

I Am the Change

BARACK OBAMA
and the
CRISIS
of LIBERALISM

CHARLES R. KESLER



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Dedication

TO THE MEMORY OF WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.

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Introduction

Barack Obama had the distinction of being the most liberal member of the United States Senate when he ran for president in 2008. The title had been conferred by *National Journal*, an inside-the-beltway watchdog that annually assigns senators (and congressmen) an ideological rank based on their votes on economic, social, and foreign policy issues. Obama was more liberal than the Senate's most independent socialist, Bernie Sanders, considerably more liberal than Barbara Boxer or Harry Reid, and dramatically to the left of his opponent in the primaries, Hillary Clinton. It was only one ranking, but it captured something important. He was much more liberal than his presidential campaign let on.

Since then, we have learned a lot more about his political leanings as a young man, which were fashionably leftist, broadly in keeping with the climate of opinion on the campuses where he found himself—Occidental College, Columbia University, Harvard Law School. As a senior at Columbia, he attended the 1983 Socialist Scholars Conference, sponsored by the Democratic Socialists of America. It met in Manhattan at the Cooper Union, site of one of Abraham Lincoln's major speeches, but the conference commemorated not the Great Emancipator but Karl Marx, on the centenary of his death. Though a meeting of democratic socialists and, yes, community organizers, the conference as well as his long-running friendships with radicals of various sorts would have drawn more sustained attention if the Cold War were still raging. But it was not, and Obama pleaded youthful indiscretion and drift, and of course his campaign did its best to keep the details from coming out. He still had to answer, to some measure, for his ties to William Ayers and Jeremiah Wright, but the issue with, say, the good Reverend concerned his sermons about race and Middle East politics, not his penchant for visiting and honoring Fidel Castro, not to mention the Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua.¹ Partly by avoiding the worst of the old anti-Communist gantlet, Obama became the most left-wing liberal to be elected to national executive office since Henry Wallace.

Still, the President is not a self-proclaimed socialist—nor like Wallace, a self-deceived fellow traveler or worse. Obama never went so far, so openly—whether out of inertia, political calculation, or good sense—and therefore never had to make a public apostasy. As a result, we know less about his evolving views than we might like, though probably more than he would like. He calls himself progressive or liberal, and we should take him at his word, at least until we encounter a fatal contradiction. That's only reasonable and fair; and it avoids the desperate shortcut, gratifying as it may be, of unmasking him as—take your pick—a third-world daddy's boy, Alinskyist agitator, deep cover Muslim, or undocumented alien. Conservatives, of all people, should know to beware instant gratification, especially when it comes wrapped in a conspiracy theory. In any case, hypocrisy, as Rochefoucauld wrote, is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, and Obama seems to think it would be a virtuous thing to have been a lifelong liberal, even if he wasn't. And so the question arises: what does it mean anymore to be a liberal?

This book is about Barack Obama and his place in modern American liberalism. It approaches

liberalism as he sees it, as a form of progressivism, which is more or less how its greatest twentieth-century champions understood it, too. (Capital-P Progressivism hereafter refers to the movement that arose in the first two decades of the past century; small-p progressivism to the more general belief in an inevitably glorious, man-made future. Progressivism was progressivist; but not every form of progressivism, e.g., Marxism, was compatible with Progressivism.) Neither a biography of Obama nor a history of liberalism, this volume focuses on liberalism's essence—what it is, where it came from, where it's going—and how the president sees himself in that picture. Foreign policy, as such, figures very little here, not because liberals don't have interesting and highly untraditional views on that subject but because their views of domestic policy, and particularly of the grounds and purposes of political life, are more fundamental. For similar reasons, we don't consider the broader American Left, spanning labor unions, social reform movements, the Socialist and Communist parties, and the like, but confine ourselves to the main political and intellectual developments and the most prominent and ambitious political leaders—the great men of the age, as Woodrow Wilson might put it.² Most liberals would recognize Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson as the most eminent, certainly the most consequential of elected liberal statesmen, even though they are lamentably dead, white, and male. Teddy Roosevelt has admirers, including, lately, Obama; but though he managed to do many things, often at the same time, TR was never a Democrat nor a sentimental egalitarian. Doubtless John F. Kennedy is more beloved than LBJ, but he doesn't hold a candle to the uncouth Texan in terms of building the modern welfare state and fulfilling the civil rights agenda. Truman's achievements are mostly in foreign policy, and many of them, like launching American participation in the Cold War, reek too much of the Vietnam War for contemporary liberal tastes. Bill Clinton, we might say, has his own problems. Ditto Jimmy Carter, though not the same ones.

When liberals tell their own story, they emphasize the unplanned, improvisational character of what came to be called liberalism. As Eric Alterman, a professor of English and journalism who likes to write books defending liberalism, declares, “liberalism arose as a matter of pure pragmatism with no theory in the first place and was led by a politician [FDR] who prided himself on his willingness to try almost anything. . . .” This argument, repeated in countless mainstream histories, presupposes that socioeconomic change is the driving force, and that politics, at least good, liberal politics, is a kind of reaction—an adjustment of governing institutions and policies to the changing realities of society. Liberalism comes across as defensive and modest, in fact downright conservative, but also inevitable. Political change can't lag behind social change for long, and what liberals do is simply to mind the gap: they prescribe the minimal adjustments necessary to keep the social organism healthy and whole. The story has the advantage of de-radicalizing liberalism, and of distracting attention from its actual ideas and from their role in its real genesis and growth. It's the equivalent of the policeman saying, Move along, folks, there's nothing to see here. Keep moving. . . . The same liberals who push this pragmatic account invariably speak at the same time of their movement's “ideals” or “vision,” revealing that liberalism as conservative adjustment cannot be the whole truth. In fact, both arguments, for liberalism as slow change and for liberalism as the hope of idealistic or radical transformation, were originally made by the same man, Woodrow Wilson, when he helped to found modern American liberalism. Franklin Roosevelt was a young man then, a Wilsonian progressive serving in his leader's administration.

Wilson thought the modest story about liberalism partly true, but partly a noble lie to cover the remarkably thorough break he intended to make from the original, and still more or less prevailing interpretation of the principles of American politics. The cover-up was thus coeval with the crime, you might say. Without dismissing the liberal gift for moderation and capacity for compromise, this book

will shine a light on the peculiar radicalism inherent in American liberalism ever since its origins in the Progressive movement. Liberalism was a choice, not a destiny, and in its rise to power ideas, not material conditions, were in the forefront. Its “foundational” ideas, as we say today (alas), when seen in broad daylight, point up the connections between the several installments of liberal reform, as envisioned and explained by the leading liberal reformers themselves. Pay no attention to the magic behind the curtain, commands the Wizard of Oz. In this case, however, the famous liberal statesmen are well in front of the curtain, exposed as only presidents can be, and their ideas and their reasoning are open to anyone who knows how to read. Our method, accordingly, is to let these renowned liberals speak for themselves as much as possible. We stick as closely as we can to their own words from their speeches, books, and letters. We try to understand them as they understood themselves, before criticizing or evaluating them—though this book, written by a conservative, doesn’t hesitate to criticize, taking as its touchstone the very precepts the liberals were gently but firmly trying to supplant, the principles of Abraham Lincoln and the American Founders.

