

Downside UP

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In a Political Time Warp: Observations on Obama & Politics Three Months Out

Moving one's household is like being in a time warp. It has left me rather out of it on political events since the Obama Inauguration but in the loop enough to be rather nonplussed by reactions to Obama on both the Left and the Right. What's impressive is how much Obama -- and the American people -- have managed to stay on an even keel through it all.

When you are moving, you know the rest of the universe is still there but you are so wrapped up in selecting a mover, getting someone to transport your car, changing addresses, readying your house for show to prospective buyers, arranging for care of the house, packing... And then you arrive and begin unpacking, hanging stuff on walls, getting to know where to go for what, and, in the case of a new house, getting fixed all the things which have not been finished or done right, from the wrong bathroom fixtures to a mis-plumbed dishwasher to a missing heating vent in the downstairs bath (all real examples!).

For me, it was a political time warp from the beginning of February all the way through April. You never know how long some periodicals are going to take to change addresses; sometimes they stop too early coming to the old address or don't come soon enough to the new address. Not that you have time to read most of them anyway. I hardly read *Business Week* or *The Washington Post Weekly Edition*. Even TV news from "The Daily Show" to "The News Hour" to "Noticiero Univision" went by the wayside. Then my on-line *New York Times* stopped because my email address got messed up.

Still some observations emerged in my mind.

Looking In On the Looney Right & The Unrealistic Left

On the looney Right -- which now seems to include almost all Republicans, Obama is a Socialist hungering after corporation nationalization and massive regulation of everyone's bathroom routine. Can it really be that the Republicans have nothing else to talk about than the same old disastrous programs which got us in the economic mess we're already in? "Down with big government." "Cut taxes." "Let the market regulate itself." "The Democrats seem to think that the government owes everyone a job [because it is your own fault if you don't have a job]."

Can it really be that the Republicans are so steeped in their own anti-government ideology that they won't vote for anything Obama or the Democrats propose? And yet have no thoughtful alternatives? They ran a bunch of Right-wingers against moderate Republicans in primaries only to see both the Right-wingers and the moderates lose in the final election, but they still pursue ideological purity as if that is going to win the next election. Arlen Specter became so desperate that he

changed parties and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell dismissed his action as "just politics" – as if elections themselves were "just politics."

Then there is the Left and I don't just mean the far Left. I mean the mainstream Left like the Krugfried brothers. Many of them argue that Obama should have been bolder, that he should, for example, have followed the Swedish example and nationalized the bankrupt banks, dumped their hopeless debt on their own investors, and re-privatized the banks as healthy entities. Public-private mongrels often end up with the worst of both worlds, socializing losses and privatizing profits. Now the government is going to extend the principle to all financial institutions, taking on most of the risk and leaving most of the profit to the private sector.

Others argue for massive intervention in the mortgage market, no tax cuts, a government-run health care system, a larger stimulus package, getting out of Afghanistan, and prosecuting those who turned the country to torture.

There are good arguments for all of these positions but they are mostly contained within a self-affirming circle of Left assumptions not completely dissimilar from the vicious circle of Republican mindlessness. Most notably, whatever Obama's public support, I doubt he ever could have gotten the votes for bank nationalization even from all the Democratic Senators, to say nothing of the Republicans necessary for the 60 votes needed to pass most bills in the Senate.

Those of us on the Left need to remember that Obama ran as a moderate. He has always talked about the importance of compromise and it is clearly part of his character to prefer inclusive decision-making to leave-no-prisoners victories. There is no way he was going to risk his standing on nationalization of the banks, however preferable that policy would have been for the economy and most taxpayers.

My Concerns

Not to say there is no basis for the Left's criticism of Obama for being too reticent, too passive, or too unwilling to act boldly. Obama's very high public approval ratings should give him the political capital to take on tougher issues beyond stimulating the economy.

Nationalization of the banks would have been better economic policy, as would have been immediate bankruptcy for dinosaurs like General Motors and victims of hedge funds like Chrysler. Both ran up against not only Democratic conservatives but traditional Democratic constituencies in Detroit and on Wall Street (yes, Wall Street).

A tax on gasoline/carbon is a must to balance the costs of the stimulus plan, pay for transportation infrastructure, bring under control our worst environmental threat, and enable car companies to sell a lot of energy-efficient cars even when the market price of gasoline is low. Carbon trading is not good enough.

I cannot see Obama ever having the political base for confronting Israel on West Bank settlements and that country's threat to peace. I know he promised tax cuts for the middle class and he has to deliver but if the rich spend tax cuts on totally unproductive investments in real estate and art, the middle class still doesn't spend them on roads, schools, and new environmental technology. I don't like where he seems to be going on so-called "enemy combatants." Iraq cannot be judged a success until we leave, I doubt it will be a success then, and Afghanistan is probably another quagmire.

Most of all, I would castigate Obama for chickening out of a single-payer national health program. With the savings in efficiency from a single-payer plan, the country could not only cover health care for all Americans but improve the quality of that care.

What's So Not To Like?

For all that, my criticism is not a brief against Obama. The Right might not like it and the Left might not appreciate it, but Obama is doing more to institute progressive programs than I could have dreamed a year ago -- and the American people seem to know and like what he is doing.

Two of my major issues have always been the environment and foreign policy and in both cases, I could hardly ask for more.

On the environment, it seems like every day Obama reverses another stupid Bush rule protecting corporate polluters and despoilers. His appointments are stunning. Some may be Clintonites but, first of all, it is a Democratic government, and secondly, some appointees are brand new beauties like Jane Luchenco, marine biologist and former American Academy for the Advancement of Science president as head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Nobel Prize winner Steven Chu to lead the Energy Department, and physicist John Holdren as science adviser. Obama is pursuing a green agenda I could not have imagined a year ago.

In foreign policy, he has turned not only US policy but the world on their heads. The poor Europeans suddenly don't have a president to look down on for his ignorance and narrow-mindedness. The Latin Americans can only be ecstatic about his openness. Obama has lowered the decibel level of US foreign policy, stopped treating as enemies everyone who disagrees with him, reached out to even the most annoying world leaders, and is closing Guantanamo.

His predecessor's foreign and environmental legacies are probably even more disastrous than his economic one but Obama is surely turning the first two around and hopefully the latter as well. For me, that's to like.

Ronald Woodbury is the writer, publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of *Downside Up*. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in history, economics, and international affairs from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL and has recently moved to Pendleton, OR. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.

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