Bagram or Gitmo—which, campaign suggestions to the contrary, remain open for business—the Obama administration prefers to kill them.

As the *Washington Post* put it in February, using an indulgent definition of “targeted”: “The result has been dozens of targeted killings and no reports of high-value detentions.” This is Obama's version of human rights progress.

For a moment, it looked like Obama might turn down the heat on Iran, if only for pragmatic reasons—the harder the U.S. presses, the more sense it makes for Iran to make a bomb, and besides, they've got lots of oil—he's done anything but. Instead, the Obama administration has continued the Bush policy of persuading Russia and China to go along with economic sanctions—a strategy that in the Iraqi case killed hundreds of thousands.

And let's not forget Latin America, where Obama's administration was the world's only government that didn't condemn the coup in Honduras—almost at the very moment that it was busily signing a military basing agreement with Colombia, the nastiest regime in the hemisphere.

So basically Obama has continued the Bush foreign policy, with less Iraq and more AfPak. His Justice Department is prosecuting NSA whistleblowers, something Bush threatened but never did, while letting torturers run free. The best he does is make emptily grandiose gestures like fantasizing about the end of nuclear weapons, which will never happen but which makes Jonathan Schell go weak in the knees. Otherwise, Obama hardly bothers to make the human rights and civil liberties gestures that liberals fervently circulate petitions about.

Home Game

It's almost too easy to point out the Dems' servility to the owning class in economic policy. Even the best thing they've done, the StimPak, was mostly supported by mainstream Wall Street. The SEC's suit against Goldman Sachs is a lovely thing to watch, but the real test will be what the derivatives legislation looks like. Obama will probably huff and puff while Wall Street works the "moderate" Congressional Dems, and whatever emerges is likely to be fairly weak—at best only a notional consumer protection agency and minimal restrictions on derivatives.

And then there's the awful health care bill, which is now seen as the administration's signature achievement. It's no surprise that single-payer was ruled out from the start. But the bill offers no challenge to any major element of the medical-industrial complex—insurance companies, hospitals, the pharmaceutical industry. Even as mild a gesture as a public option died of being too threatening. The core of the bill has deep conservative roots: the individual mandate to buy insurance was an invention of the Nixon administration, in response to Teddy Kennedy's single-payer bill of the early 1970s, and the insurance marketplace idea was concocted by the Heritage Foundation as a counter to Bill Clinton's health bill. So even if the thing didn't get any Republican votes, it is bipartisan across the years.

But on some domestic matters Obama is coming in strongly under expectations, as they say on Wall Street. Worst perhaps is education policy, where the administration has largely embraced Bush's No Child Left Behind strategy, and even intensified it. Obama and his education secretary Arne Duncan love charter schools, frequent testing, and firing allegedly "bad" teachers (so defined via testing) as much as their predecessors, even though these cornerstones of neoliberal education policy—whose ultimate goal is the quasi-privatization of the public school system—have no support in empirical research. Duncan went so far as to praise the beneficial effects of Hurricane Katrina on the New Orleans public schools—"the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans"—in terms indistinguishable from those of Milton Friedman. There's nothing like massive flooding and displacement to grease the path towards charter schools!

And Obama himself endorsed the mass firing of the teaching staff in Central Falls, Rhode Island, a remarkable step for a Democratic president. Inequitable funding, massive poverty and inequality, and an anti-intellectual culture, all major contributors to our educational problems, disappear from view. Education policy used to be a major difference between the parties; no longer.

Onwardness

Ok, 1,200 words are about enough for the bill of indictment. Now it's time to say that none of this is Obama's personal fault; it's all about the imperial imperatives and the ownership structure of the U.S. Neither he nor his party are spineless betrayers—they're partisans of capital who sometimes have to pretend otherwise for electoral reasons. But that won't stop loyalists from scratching their heads and wondering why the Dems are the way they are—only to stop and reassure you that the Republicans are so much worse.

Lending vigor to that indulgent urge is an unfortunate sequencing. Bush's administration was unusually cretinous, and Bush himself one of our most philistine presidents ever. He was succeeded by one of the smoothest and most cerebral politicians imaginable. Liberals are so overjoyed that the president can speak in grammatical sentences that show more than trace levels of thought and wit.

Bush's abrasiveness and stupidity obscured the fact that much of what he did was within the normal bounds of imperial practice; opposition to him got so personalized that appreciation of the fundamental structures disappeared—not necessarily among the broad public or the pundit class, but among people who should have, or at least could have, known better.

So the relief on Obama's succession among those better sorts dulled critical faculties to an unusual degree. The antiwar movement ceased to exist and unions, who'd spent enormous sums on the election, gave the pres a free pass as the health care legislation was written by a former WellPoint lobbyist. As we approach the year-and-a-half mark, there's been some disillusionment, but not of a very productive sort. Garry Wills, the original source of the idea that dashed liberal hopes have radicalizing potential—it was his explanation of why things exploded in the 1960s, as JFK failed to lead to a marked departure from the Eisenhower years—has given up on hopiness.

But *The Nation* magazine, which should be at the front of the pack, has instead hired the awful Melissa Harris-Lacewell, whose beat is Obama apologetics of a very low sort, as a columnist, and obsesses week after week about the Tea Partiers, who are awful, but not worth all the attention—unless you want to scare people into forgiving the Dems everything.

It doesn't have to be that way. About a fifth of the U.S. population supports a broadly social democratic, antiwar agenda. That's a minority, but it's not negligible. Most of those people vote for Democrats and are continuously disappointed by their alleged weakness and lack of backbone. There can't be any kind of radical politics in the U.S. until some of them see that those "failings" for what they are. Otherwise, it'll be an excruciating process of eternal recurrence: complaint about Republicans followed by fantasies of rescue by another Democrat, who fails to do much of anything and is succeeded by another Republican, which in turn prompts fresh fantasies of rescue.... One hopes that the right kind of disillusionment could break this cycle, but we're not there yet.