Good-natured liberals may be surprised by this frank account of their own creed. Contrary to what they’ve probably read, liberalism was all about theory, and a kind of theory much more hostile to American premises than they’ve been told. But what is this “pure pragmatism” they are supposed to be celebrating instead? Pragmatism was a new development in American philosophy, a late nineteenth-century school that modestly disclaimed ultimate truths, abstract theories, and final ends in favor of a method that seeks and finds truth in “what works.” At the time, this meant what works according to the methods of the natural sciences, particularly Darwinian biology, and the new social sciences modeled on the natural. To the Pragmatists themselves, like John Dewey and William James, their approach was revolutionary, or to be precise, a revolution against the old ways of philosophy and politics that had discovered supposedly permanent truths like natural rights, the laws of nature and nature’s God, and unchanging species. In other words, Pragmatism was itself a theory; and to be a Pragmatist was already to incline against some of the main ideas of American constitutionalism. That isn’t the blancmange that the term suggests to most people today. As for philosophers, few would adhere nowadays to old-style Pragmatism anyway, having long since exchanged it (see Chapter Five for a more radical formulation. “What works” now implies not Dewey’s “method of intelligence,” but rather what works for you—for your favorite values, self-created lifestyle, or will to power. Have liberals noticed that they are in danger of becoming confidence men, selling belief in what Obama sometimes calls “universal truths” that they know are not universal and suspect strongly are not true?

The sense of liberalism as something novel, audacious, and comprehensive has faded, lost in the enduring authority of its innovations, the familiarity of its claims, and its temporary taming by the Reagan Revolution. Whatever else he has accomplished, Obama has reminded conservatives and liberals alike that liberalism can be an aggressive doctrine unashamedly pursuing the transformation of the country. Its robustness shouldn’t surprise. Its transformations are relatively recent. The twentieth century was, as the late Thomas B. Silver used to say, “the liberal century.” Conservatism was a late arrival, debuting as a self-conscious intellectual movement only in the 1950s, and lacking significant political success until the 1980s. By contrast, the liberal storm was already gathering in the 1880s, and broke upon the land in the new century’s second decade. It had made deep, decisive changes in American politics long before conservatism as we know it came on the scene. Those who would like to limit or reverse liberalism’s damage must face the fact that already, over several generations, it has pervasively reshaped Americans’ expectations of government and of life. Nonetheless, it didn’t win these victories all at once. Modern liberalism spread across the country in three powerful waves, interrupted by wars and by rather haphazard reactions to its excesses. This fa

is encouraging, because it shows that it can be stopped, and discouraging, because it hints it cannot be stopped for long. But then conservatives and moderates—even liberals—haven't had a commanding view of the movement in a long time, and so the past is not necessarily prologue.

Each wave of liberalism featured a different aspect of it—call them, for short, political liberalism, economic liberalism, and cultural liberalism—and each deposited on our shores a distinctive type of politics—the politics of progress, the politics of entitlements, and the politics of meaning. The terms are conceptual rather than, strictly speaking, historical. They help to organize our thinking more so than our record-keeping, inasmuch as elements of all three were mixed up in each stage. Although it wasn't inevitable that one wave should follow the next, a certain logic connected the New Freedom, the New Deal, and the Great Society. Each attempted to transform America, as their names suggest, and the second and third waves worked out themes implicit in the first, which is why the book devotes so much attention to Progressivism in Chapter Two. But the special flavor of each period owed much to the issues and forces involved, the legacy of previous reform, the character of the political leaders, and the disagreements within and between the generations of reformers. The third wave, centered on the Sixties, showed just how fratricidal liberalism could become.

The first and most disorienting wave was political liberalism, which began as a critique of the Constitution and the morality underlying it. That morality, Wilson charged, the natural rights doctrine of Thomas Jefferson and Lincoln, was based on an outmoded account of human nature, an atomistic and egoistic view that needed to be corrected by a more well-rounded or social view, made plausible by the recent discovery that human nature was necessarily progressive or perfectible. So-called natural rights were actually historical or prescriptive, evolving with the times toward a final and rational truth. The eighteenth-century Constitution, based on the eighteenth-century notion of a fixed human nature with static rights, had in turn to be transcended by a modern or living constitution based on the evolutionary view. Drawing on a curious and unstable mixture of Social Darwinism, German idealism, and English historicism, Wilson outlined the new State that liberals would ever after be building, the goal of which would be nothing less than man's complete spiritual fulfillment. Though he insisted that the process of change was seamless, he was candid enough, especially in his political science but also in his popular speeches, to explain the metamorphosis he intended.

The second wave explicitly adopted the name of liberalism, laying aside the old banner of Progressivism. It championed liberality or generosity in the form of a new doctrine of socioeconomic rights, and tried to connect the new rights to the old, the Second Bill of Rights (as FDR called it) to the First. Instead of rights springing from the individual, the New Deal reconceived individualism as springing from a new kind of rights, created by the State. The new entitlement-style rights posed a personal rights, even though they effectually attached to groups; but due to the slight familial resemblance, they allowed Roosevelt to present himself and the New Deal as the loyal servants and successors of the American Revolution, of the old social compact suitably updated. Liberalism's third wave, cultural or lifestyle liberalism, hit in the 1960s. It was only when this wave crashed around them that the radical character of liberalism became clear to the American people; only then that conservatism became, at least temporarily, a majority movement, insofar as it stood for America against its cultured despisers and reformers. The Great Society agreed with the New Deal that the government had to provide for Americans' necessities in order that they may live in freedom, but it denied that freedom from want and freedom from fear (along with freedom of speech and worship) were any longer sufficient for all-around human liberation. Freedom required not merely living comfortably but also creatively, a demand that the New Left took several steps further than poor Lyndon Johnson was willing or able to go.

In the Sixties the “peculiar” character of the radicalism bound up with contemporary liberalism began to tear it apart. Modern liberalism had always been a complex blend of an evolutionary right doctrine, pursuing greater equality of conditions among individuals and groups so that they would have greater freedom to realize themselves or choose their own lifestyles; a unified State directed by experts in public administration and social and economic development who would enforce the conditions of social morality; a philosophy of history that assured that rational progress was possible and indeed inevitable; and a faith in political leaders who could envision history’s next move and inspire the people to march into that better future. The second and third elements depended on hierarchy, education, and authority of a surprisingly conservative sort. The first and fourth were more fluid, open-ended, and relativist. When social morality collided with personal liberation, and the State’s authority clashed with the people’s rights, and the assumptions of rational progress were denied by protestors who preferred to make history by following their authentic selves rather than admire history as it came to an end—then liberalism began to unravel. For conflicting reasons, liberals lost faith that they were on the right side of history, and that the State could ever provide the conditions for complete self-development or spiritual fulfillment.

Obama inherited that frayed liberalism. Against long odds, he’s tried to reunite its dissonant parts and restore its political élan. He brought America to the verge of a fourth wave of political and social transformation, something that neither Democrats nor Republicans thought possible. But as the late embodiment of the visionary prophet-statesmen he hasn’t been able to sustain the deep connection with the American people that his election in 2008 seemed to promise, and that his desire to restore liberalism as the country’s dominant public philosophy required. Perhaps after the debacle of the Great Society, three decades in the political shadow of Ronald Reagan, and the current protracted economic doldrums, Americans have grown suspicious of the liberal vision of the future as a kind of Brigadoon—a land of wonders that voters glimpse every four years but that fades quickly into the mists, and from which no one has ever returned. Unlike any of his liberal predecessors, Obama’s tortuous doubts about American exceptionalism lead to a sense of his estrangement from his own country, a disability not relieved by his profession, in Berlin, that he is a citizen of the world as well. By American standards he seems to lack both the citizen’s pride and the immigrant’s gratitude.

