

The Seventh Generation

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

-From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Mobilizing Hope and Obama

by Tom Angotti

Many progressive planners continue to be hopeful that the Obama administration will usher in real change that we can believe in. But unless we ratchet up the organizing the prospects for change are not good. Obama can't and won't do it on hope alone. And there are just enough angry white men (and women) out there to scare the Democratic Party's core leaders away from any real reform.

The Importance of Hope

We understood the enormous symbolic change of a black man being elected president in a nation born in slavery and nurtured on Jim Crow. I can't forget that less than fifty years ago black people couldn't enter public facilities in the south, and now, thanks to the success and maturity of the civil rights movement, a black family runs the White House. With the rest of the world we breathed a sigh of relief that eight years of combined incompetence, lying, thievery and thuggery had ended, knowing that things couldn't possibly get any worse.

But after almost a full year of the Obama administration, it hasn't been easy to keep hope alive.

We watched Obama appoint recycled Clinton hacks and promote a few of his own, but we excused him. After all, we said, "He's a politician" even if his organizer's heart is in the right place. He has to be "realistic" or he'll get attacked from the right and in the space of only two years the Republicans could easily win back Congress, leaving Obama out on his own to go down in history as a one-term failure.

Alas, thanks to this kind of pragmatic thinking, the progressive agenda got postponed and perhaps exiled from Washington for another four or eight years. We did see Obama withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq's population centers, but Bush had already decided to do as much. Afghanistan is now all Obama's to plunder and destroy—unless he's willing to pull out and face conservative critics proclaiming that the U.S. is surrendering to "terrorists." On the home front we saw Obama introduce health insurance reform but take off the table from the outset the most effective and progressive option—single payer.

Hope for Cities?

Is there hope for urban policy? We saw Obama bring to the White House as his advisor on urban policy a New York City politician, Adolfo Carrión of the Bronx, who infamously put down neighborhood opposition to a Yankee Stadium project that earned the team huge public subsidies for building on city park land and evoked cries of derision from the 'hood. The new stadium has many more luxury boxes and a lot fewer bleacher seats, and the park land the Yankees promised to the community hasn't been built. Obama also brought in New York City's housing commissioner, Sean Donovan, to clean up the mess at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. But Donovan brings with him the ideology and programs of billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose regime destroyed more affordable housing units than it created. Bloomberg and Donovan advanced programs that provided **cont. on page 11**

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small numbers of subsidized “affordable” housing units, most of them too expensive for low-income households, as window dressing for huge luxury projects that gentrified neighborhoods and displaced working-class communities of color.

The rhetoric coming out of HUD today suggests more of the same. The agency favors supporting the floundering markets, improving management and greening new development, while programs to help those in greatest need, low-income homeowners and tenants, remain weak and inadequate. It seems that the new regime is preparing to continue HUD’s long romance with neoliberal policies that promote private market solutions to urban problems and abandon low-income people with the greatest needs.

Change the System!

Perhaps we are too quick to blame Obama because we as a society are trained to see politics as exclusively personal, and blaming others gets us off the hook. The radical right is already doing a good job of blaming Obama. They spice up their anger with racist innuendos and bizarre conspiracy theories and have absolutely no solutions except cutting taxes for the rich. Above all, this helps draw attention away from the systemic problems that any well-intentioned president would face.

The political system as a whole, including its twin pillars, the Democratic and Republican parties, is dedicated to saving the bankrupt economic system and reestablishing the fortunes of the professional pirates and buccaneers who robbed the banks and started the global depression. Obama seems to understand this all too well. Like a good community organizer, Obama built his campaign from the grassroots to help empower his political base, the only real hope to throw out the rascals and make any systemic changes. After getting elected, he was right to challenge his base to do more. His own space for maneuvering at the top is limited because of the depressed economy, the lobbyist-infested Congress, a government bureaucracy that learned long ago that public and private interests were the same and a Democratic Party weighed down

by “moderates” with spines permanently curved from bending over backwards to prevent getting hit by the angry white men (and women) of the right. This is not to suggest that Obama himself isn’t deeply embedded in this system, but if you look at his history and rhetoric—well, it engenders hope!

