

# The BLACK C o m m e n t a t o r

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Don't wait for Obama to take on the political Right!

African World

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Over the last number of months, as the political Right has intensified its vicious campaign against President Obama and some of his reform efforts, there has been increasing frustration in progressive circles with the failure of the Administration to regain its stride and move a counter-offensive. A **Washington Post** op-ed by Peter Dreier and Marshall Ganz ["We have Hope; Now where's the Audacity", [August 30, 2009](#)] summarizes both this frustration but also offers a useful critique. That said, I believe that it is worth offering two additional concerns.

The first is historical. The outrageous activity that we are witnessing on the part of the political Right is not a new phenomenon. The political Right in the USA has demonstrated time and again an ability to engage in brutal, defamatory and highly repressive activity since the formation of this country. Such activity, of course, includes the highly repressive McCarthy Era, but it also includes periods such as the notorious 1919 Red Scare, with the repression of the Left and progressives soon followed by the Sacco & Vanzetti sham trial and execution. The 1930s was not all fun and games, despite the activity of a well organized political Left. Union organizing efforts were regularly attacked, and not just through harsh language. The appearances of employer-sponsored paramilitary outfits like the "Black Legion" were aimed at undermining the efforts by workers at self-organization. And, who can forget the notorious Father Coughlin, the right-wing radio priest?

There is a tendency to overlook these moments in US history, particularly on the part of white activists. There are myths regarding periods of normal bi-partisanship and rational discourse that allegedly contrast with today. While there are differences

between today and earlier periods, we should keep in mind that today's political Right stands on the shoulders of their predecessors, having new technology but often conveying very similar messages.

What is it about today's Right? Among other things they are "irrationalists." Just so that there are no misunderstandings, this does not mean that they are simply irrational, which many of them are. Instead, the message that much of the political Right articulate is drawn from an ideology that has no relationship to the truth, scientific investigation, history or critical reasoning. Instead, the appeal is to frustration, anger, resentment, myths and scapegoating. Again, this is not particularly new when one views the history of the political Right in the USA.

What we are seeing, however, is an attempt to overturn the entire history of the 20th century by the political Right. A few years ago, a right-wing commentator suggested that government needed to be reduced to the size and role that it occupied at the time of President McKinley (circa, Spanish-American War, 1898). Such a suggestion, as outrageous as it sounds, is only the tip of the ice-berg. What the political Right, and particularly the right-wing populists, aims to accomplish is not only to narrow the scope and role of government, but to beat back the various advances by progressive social movements. In this sense it is almost misleading to refer to them as "conservatives," a term that generally suggests going slow. Rather the right-wing populists, including but not limited to crypto-fascists, wish to turn back the clock totally, albeit with slick language and suggestions of race neutrality, only to cover a far more devious set of objectives.

The second point or concern is that the Obama administration has been very slow to respond to the intensity of the campaign being carried out by the political Right. Part of this may be a reflection of underestimating the nature of this right-wing, white backlash against his election (and all that it represented). Part of this may also be a reflection of the fact that his is an effort to reform neo-liberal capitalism not, at least at this point, to challenge neo-liberalism (even in the name of defending capitalism!). Thus, combined with Obama's personality to begin negotiations from the middle and to seek bi-partisanship, he and his administration have been quite reluctant to go on the warpath against the irrationalist Right.

Commentators on the progressive side of the aisle have been pointing to the fact that something needs to be done in the face of this right/white backlash. The assumption is that we must lay out a set of tactics for President Obama to choose from such that he can take the lead. I would suggest an alternative course.

In the wake of death of Senator Ted Kennedy I found myself thinking about the relationship of the Civil Rights Movement to President John Kennedy. Using the logic of many of today's progressives, the focal point of the Civil Rights Movement would have been appeals to President Kennedy. That was, in fact, exactly what the Civil Rights Movement did NOT do. The Civil Rights Movement had a set of objectives, with the idea of outlawing Jim Crow segregation at the center. Demands were placed upon President Kennedy, but the movement did not wait for Kennedy to act. Instead, they created an environment in which he had to act.

This is a critical lesson today. Progressive forces should not be waiting for President Obama to act. Many people realize this implicitly, such as those who continue to demand Medicare for all, despite the fact that President Obama removed that from the table. Yet in the face of the irrationalist Right, progressives must mobilize on different fronts. We see evidence that this is happening, but we need to up the tempo. The developing campaign against the inflammatory right-wing pundit Glenn Beck is a case

in point. Pressuring his sponsors to drop him is of incredible importance, yet we must go further. Progressives must debunk, in the public arena, everything that comes out of his mouth. We must put him on the defensive such that regular, everyday people question his sanity and not just the accuracy of his remarks.

In the face of the disruptions of the healthcare town halls, there could have been greater progressive mobilization. While it was great that Congressman Barney Frank took on some of the idiots, progressives needed to be inside and outside these town halls, not only holding signs but blocking attempts at disruption. Frankly, if we have the numbers, the irrationalist Right will shrink, but they will not shrink simply because we plead for rational debate. They are not interested in rational debate; they are interested in destabilizing the Obama administration and blocking any efforts at progressive change.

The other day I had a discussion with a progressive individual who attended one of those town hall meetings. He noted that otherwise reasonable people seemed quite willing to believe completely irrational and illogical assertions from the political Right. In periods of crisis, such a phenomenon arises from the deep, sort of along the lines of a red tide coming ashore. Regular people are looking for answers, and they tend to look for answers that correspond to the belief system which has shaped them. This is what makes the language and message of the right-wing populists so tempting.

Beating the Right cannot rely on Obama. It necessitates a level of self-reliance among progressives that focuses on identifying the nature of the crisis; moving real struggles for significant structural reforms, struggles that involve regular people rather than lobbying campaigns; and efforts to expose and crush the political Right. The Right must be understood at a mass level for what they are, harbingers of hell. That will only happen when progressives offer genuine alternatives and mechanisms for achieving them.

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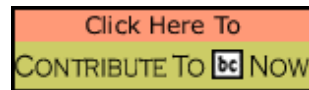
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