Nonetheless, the health care reform bill alone could plausibly establish him as the savior and renewer of the liberal political faith for its second century. But the program’s life is threatened on all sides. The Supreme Court could deprive him of this triumph by roughly striking down Obamacare, and if it doesn’t the people themselves may do so, indirectly, in the 2012 election and its aftermath. Nor can one forget that rich countries around the globe are being bankrupted by their government debt and deficits, just as he vows to expand ours by leaps and bounds. Obama’s fate is tied to liberalism’s, and vice versa. It was precisely a hundred years ago that Woodrow Wilson launched modern liberalism in all its hubris. That year, 1912, was also the year of the *Titanic*. Does anyone see an iceberg ahead?

1

The Audacity of Barack Obama

Martin Luther King Jr. had already been killed in Memphis in April, and Bobby Kennedy nine weeks later in Los Angeles, when the Democratic National Convention pulled into Chicago in August 1968 intent on nominating Hubert Humphrey for president. By then Americans were inured to seeing the cities burn: almost a hundred riots had broken out after King's murder, a striking case of shooting the messenger and then his message—of nonviolence. But none of those explosions or any of the others since the 1965 Watts riots had the shock value of the melee in Chicago between the peace activists and the police. This wasn't a protest against racial inequality or against a brazen assassination, nor even rioting mainly for fun and profit.¹ The demonstration and the ensuing confrontation in Grant Park were emphatically political, a revolt against the Democratic Party and its old guard (with its old rule). Humphrey was the last Democrat to get his party's nod without entering a single presidential primary), a battle between the center-left and the farther left for the liberal soul. *Götterdämmerung*, a astute participant later called it: the twilight of the gods. Inside the International Amphitheatre Senator Abraham Ribicoff, in the course of nominating the antiwar successor to the recently martyred Kennedy, declared that "with George McGovern as president of the United States we wouldn't have had Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago." Not to be outdone, Mayor Richard J. Daley shook his fist and loosed a perfect storm of politically incorrect epithets in the Connecticut senator's direction, denouncing Ribicoff in terms that might curl even current Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel's toes.² For five days the battles raged inside and outside the convention. Haynes Johnson, who covered it as a reporter, summed up the results four decades later: "In its psychic impact, and its long-term political consequences, it eclipsed any other such convention in American history, destroying faith in politicians, in the political system, in the country and in its institutions."³

To be sure, Haynes Johnson was not an unbiased observer, and so one must adjust his terms. By "politicians" he meant *liberal* politicians, and by "political system" he meant the liberal political system as it had developed since the New Deal. Chicago did not destroy American conservatives' faith in *conservative* politicians, in conservative ideals, or in the enduring institutions of the country. In anything, the events in Chicago confirmed the right wing's opinion of American liberalism as an advanced state of decomposition. What the 1968 Democratic National Convention bloodily exposed was the civil war within liberalism itself. At the center of that conflict was the Vietnam War, which the protesters and New Left groups condemned not merely as unjust but sick. Increasingly, they regarded Vietnam as the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace in the American soul: this was a country that *enjoyed* waging cruel and unjust wars because this was a cruel and unjust country, whose Gestapo tactics at home perfectly reflected its fascist warmongering abroad. The enemy was not merely the war but "the war machine." In this sense Johnson got it exactly right. What

was at stake was nothing less than the moral and political respectability of American civilization, and especially of America regarded, as Mayor Daley and millions of his fellow Democrats regarded it, the bulwark and very home of liberal decency. And since liberalism was in the saddle in those days and the Democratic Party predominant, Johnson can be forgiven for thinking everyone perceived the same catastrophe he did.⁴

Still, Americans of every political persuasion would have been struck by the contrast with Grant Park forty years later on Election Day, 2008. Thousands of citizens of every race and background streamed happily down Michigan Avenue for hours before the victory rally began, before they could be sure (though hardly anyone doubted) there would be a victory to celebrate, converging around the dignified stage where Barack Obama would acknowledge his election as the forty-fourth president of the United States. To millions in America and around the world, it felt historic, but in a good way. *Time* magazine's post-election cover story began: "Some princes are born in palaces. Some are born in mangers. But a few are born in the imagination, out of scraps of history and hope." (The birth turned the bliss into a joke: Why doesn't Obama have a birth certificate? Because he was born in a manger!) *Time's* writer, the talented Nancy Gibbs, didn't specify which kind of royalty had been elected president but implied . . . a Prince of History and Hope. She noted, for example, that Obama disclaimed personal ambition. "*I'm not the one making history*, he said every chance he got. *You are*." Nonetheless, "people were waiting for him, waiting for someone to finish what a King began." She meant Martin Luther King Jr. It's remarkable how much the day's elation drew on the hope, or the hype, that the curse of the Sixties had finally been extirpated, King's dreams for the country realized: Camelot, civil rights, youthful idealism, an end to unjust wars, the certitudes of American progress, the banishment of tragedy—all came together again, this time in perfect harmony. "*Remember this day*, parents told their children as they took them out of school to go see an African-American candidate make history," observed Gibbs. "An election in one of the world's oldest democracies looked like the kind they hold in brand-new ones, when citizens finally come out and dance, a purple thumb day, a velvet revolution. . . . You heard the same phrases everywhere. *First time ever. In my lifetime. Whatever it takes.*"⁵

David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker* and soon-to-be Obama biographer, agreed that Chicago was an epochal moment in American race relations. "The color line had not been erased or even transcended, but a historical bridge had been crossed," he wrote. *The Bridge*, his life of Obama, elaborated on the metaphor, spanning the story of American race relations from "Bloody Sunday" on March 7, 1965, in Selma, Alabama, to Obama's victory speech in Grant Park. Remnick relayed a story from Roger Wilkins, who asked his white neighbor Ann why she was supporting Obama. "She looked at me and said, 'Because I want to feel good about my country.'" Ann's feeling was widely and passionately shared. When the Electoral College numbers signaled victory, the new president and his family finally appeared onstage, greeted by what Remnick called "well-mannered pandemonium": crying, flag-waving, the embracing of friends and strangers. "It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment" declared Obama, "change has come to America."⁶

Michael Tomasky, the editor of *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, whose principal idea is democratic liberalism, captured the moment this way:

The image of Barack Hussein Obama speaking to America from his stage in Grant Park that night in November 2008 as president-elect was, for liberals, one of the most staggering images we've ever seen. One felt—many millions of us felt—almost invincible in a way; finally justified

in our beleaguered beliefs, after so many years of despondency and rage; aware in fresh and unprecedented ways of our collective power, like mortals transformed into superheroes in the movies, realizing for the first time that they could fly or crush stone. . . . All things seemed possible.⁷

It wasn't just stardust, in other words, or even a racial breakthrough that all Americans could be proud of, that the president-elect represented. There was something about "the image of Barack Hussein Obama speaking to America" that filled millions of his fellow liberals not so much with pride in their country's progress as with a sense of "collective power," like supermen to whom suddenly "all things seemed possible." Race shrank to a subplot in the drama of *Yes We Can*, "that timeless creed," "that American creed," as Obama called it, exhorting the crowd with the phrase seven times. His was no mere personal, racial, or even partisan triumph, but a long-overdue renewal of the progressive cause, which in his view was the American cause. If not exactly two sides of the same coin, he and American liberalism yet were intimately connected, dependent on the same "staggering images" of a political hero with superhuman abilities who could, by the magic of his own rhetoric, inspire belief in a future in which all things desirable seemed possible. The alternative to such "invincible" power was in Tomasky's terms, hideously bleak: a future, like the recent past under George W. Bush, of "despondency and rage," of liberal beliefs "beleaguered," unfulfilled, nugatory. Grant Park 2008 was not so far from the rage of Grant Park '68, after all. But now the dreams of the antiwar protesters, the McGovernites, the radicals, and to a certain extent even the old Democrats had come true, or at least were on the verge of being fulfilled, thanks to Obama's victory. He seemed to have reconciled the Sixties antagonisms, to have restored the house of liberalism to its accustomed and ruling place in American politics. On that day and for many months thereafter, through his own audacity and vision Barack Obama defined the power and the possibilities of American liberalism. Only gradually would liberalism come to define—to circumscribe and finally endanger—the power and the possibilities of Barack Obama.