The hard truth is that a very significant proportion of the American public—certainly the moderate and more conservative wings of the Democratic Party, but many independents as well—continue to be wedded to the core values of neoliberal ideology and imperialist politics. They hope for change, but they “of course” understand that change cannot undermine the basic foundations of private enterprise and U.S. interests around the world. While a minority criticizes capitalism and U.S. military adventures around the globe and can see where the problem lies, most Americans are not there, and when they hear the charge that Obama is a socialist they think that puts him somewhere close to hell. Perhaps Michael Moore’s new movie “Capitalism: A Love Story” will help to change that. While I don’t expect Obama will ever go for socialism, until there is serious debate about replacing the failed capitalist system more progressive alternatives will fall into the system’s deep hole of failed reforms.

To effect real change, Obama would have to be much more forceful in repudiating neoliberal policies and using his great communication skills to attack the core values of the right wing. Obama, however, is at the pragmatist center of classical economics, eager to reach back into the neoliberal bag of tricks containing privatization and deregulation and use these whenever it’s deemed expedient and not too threatening to the system. He blithely touts public-private partnerships, charter schools, cap-and-trade environmentalism and deep subsidies to the private housing market. The administration’s health care reform supports private insurance and requires everyone to buy it. The free market is allowed to reign except when it comes to protecting the largest financial institutions, agribusiness and U.S.-based monopolies. Obama’s foreign policy has rolled back the jingoistic rhetoric of the Bush

administration but it remains to be seen whether this will be followed by a real reduction of U.S. imperial pursuits. Muslims will no longer be demonized by the international propaganda machine so long as the U.S. can keep its troops in Muslim countries and continue to make inroads in the Muslim marketplace.

Because the Democratic Party mainstream has staked out ambiguous positions that clearly don't correspond with the "change" we were led to believe in, the public is increasingly confused, upset and open to the rants against change from the radical right. The left and progressives are becoming more isolated as the centrists retreat. As the radical right and its shock troops disrupt town hall meetings and enliven cable television, it's not mainly the left that is cowered but the traditional moderates and liberals. Good old anti-communist hysteria works pretty well on them. All that is needed is a suggestion that Obama is really a "socialist" to find his supporters guilty by association. That's enough to get them to compromise on the big-ticket change items and exhaust every concession in a quixotic pursuit of "bipartisanship." As good patriots, they must insist that the Obama administration clamp down hard on anyone suspected of terrorism, preserve the Patriot Act and keep the Guantanamo prisoners George Bush rounded up under lock and key. All this to show that Obama really isn't a secret terrorist and closet Muslim sent here to destroy our mythical Christian nation.

Playing the Racial Card, Creeping Fascism

Alas, this is the setting for the return of the angry white men (and some angry white women too) to prominent positions in our political life. These aren't simply angry individuals like Rush Limbaugh, who makes the "moderates" cower in the bunkers that conservatives build. These are members of a dying social and political class and a culture in serious crisis—hence the panicked shrieking. In a nation and global marketplace that is increasingly diverse, white men are losing traction. This kind of phenomenon is not new. In the 1920s, the organized working class in Germany and Italy became a major political force and social democratic parties, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, were winning elections. Fascism, supported by the dominant capitalist groups, developed its own conservative social base in sections

of the working class by playing on xenophobic, racist and anti-communist fears. It started with goon squads and thugs, picked up disaffected workers and then won over the middle class. And if fascism is the unfettered rule of finance capital, as we understood it to be in the 1930s, the continuing ability of the financial barons to get the Obama administration to prop up banks and Wall Street at any cost suggests that it is closer to us now than we think.

In this tense environment, where people who have nothing to sell but their labor are forced to compete in a racialized labor market, tensions between races could well increase. Obama, the black president who doesn't make white people uncomfortable because he's not quick to complain when racism shows its ugly face, may well play a stabilizing role. While former president Jimmy Carter pointed out the racist component of South Carolina Senator Joe Wilson's outburst that called Obama a liar, Obama politely accepted an apology. While Cambridge's police department and local government nervously moved away from defending the police officer who arrested noted black scholar Henry Louis Gates, Obama gave in to the angry white men, retracted his charge that the cop's behavior was "stupid" and sat down for a beer. The national conversation about race that Obama promised us (and Clinton before him, with little to show) is now a private discussion, allowing racism to be used more freely as a weapon to divide us.

In sum, now more than ever before it's time for community and social movements to mobilize and build the grassroots foundation for systemic change and stop the return of the angry white men. The Right to the City Alliance (see article this issue) is just one of the many possibilities for building momentum towards real change we can all believe in. Progressive planners have a lot of work to do.

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