Nemesis

As a candidate, Obama used to joke about the sun breaking through the clouds when he started to speak. For the past year and a half, at least, the sun god has deserted him. His legislative accomplishments peaked in early 2010 with the passage of his health care and financial reform bills. Both are less popular now than then, and polls consistently show a majority of Americans opposed to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The economic stimulus bill failed to fulfill the administration's promise to keep unemployment below 8 percent; on the contrary, unemployment soared to over 10 percent and lingered painfully in the 9s and high 8s before drifting lower. Obama's own approval numbers plunged from 69 percent in early 2009 to the low 40 percent range, before stabilizing in the mid-to-high 40s. What his secretary of the Treasury, Timothy Geithner, dubbed the "recovery summer" of 2010 disappeared beneath the waters of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico—a recovery operation of a different, and protracted, sort. Day after day those belching black clouds mocked Obama's billowing oratory, becoming an omen of subterranean nemesis for this president who had promised to heal the earth and calm the seas. The low point was reached when, criticized for his excessive deference to BP's team and the government's own experts in the Gulf, the president asserted he was looking for some "ass to kick." He added that of course he first had to consult the experts, including his Nobel Prize-winning energy secretary, to determine *whose* ass to kick!

It's not surprising that by the second summer of Obama's term, supporters like Tomasky had begun

to write essays with titles like “Against Despair.” “It seems likely,” he admitted, “that American liberals will never again for the foreseeable future feel quite like we did that night” in Grant Park. Euphoria always leaves a hangover, and this was a doozy. “American liberalism has . . . been living through a painful period of coming to terms with [the] reality” that “all things weren’t possible,” Tomasky explained, and that in retrospect it was a bad idea to “insist on thinking of Obama . . . as liberalism’s redeemer.”⁸ The despondency deepened when the November 2010 election results rolled in. Amid the worst economy in a generation and in some respects since the Great Depression, the only populist movement to emerge was a right-wing one, the Tea Party. Aided by the Tea Party, the Republicans won historic gains in the House of Representatives and in state legislatures, picking more than 60 seats in the House and almost 700 at the state level, and electing six new GOP governors (including in the key swing states of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and six senators. Independent voters went overwhelmingly for GOP candidates. For two years the Democrats had enjoyed undivided control of the national government, holding all three of the elective branches. The midterm elections ended that. After this “shellacking,” as he called it, the president formerly known as Prince would no longer be able to dictate the terms of debate, and would have only the pleasures of partisan gridlock, a sluggish economy, and golf games with Speaker John Boehner to look forward to.

A New Majority

Tempting as it might be to write President Obama off, it would be a big mistake. Whatever else he may accomplish, his staggering victory on health care reform has earned him a future place on the Mount Rushmore of liberalism, alongside those other supreme hero-statesmen of the creed, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Assuming that his signature achievement is not unceremoniously repealed and replaced, Obama will almost certainly become one of the Democratic immortals, the giants who built and expanded the modern liberal state. Unlike his predecessors, he will deserve credit for bringing liberalism back, at least temporarily, from a period of prolonged and profound decline. After Ronald Reagan’s presidency, for almost twenty years liberalism seemed an exhausted political faith, ashamed of its own name—in 2008 both Hillary Clinton and Obama preferred to be called “progressives”—and surviving as a political force only by tacking rightward. From the very beginning of his campaign for the presidency, however, Obama set his sights not on modest policy gains but on bold, systemic changes to energy policy, environmental regulation, taxation, foreign policy, and of course health care, all designed, in his words, to *remake America*, and all presupposing that “shock-and-awe statism,” as Indiana governor Mitch Daniels termed it, was again possible.

In pursuit of that vision, Obama led his party in 2008 to a commanding victory, winning the presidency with a majority of the popular vote—something a Democrat hadn’t managed since Jimmy Carter’s squeaker thirty-two years before. It’s worth recalling the sweep of the Democrats’ win only four years ago. In individual terms, Obama’s was the biggest triumph for his party since LBJ’s landslide in 1964—though that understates Obama’s achievement because Johnson was already president then. Among *non-incumbent* Democrats, Obama’s presidential victory ranks an astonishing third in U.S. history, behind (as a percentage of the popular vote) only Roosevelt’s in 1932 and Andrew Jackson’s in 1828.⁹ In short, Obama already compares favorably to the greatest Democratic politicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And though he didn’t sweep into office as many congressmen and senators as FDR or LBJ did in their big years, he helped boost the Democratic margin of control in both houses of Congress, which had been liberated from a decade of GOP dominance in 2006. They moved from 235 to 257 seats in the House of Representatives, and from 5

(counting the two independents) to 59 in the Senate. Those larger margins proved vital to the passage of the stimulus, Obamacare, and the financial reform bill.¹⁰

Liberals now may carp at him for losing the initiative or not fighting hard enough, but Obama is playing a long, high-stakes game, and it's not at all clear he's losing. After all, he sees himself engaged in an epic struggle: he is trying to reinvigorate the very possibility of liberalism, as both a moral aspiration and political program. To understand what he's aiming at, it helps to see the problem he is trying to overcome. Consider, then, his own view of the parlous state the Democrats were in before he came along.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, published in 2006, his second autobiography and first campaign book (focused nominally on his U.S. Senate years, not quite two of them at that point) and the source of his most thoughtful campaign speeches, he treats the party elders respectfully, but not exactly warmly. He mentions Teddy Kennedy three times, calling him one of the Senate's best storytellers; devotes a page to Al Gore's emotions after his "precipitous fall"; and acknowledges "the Kerry people" who invited him to speak at the 2004 Democratic convention. Obama goes out of his way to emphasize he was a newcomer to the party who couldn't even get a floor pass to the 2000 convention. Reflecting on the elections of 2000 and 2004, he confesses, "I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation—a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago. . . ."¹¹

He praises Bill Clinton more highly than any other contemporary Democrat, because Clinton recognized the staleness of the old political debate between Left and Right and came close to moving beyond it with his politics of the Third Way, which "tapped into the pragmatic, nonideological attitudes of the majority of Americans." But Clinton blew it, and the author gradually explains why and how. First, he regrets Clinton's "clumsy and transparent" gestures to the Reagan Democrats, and his "frighteningly coldhearted" use of other people (for example, "the execution of a mentally retarded death row inmate" before a crucial primary). Then Obama notes sadly that Clinton's policies—"recognizably progressive if modest in their goals"—had commanded broad public support, but that president had never been able, "despite a booming economy," to turn that support into a governing coalition. Finally, he gently charges Clinton with the worst offense of all: strengthening the forces of conservatism. Due to Clinton's untidy life story, which Obama doesn't hesitate to summarize—"the draft letter saga, the marijuana puffing, the Ivy League intellectualism, the professional wife who didn't bake cookies, and most of all the sex," not to mention the "undeniable evidence" of such "personal lapses"—Clinton prepared the way for George W. Bush's victory in 2000.¹²

In his campaign and presidential speeches, Obama can't afford to be so candid—he still needs Hillary and Bill's supporters, after all—but he subtly makes his point. For example, in his acceptance speech in Denver, the single biggest speech of the 2008 campaign, he laid at Bill Clinton's feet the oldest backhanded compliment in the books, thanking the former president "who last night made the case for change as only he can make it. . . ." That's a subtle double insult. It reminds the discerning of Clinton's characteristic bloviation, and then of his larger political failings—that is, when you think back on Clinton, you're reminded why the Democrats so desperately need Obama.¹³

Granted, Obama holds Clinton to higher standards than he does the other party elders. Jimmy Carter, Al Gore, Kerry—these mediocrities lacked the political talent that Clinton squandered, in Obama's estimation, and they were innocent of political daring. Their shortcomings were excused, to some extent, by the fact that their times were not auspicious. Still, Obama is fairly clear that if the party is to move forward it must return to the standards set by earlier exemplars, and especially by its heroes who brought about major political changes lasting for a generation or more. This was the context

his comparison of Clinton to Ronald Reagan, which raised such a ruckus early in the campaign:

I do think that, for example, the 1980 election was different. I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it.¹⁴

The comparison of Clinton to Nixon is delicious in its own right, but Obama's larger point is that Clinton was no Reagan, partly because the times were different but mostly, as he points out in his book, because Clinton was undisciplined, unfocused, and conceded too easily to the Right. Once his own health care reform—Hillarycare, as it came to be called—had been quashed by a Democratic Congress, Clinton decided the Age of Reagan was here to stay, and gave up on his already halfhearted efforts at political realignment.

Obama assumes the Reagan Revolution is not here to stay, because the Obama Revolution is just beginning. As tokens of Obama's seriousness about fundamental political change, *The Audacity of Hope* mentions Franklin D. Roosevelt more often than it does any living Democratic politician. And it features a long, interesting discussion of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the political point of which is to reassert the Democrats' claim to speak for American ideals, which are the touchstone of every electoral realignment.

Thus the commentators who interpreted Obama as a new kind of postpartisan political figure get exactly wrong. It's true he wants to stop "arguing about the same ole stuff," as he once put it; he wants to move beyond the decades-long debate between liberalism and conservatism. Bill Clinton attempted the same thing in 1992, as did George W. Bush in 2000. The forty-second and forty-third presidents each promoted a novel doctrine he hoped would leave the old arguments in the dust—the Third Way and compassionate conservatism, respectively—but each proffer eventually fizzled. Though capable of distracting the pundits for one or two elections, neither idea came close to new-modeling the public philosophy and realigning the entire party system. But Obama, as political scientist James W. Ceasari noted, dispensed even with the obligatory bow to such a new doctrine.¹⁵ Instead of a fresh public philosophy, he offered himself. John McCain reciprocated. As a result, the 2008 presidential race took place squarely within the familiar ideological framework of liberalism and conservatism, but with McCain promising some maverick departures from, while still accepting, the right-wing norm, and Obama pressing for leftward hope and change. Once in office, Obama tried belatedly to christen his reforms "the New Foundation," but abandoned the name amid a torrent of late-night TV jokes about ladies' undergarments. Retreating from any suggestion of newfangled ideology, he then came up with a second, even feebler mantra, "Win the Future," which in its desperation recalled President Gerald R. Ford's mid-1970s rallying cry, "Whip Inflation Now," abbreviated on political buttons as "WIN." The wag asked why couldn't the message be "Stop Inflation Now," or "SIN"?

Yet a change is gonna come, Obama vows, even if it won't come in the form of a new doctrine. He doesn't need a new ideology because he finds plenty of life left in the old, a concession that in no way detracts from his ambitiousness. For the change he seeks is nothing less than an electoral earthquake that would permanently shatter the 50-50 America of the past four presidential elections (prior to 2008). He thinks liberals can get beyond the old debate by finally *winning* it. "Eking out a bare Democratic majority isn't good enough," he wrote in *The Audacity of Hope*. "What's needed is a broad majority of Americans—Democrats, Republicans, and independents of good will. . . ." Though he didn't call explicitly for a realignment that would make the Democrats the majority party again, he left little doubt which party would be the centerpiece of the new coalition. After the New Hampshire primary, he told his supporters "you can be the new majority who can lead this nation out of a long

political darkness.” A month later, after winning the Wisconsin primary, he explained what he called “my central premise,” that “the only way we will bring about real change in America is if we can bring new people into the process, if we can attract young people, if we can attract independents, if we can stop fighting with Republicans and try to bring some over to our side. I want to form a working majority for change.” Speaking to the AFL-CIO in 2003, he laid out the long march that would be necessary:

I happen to be a proponent of a single-payer universal health care program . . . [a] single-payer health care plan, a universal health care plan. And that’s what I’d like to see. But as all of you know, we may not get there immediately. Because first we have to take back the White House, we have to take back the Senate, and we have to take back the House.

As a presidential candidate, he was not officially for a single-payer health care plan; his 2008 platform stopped far short of that. Nor did he ever repeat this candid statement of his ultimate goal, which could be described by that hoary but accurate curse word, *socialized medicine*. In the meantime, however, the Democrats in 2006 handily recaptured both the Senate and the House of Representatives, followed by the presidency in 2008. The “working majority for change,” or a reasonable facsimile of it, was ready to get to work.

Lightworker

If the leading edge of Obama’s audacity is his desire to bring about fundamental political change at a time when he thinks every other leading Democrat has given up on it or lacks the gifts to achieve it, his daring shows itself too in his confidence that he is “the one,” as Oprah Winfrey famously said. His supreme self-confidence bordering on self-obsession isn’t news, of course, either to his critics or to his admirers. They gush over him less than they used to, but it’s good to be reminded of their initial enthusiasm, their enthralment. Here’s Mark Morford, an online columnist in San Francisco, in 2008:

Many spiritually advanced people I know (not cowering religious, mind you, but deeply spiritual) identify Obama as a Lightworker, that rare kind of attuned being who has the ability to lead us not merely to new foreign policies or health care plans . . . but who can actually help usher in *a new way of being on the planet*, of relating and connecting and engaging with this bizarre earthly experiment. These kinds of people actually help us *evolve*. They are philosophers and peacemakers of a very high order, and they speak not just to reason or emotion, but to the soul.

Yet the fact is that neither then nor now has the precise character of Obama’s soulcraft been well understood. In his own terms, he seeks to bring about enduring political change even as (to mention those he often invokes in this connection) Ronald Reagan, Franklin Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln did before him.¹⁶

Obama’s account of Lincoln deserves particular attention. Lincolnian language appears and reappears in Obama’s speeches, usually in dreadful, tin-eared paraphrase. He often compares himself indirectly and sometimes directly to the first Republican president. As he prepared to take office, he read and encouraged reporters to read *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book about Lincoln’s cabinet. On his way to Washington, he retraced part of Lincoln’s journey from Springfield, Illinois, in 1861. At his inauguration, he took the oath of office with one hand on Lincoln’s Bible. At the luncheon afterward, each course had some reference to the sixteenth president and was served on replicas of Lincoln’s china. The speech that initially put Obama on the map, his 2002 denunciation of

the pending Iraq War, concludes in a mangle of the Gettysburg Address: “Nor should we allow those who would march off and pay the ultimate sacrifice, who would prove the full measure of devotion with their blood, to make such an awful sacrifice in vain.” He couldn’t have had a speechwriter for that one. He announced his candidacy in Springfield, a place central to Lincoln’s political career and the site of some of his great speeches, including the “House Divided” and his affecting farewell to the city as he left to assume the presidency. In his speech, Obama does his best to appropriate Lincoln’s memory:

And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together . . . I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President. . . . By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail. But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible. He tells us that there is power in words . . . in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope. As Lincoln organized the forces arrayed against slavery, he was heard to say: “Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought the battle through.” That is our purpose here today. That’s why I’m in this race. Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation. . . . Together, starting today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth.

Obama strains to let you know he identifies, as we say today, with Lincoln: Abe is not the only “tall, gangly, self-made” lawyer primed for greatness that the audience is supposed to recognize. Though it ends with another paraphrase of the Gettysburg Address, the passage—and the whole speech—was meant to recall Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, which kicked off his campaign for a U.S. Senate seat in 1858 against Stephen Douglas. The quotation about the “four winds” is Lincoln’s description of the new Republican Party, forged from fragments of the fading Whig and Free Soil parties, and reaching out to antislavery Democrats and centrists.

Thus Obama compares the new majority he seeks to build to the majority party that Lincoln helped create. He tries to inspire Democrats by appealing to the founder of the generations-long, post-Civil War Republican majority. This is partisan ambition of a high order, masquerading as high-toned bipartisanship or postpartisanship. Obama speaks as though Lincoln had been trying to overcome the country’s divisions by calling for unity, for fraternal or bipartisan or postpartisan cooperation in the spirit of national renewal. In fact, Lincoln warned in Springfield that the Union would “become all one thing, or all the other.” It would become either all free, or all slave. Lincoln’s road to unity (for of course he did wish to save the Union and free government) ran through division, through forcing the country to choose: slavery or freedom. That’s why it’s called the “House Divided” speech. Lincoln offered no compromise on the issue of slavery’s moral status or its extension into the western territories. In fact, he was determined to undercut the false compromise then being peddled by Stephen Douglas in the form of popular sovereignty. Obama’s political point seems to be similar, despite his soothing and disingenuous language: all our chronic divisions will be healed once the country is safely in the hands of a broad, liberal, pro-change majority. That is his “central premise.” *The* postpartisanship will indeed flower, once partisanship is laid to rest by the effective disappearance of conservatives after a shattering Republican defeat.

The Audacity of Hope

Obama spoke in 2005 at the opening of the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield

On that occasion, he talked more of the man himself than of his political legacy. Lincoln exhibits “the fundamental element of the American character,” he said, “a belief that we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams.” He hailed Lincoln’s “repeated acts of self-creation, the insistence that . . . we can recast the wilderness of the American landscape and the American heart into something better, something finer.” The wilderness of the American heart—now that’s a phrase Lincoln would never have uttered. Is it Obama’s own view of the American soul’s desolation? Perhaps it is even a topic of family conversation. Michelle Obama used to say in her standard 2008 campaign speech that the country is “just downright mean” and “guided by fear,” though she implied the problem was curable. Her husband “knows that at some level there’s a hole in our souls,” she often said, and he “is the only person in this race who understands that before we can work on the problem we have to fix our souls. Our souls are broken in this nation.” In a speech in Los Angeles she amplified the point: “Barack Obama . . . is going to demand that you shed your cynicism. . . . That you come out of your isolation, that you move out of your comfort zones. That you push yourselves to be better. And that you engage. Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed.”¹⁷

Obama calls this power of soul-fixing “the audacity of hope.” The phrase comes from a sermon by the man who married Barack and Michelle, baptized their daughters, and served as their minister for twenty years, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama defines it as “a belief in things not seen,” applying St. Paul’s description of Christian faith to the earthly transformations promised, consistently and seriously, by the president and by American liberalism for more than a century. He isn’t the first or the last Lightworker, after all, though in some respects he is a new political phenomenon. To state the obvious, he is young, gifted, and black, and as Nina Simone (followed by Aretha Franklin) sang forty years ago, “To be young, gifted, and black / Is where it’s at!” Even after the past few years’ disappointments, most Americans feel a certain pride in Obama and his achievement. Beyond that, his rare combination of Ivy League degrees and Chicago street cred, of high-sounding postpartisanship and hard-core partisanship, leaves people guessing. To call this combination or alternative “pragmatic,” as he likes to, is simply to accept his invitation not to think about it.

But in the decisive respect, Obama does *not* stand for something new under the sun. He represents a rejuvenated version of the progressive impulses that gave birth, a century ago, to modern American liberalism. Most political movements in our history came into being to press a putative reform or two and dissolved when they had succeeded, or failed, definitively. The antislavery and women’s suffrage movements succeeded, the Populists’ demand for the free coinage of silver failed, and Prohibition is an interesting case of a movement that succeeded and *then* failed. Modern liberalism is something else again.

What came to be called liberalism was the first intellectual and political movement without a clearly defined goal of reform, without a *terminus ad quem*: the first to propose an endless future of continual reform. It pledged to make the country “progressive,” to keep America always moving forward, up-to-date, and in tune with the times. No specific reform or set of them could satisfy the demand, and no ultimate goal could comprehend, much less specify, all the changes in political forms and policies that might become necessary in the future. Obama’s campaign slogans in 2008 were marvelous examples of this open-endedness. Hazy as they were, they galvanized millions of voters in the primaries and general election, and judging by his record as president they are likely to remain his most renowned utterances. I mean the famous monosyllables, *hope* and *change*.

Around these two gas giants Obama’s rhetorical system spun. To begin with, in Obamaspeak hope confronts “the politics of cynicism.” Cynicism wears many hats in Obama’s speeches: the “politics of

anything goes,” the tactics of “spin masters” and “negative ad peddlers” who seek to divide us, the viewpoint of those who think “politics has become a business and not a mission,” the “can’t-do, won’t-do, won’t-even-try style of politics,” the resort to “stale tactics to scare the voters,” the effort to “make a big election about small things.” The nefarious cynics deny the nation’s problems, they blame them on someone else (“the other party, or gay people, or immigrants”). And when the people look away “in disillusionment and frustration,” the “cynics, and the lobbyists, and the special interests” move in to fill the void, and turn government “into a game only they can afford to play.”¹⁸

Cynicism remains Obama’s all-purpose explanation for the “gridlock and polarization” that characterize our small politics today, that rob Americans of “our sense of common purpose—our sense of higher purpose.” He has disdain enough for Democrats as well as Republicans, but lately he contemns primarily the alleged extremism of the congressional Republicans, their stubborn refusal to compromise. Since he finds it difficult to believe that he’s not being reasonable, and that Republican and Tea Partiers could possibly believe, on the merits, what they claim to believe, he tends to resort sooner or later to the notion that his opponents must be rationalizing. That is, they have interests and prejudices to defend that they couldn’t possibly admit publicly. To reason or deliberate with them, at least in the high-minded sense, is therefore futile. Even self-styled rebels like the Tea Partiers are hiding their real motivations, often from themselves. Their various “absolutisms”—of the free market, Christianity, and majoritarianism—are the flip side of their own private desperation. Their leaders cynically exploit the rank and file, who though not conscious cynics themselves are, typically, victims of powerful forces outside their comprehension or control. They “cling,” therefore, as Obama said once in San Francisco, “to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them,” out of anxiety over their falling social status or declining job prospects. “A cynical electorate is a self-centered electorate,” he argues, even if they don’t realize it. In any event, the bogeyman of cynicism is hardly equivalent of the deeper and richer institutional analysis that once, as we shall see, was America’s liberalism’s stock-in-trade. Liberals used to criticize institutions like the congressional committee system, the separation of powers, and political parties dominated by large donors and local interests on the theory that they perverted American politics by marrying narrow self-interest to mechanistic checks and balances. The result, supposedly, was the obstruction of salutary change and progressive reform—the dreaded “deadlock of democracy.” Obama in 2008 simplified this elaborate protean literature into an indictment of the Tom DeLays and Karl Roves of contemporary Washington who had induced public apathy, a paralyzing loss of faith in the future, and a dumbing down of political debate. He clings to that simplification today, though he’s had to broaden the villain class.¹⁹

The antidote for widespread cynicism and rationalization is *hope*, the saving quality that a Lincoln or FDR can awaken in the public, at long last. Without that change in the public mind or soul, no broad program of legislative reform can be enacted; and without such reforms, the belief in hope cannot long be sustained. “We know the challenges. . . . We’ve talked about them for years,” Obama argues.

What’s stopped us is the failure of leadership, the smallness of our politics—the ease with which we’re distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance of tough decisions, our preference for scoring cheap political points instead of rolling up our sleeves and building a working consensus to tackle big problems.

There are good “ten-point plans” aplenty, he observes. They have all been blocked by the pervasive cynicism in Washington, and concerning Washington, over the past three decades or more. “It’s time to turn the page,” he likes to say, but the problem is that “we haven’t had leaders who can inspire the

American people to rally behind a common purpose and a higher purpose.” The public has to be aroused from its cynical slumbers, and though he admits that the times must be right, it’s up to the leader to recognize and exploit the favorable moment, to open the public’s eyes to the possibility, indeed the imminence, of a political leap forward.²⁰

In every critical moment, Obama affirms, “a new generation has risen up and done what’s needed to be done. Today . . . it is time for our generation to answer that call.” Echoing the passing of the torch that JFK evoked on behalf of his generation—as well as the heroic exertions of the civil rights movement—Obama in announcing his candidacy adjured his followers, “Let’s be the generation that ends poverty in America. . . . Let’s be the generation that finally tackles our health care crisis. . . . Let’s be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil.” He continued:

That is why this campaign can’t only be about me. It must be about us—it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams.

His oft-repeated refrain about “the moment” speaks to this generational awareness. The moment when a generation becomes conscious of itself and ready to act to change America, when it realizes “yes, we can” change the political system. This awakening that makes possible all subsequent political reform is what Obama refers to when he proclaims, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” The “moment” is when hope vanquishes cynicism, when the sudden realization of generational unity finally makes hope, and thus liberalism itself, viable. The crucial change is what social scientists in another context used to call “the change to change,” the point at which a people inured to stasis and stalemate begins to expect instead continual improvement. Obama invites new voters, college students, independents, and disaffected Republicans to join in this new political revelation.²¹

The clash between hope and cynicism pits the future against the past, “a new politics for a new time” against the same old, same old. He is careful to distinguish hope from blind optimism. Hope is not “the almost willful ignorance that thinks . . . the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it.” “Hope is not ignoring . . . the challenges that stand between you and your dreams.” On the contrary, hope is “imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, struggling for what did not seem possible before.”

You know, there is a moment in the life of every generation when that spirit has to come . . . for what we know in our gut is possible . . . when we determine that we’re going to keep the dream alive for those who still hunger for opportunity and still thirst for justice.

That’s why he insists on “the audacity of hope,” which he calls “God’s greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation; a belief in things not seen; a belief that there are better days ahead.”²²

This mixture of divine and secular assertions boils down to a moment of historical clarity: *hope* when you recover your faith in progress, and so in progressivism; when you can envision “the better days ahead,” but also when you resolve not to wait passively for them but to pursue them courageously: the *audacity* of hope. To the leader belongs the awesome power to transmit this vision of the future to the people, to allow those who walked in darkness to see a great light, and to organize them for the “march into the future” that he alone can lead. Despite Obama’s efforts to offload to others some of this responsibility with the awakened people, it falls primarily on his head as the prophet of the moment. Though he expresses doubts about his ability and invites the people to correct

him when he goes wrong, he knows he is the one. It's like the old joke in which the egotist says, "Be enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think about me?" That's why Obama's campaign catchwords lack grammatical subjects and objects. Who should change, and in what way? Hope for what, exactly? Yes, we can . . . do what again? These slogans discourage deliberation. They have a childlike, dreamlike over all debate. Each requires some external agent to supply and define its missing terms. Together they say, in effect, give us a leader who will show us what to hope for, what to change, and what we can do.

Audacity is a curious word with two meanings, which reflect a genuine moral ambiguity. It means both boldness, daring, confidence—and reckless daring, rashness, foolhardiness. It can be a good or a bad thing, a virtue or a vice. "Hope," by contrast, is a passion; in the language of the medieval school of thought, hope aims at a future, arduous, and possible good. It doesn't always attain that good, but young people tend not to know that; their inexperience of life and of their own shortcomings disposes them to be full of hope and heedless of dangers, noted Aristotle, just as drunks are. Obama, like most liberals, looks to the young for confirmation of his hopes and dreams, and urges the old to adopt the inexperienced and immoderate as their guide. Hope is also a theological virtue, but presumably even Obama doesn't mean to offer eternal happiness to his followers.²³ His vision is of earthly happiness, wholeness, and justice, a world in which all things desirable are possible. As he helpfully explained in his debut at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, his name, Barack, means "blessed." It's as if, though he were a little bit of heaven on earth, intent on helping turn earth into heaven, even if he wasn't born in a manger.

As he told Congress in the late innings of the health care fight, "we did not come here just to clean up crises," even one as big as the Great Recession. "We came to build a future," to do the "great things" that "will meet history's test." He concluded, "This is our calling. This is our character." And that had been his ambition all along. "Let us transform this nation," he implored in 2007 when he announced his candidacy for president. After the 2008 Iowa caucuses, he hailed those voters "who have the courage to remake the world as it should be," and after the New Hampshire caucuses he declared, "Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can." As Election Day approached, he promised, "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America."²⁴

Those words mean *this will be a different country* when he's finished with it. If, Rip Van Winkle style, one had slept through the Obama administration, one would awaken, as it were, in a new land. The old word for such a profound change was *revolution*. As a good progressive, however, he reckons his revolution will be one in a series, an unending series generated by social progress or history itself. His reforms will connect to Wilson's, FDR's, and LBJ's before him, and others yet to come, and all these together will constitute a continual upward evolution. That sounds reassuring, insofar as it promises to take the sting and surprise out of change; but such inevitability comes at the expense of liberty, because there is no choice about the whole of liberal-style progress. In the old days, one could choose to make a revolution or not. A revolution could be defeated or reversed. But you cannot deliberate about the inevitable, which is how progressives think of history. As we've been told for generations now, ad nauseam: you can't turn back the clock.

Heightening the Contradictions

By the same token, however, you can't turn the clock ahead, either. What Obama invokes as "history's test" is a stern one: success or irrelevance, power or nothingness, to recur to Tomasky's suggestive language. Either you're on the right side of history or the wrong side, where the right side is necessarily understood to mean the winning side, and the wrong side the losing one. Otherwise the

would not be a *historical* test but an abstract moral or philosophical one. The obvious moral difficulty—does the right side always win its wars?—can be finessed for a while by distinguishing between wars and mere battles. It's possible to lose many battles and still win the war, eventually. But "history's test" is of necessity a final examination; it can't be postponed indefinitely without the whole idea of historical validation becoming a laughingstock or an otherworldly stalking horse, neither of which liberalism fancies itself to be. Meeting history's test, as Obama sees it, means recognizing that the "moment" has come for bold, new reforms; but if these prove untimely and unattainable, if the moment comes and goes fruitlessly, then it casts doubt not only on the prophet and the prophet but on the whole prophecy business. If Obama cannot repeal the George W. Bush-era tax cuts, if he cannot close the Guantánamo detention facility, if he cannot get the debt ceiling raised without agreeing to federal spending cuts, those are battles lost. If he cannot get reelected, that's a defeat of an altogether more serious sort. If the new majority for change does not triumph in congressional and state elections in 2012 or 2014 or 2016, then the long-term prospects for a liberal consummation drop still further. If Obamacare is repealed and replaced after 2012 by an energized conservative majority that controls the presidency, Senate, the House of Representatives, and most state legislative chambers and governorships, then Obama's legacy and his claim to leadership will lie in ruins.

Even so, American liberals would try to overcome their embarrassment by insisting that poor Obama was too far ahead of his time. Desperate as it is, that argument is neither unprecedented nor implausible, and it has the capital advantage of being unfalsifiable. But it would certainly be a stretch because it would highlight, by trying to ignore, the dispiriting truth that Obama had it *won*—had Obamacare enacted and written into law, its implementation under way—only to suffer the ignominy of defeat. After the repeal of Prohibition, for example, how many observers concluded that the problem with the Eighteenth Amendment was that it had been ahead of its time? After the dissolution of the USSR, how many Russians, or even communists, defended the extinct Soviet Union as too good for this world, or tragically in advance of its age? It's one thing to claim grandiloquently to represent the future, to *be* the future, ever glorious and ever distant. It's quite another to *have been* the future. The former trades in utopian speculation, however scientific the speculation claims to be. The latter forces one, wearily, to confront a history of failure and disillusionment—to confess "the god has failed," to borrow that ever resonant term from the Cold War.

American progressives' favorite tense is future perfect; they hate like hell to wrestle with past imperfect. So President Obama faces, by his own standards, a crucial test of his leadership. The election of 2008 proved, as that of 1992 had as well, that post-Reagan Democrats could win control of all three elected branches of the national government. In his first two years in office Obama further demonstrated that the Reagan legacy, both ideological and institutional, had not rendered impracticable an aggressive agenda of liberal social reform and government expansion. Now he faces an electorate that in 2010 moved dramatically rightward, even as his policies were moving American government briskly leftward. Among other things, he has to show both liberals and conservatives that the future is on *his* side, not Reagan's, and that the voters will come around to his "new politics for a new time." Tacking rightward, as Bill Clinton did in the 1990s, is out of the question, because Obama's whole project, though he would never put it so candidly, is to prove that the era of big government is *not* over. Whatever rhetorical and even policy concessions he may feel compelled to make, you can be sure they will be minor compared to Clinton's. Obama has in effect doubled down on the Left's bet on big government, and it is too late to take the chips off the table now.

But his bet comes just when the political economy of the welfare state is reaching a turning point

both in the United States and Europe. Everyone knew, vaguely, that with baby boomers beginning to collect benefits and fewer young workers available to pay taxes, the welfare state would hit a demographic wall eventually—a decade or two or three down the road. That crisis, of unfunded liabilities and revenue shortfalls, is still to come, in fact. The current crisis is related, but different in origin. The wall that Europe is hitting, and that we are coming up on fast, is a wall of deficits and debt. Although unrestrained entitlement spending is a part of it, the immediate problem was precipitated by the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the ensuing Great Recession of 2008–2009, and government reaction to these shocks. Rather than learn from the Bush administration’s fiscal and monetary mistakes, the Obama administration compounded them. Obama’s costly stimulus and bailout stimulated mainly the deficit, and the Federal Reserve flooded the economy with money to prevent the banking system’s collapse and to prop up economic growth. Unemployment insurance and other “automatic stabilizers” cost much more than anticipated, tax revenues dropped due to the prolonged downturn, and rather than cut discretionary spending the administration piled on more. In other words, the same rock-bottom interest rates, massive deficits, and credit-fueled consumption boom that helped get us into the financial crisis are now being counted on, by a bit of Keynesian magic, to get us out of it.²⁵ When the banks couldn’t handle their bad debts, they sent them to the U.S. government. But to whom does the government turn when it can’t pay its bills?

Even as Greece proved insolvent and many other European countries teetered on the brink, Obama’s policies on health care, taxation, and regulation pushed America further toward the European model of social democracy. In effect, his audacity made the problems of the American welfare state worse and more urgent. His policies made the chronic inability of big government to “make payroll,” as William Voegeli dubs it, that much more acute.²⁶ The advent of the true crisis of the welfare state has been accelerated, the hole into which it will plunge the economy dug deeper, and the options for dealing with the chronic shortfalls made worse. The Marxists call this policy of speeding up the social and political reckoning “heightening the contradictions.” It’s possible that Obama wants to heighten the contradictions in order to bring about a crisis of the American welfare state that would be solved by increasing another 10 percent or 20 percent of the American economy: the Swedenization of America. Perhaps, though, he is content to win the moral battle—a historic expansion of the welfare and regulatory state—and leave it to the next administration to wage the fiscal one. Or maybe he believes in his own talking points, and regards Obamacare, green energy, and Dodd-Frank as reforms that will save money over the long run. But whatever his intention, even he acknowledges now, with economic growth in the doldrums, that the welfare state cannot continue indefinitely along the same paths.

What history confronts him with, in short, is not merely a test of his own leadership but also a test of liberalism’s credibility as the once-and-future American public philosophy. More and more, the blue-state social model, as Walter Russell Mead calls it, looks anachronistic and unimaginative—behind rather than ahead of the times. A health care reform bill, to take the central example, that stretches to three thousand pages and creates 159 or so (an exact accounting proves slippery) new boards, commissions, and agencies hardly betrays the nimbleness, efficiency, transparency, reliability, and personalization that Americans expect from new companies, products, and services at their best. Liberalism seems about to succumb to the very critique it once leveled disdainfully at the old American constitutional and political order: the failure to evolve. Beyond its bureaucratic shortcomings, however, looms a deeper problem with liberalism’s understanding of human nature and the purposes of government, which led it to presume to lead and administer a free society and concoct rights to health care, housing, and a job in the first place. Heightening the contradictions could soon produce a kind of revolution all right, but not the one President Obama believes in and anticipates.

2

Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Progress

Despite their extravagance, the phrases come easily to Barack Obama's lips: let's "meet history test" by "fundamentally transforming the United States of America." Why stop there? While we're at it, we can repair the moral universe by decisively closing the gap between the real and the ideal. Seizing the moment, and with our best change-agents in charge, we can "remake the world as it should be."¹ This trust in "fundamental" but never final transformations, in continual progress toward an unspecified but ever more egalitarian condition of social justice and political wholeness, inspired and guided by visionary and compassionate leaders, themselves inspired and guided by history with capital *H*, and the entire cosmic process culminating in the growth of the State with its master class expert administrators—this is modern liberalism in a nutshell. It began almost exactly a century ago in the Progressive movement, determined to reform and re-form American political life. During the New Deal it changed its name and some of its methods but not its essential goals. Obama's asseverations come easily to him, in part then, because statesmen whom he admires have asserted them many times before. They sound familiar because they *are* familiar, the topoi of liberal rhetoric that have been drawn on by generations of journalists, professors, and politicians.

It wasn't always so. In 1886, the year after the appearance of his first book, *Congressional Government*, and while he was toiling away as a young faculty member at Bryn Mawr, Woodrow Wilson wrote to a close friend:

I believe . . . that if a band of young fellows (say ten or twelve) could get together . . . upon a common platform . . . with reference to the questions of the immediate future, [and] should raise a united voice in such periodicals, great or small, as they could gain access to, gradually working their way out, by means of a real understanding of the questions they handled, to a position of prominence and acknowledged authority in the public prints, and so in the public mind, a long step would have been taken towards the formation of such a new political sentiment and party as the country stands in such pressing need of—and I am ambitious that we should have a hand in forming such a group. All the country needs is a new and sincere body of thought in politics, coherently, distinctly, and boldly uttered by men who are sure of their ground.

Three years earlier he had disclosed to his fiancée a "solemn covenant" he had made with the same friend, Charles Talcott, while both were undergraduates at the College of New Jersey (as Princeton was still called then). "We swore," Wilson said,

that we would school all our powers and passions for the work of establishing the principles we held in common; that we would acquire knowledge that we might have power; and that we would

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