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Barack Obama and the Crisis of Liberalism

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Abstract

Liberalism as we know it today in America is on the verge of exhaustion. Facing a fiscal crisis that it has precipitated and no longer sure of its purpose, liberalism will either go out of business or be forced to reinvent itself as something quite different from what it has been. In this careful analysis of Barack Obama's political thought, Charles R. Kesler shows that the President, though intent on reinvigorating the liberal faith, nonetheless fails to understand its fatal contradictions—a shortsightedness that may prove to be liberalism's undoing. This essay is adapted from Kesler's new book, I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Crisis of Liberalism.

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.

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. 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, in 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 gauntlet, 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

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we might like, though probably more than he would like.

He calls himself a 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? To answer it, we must first retrace the history of liberalism over the course of the past century.

The Four Waves of Liberalism

The 20th century was, as the late Tom 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.

It didn't, however, 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. 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.

MODERN LIBERALISM SPREAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY IN THREE POWERFUL WAVES—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.

These 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. 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, Woodrow Wilson charged, the natural rights doctrine of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham 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 18th century Constitution, based on the 18th 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.

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 as personal rights, even though they effectually attached to

1. Stanley Kurtz, *Radical-in-Chief: Barack Obama and the Untold Story of American Socialism* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2010), pp. 1-11, 21-60, 71-77, 86.

groups; but due to the slight family 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 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 as its constituent elements began to clash. 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 latest embodiment of the visionary prophet-statesmen he hasn't been able to sustain the deep connection to 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 quickly fades into the mists, and from which no one has ever returned.

IN THE SIXTIES, 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.

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. He seems to lack both the citizen's pride and the immigrant's gratitude.

Tempting as it might be to write off the President, 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.

The New Progressivism of Barack Obama

Obama is neither an old-fashioned Progressive nor a radical postmodernist. Part of what makes him interesting is how he handles the conflicting strains of his own thought. As a decent man, he believes in justice and identifies with the civil rights movement's insistence that Jim Crow was manifestly wrong and the cause of black equality manifestly right. As a self-described progressive, he believes in change; that is, he believes that change is almost always synonymous with improvement, that history has a direction and destination, that it's crucial to be on the right side of history, not the wrong, and that it's the leader's job to discern which is the right side and to lead his people to that promised land of social equality and social justice.

Yet he's skeptical of the simple-minded progressive equation of history with the inevitable triumph of justice; he fears that the foreknowledge of success or the

optimistic certitude of victory would detract from the honor of standing up against Jim Crow, for example. It would also create a free-rider problem: Why risk opposing segregation if its fall is inevitable? He shares the civil rights movement's sense that you have to *make* history, not just wait for it to make you. Yet if men can make history and history makes morality, then don't human beings create their own morality?

As the product of a very liberal education, alas, Obama never discovered that this quandary could be resolved by returning from history to nature as the unchanging ground of our changing experience, as the foundation of morality and politics. Returning, say, to Lincoln's and the Founders' own understanding of themselves, reconsidering their argument for the Declaration's principles, never occurred to him as a serious possibility. The progressivist assumptions, though decadent, were still too strong. He thought the only way was *forward*.

**IN A LARGER SENSE, OBAMA
DISPLAYS THE PROGRESSIVE
IMPATIENCE WITH POLITICS ITSELF.**

In his capacity as a political leader, Obama's favorite formulation is that he seeks to "shape" history. But shaping history leaves ambiguous just how much freedom or influence human beings actually have—whether we shape history decisively or only marginally. As he declared in Iowa in 2010 after his health care victory: "Our future is what we make it. Our future is what we make it."

That's the deeper meaning of his slogan, "Yes, we can," which he elsewhere called "a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people." In itself, the phrase sounds like a reply to "No, you can't." But was the naysayer denying us permission to do something or doubting our ability to do it? If the former, "Yes, we can" is an assertion of moral right or autonomy; if the latter, it's an assertion of power or competence. For Obama, in Progressive fashion, the two appear to go together. Obama says, "Yes, we can" to slaves, abolitionists, immigrants, western pioneers, suffragettes, the space program, healing this nation, and repairing the world—and that's in one speech.²

In a strange way, "Yes, we can" takes the place in his thought that "all men are created equal" held in Lincoln's thought. Insofar as it is America's national creed, it affirms that America is what we make it at any given time: America stands for the ability to change, openness to change, the willingness to constantly remake ourselves—but apparently for no particular purpose. Jon Stewart, the comedian, caught the dilemma perfectly when, joshing the President over his equivocations on the Ground Zero mosque, he said Obama's slogan, as amended, now read: "Yes, we can.... But...should we?"

The country's saving principle, then, is openness to change. "The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government that can be changed," Obama said in 2007 when announcing his presidential candidacy. In short, ours is the kind of country that always says, "Yes, we can" to the principle of

"Yes, we can." We affirm our right to change by always changing; we shape history by reshaping ourselves.

For all his openness to change, there is one to which Obama consistently answers, "No, we can't." Any change that would move the country backward, in his view, is anathema. "What I'm not willing to do is go back to the days when..." is a phrase that begins many a sentence in his repertory. When dealing with conservatives, his confidence in history's purpose and beneficence is miraculously raised to almost Wilsonian levels. He may not be exactly sure where history is going, but somehow he knows it's not going *there*. A certain impatience and irritability creep into his voice. If people reject his vision, he can't be a leader—and that makes it *personal*. His tone turns petulant, and he begins to issue orders to follow him.

The main target of his scoldings is, of course, the House Republicans, who tend to obstruct his measures. But in a larger sense, Obama displays the Progressive impatience with politics itself. It's not merely the separation of powers, checks and balances, and other constitutional devices that often stalemate change to which liberals object. It's human nature in its present state, still so inclined to praise God rather than man, to venerate the past, and to be guided by a healthy self-love.

Eventually, man will be worthy of liberalism, assuming it has its way with him and conditions him to love the State as the bee loves the hive. In the meantime, it's a constant struggle to bear with this unreconstructed individualist who would

2. See Barack Obama, Remarks Following the Iowa Caucuses, January 3, 2008, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76232&st=&st1=#axzz1lvulJr36>.

rather govern his potty little self (in Chesterton's great phrase) according to his own lights than be well governed by experts for his own (purported) good.

Obama, like most liberal thinkers, dreams of overcoming man's stubbornly political nature in two ways, by assimilating politics either to the family or to the military. He began his 2011 State of the Union address by invoking the first theme: "We are part of the American family," and together as one we're going to "win the future"—a slogan with deeply Social Darwinist roots, by the way.

After the future business didn't pan out so well in numerous scrapes with the House GOP, his frustration took a different direction a year later. In his 2012 State of the Union, after celebrating Osama bin Laden's killing and the withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq, the President focused on the "courage, selflessness, and teamwork of America's armed forces":

At a time when too many of our institutions have let us down, they exceed all expectations. They're not consumed with personal ambition. They don't obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together.... Imagine what we could accomplish if we followed their example.

Yes, if politics were rigidly hierarchical, if we had to follow orders from above without question, and if living together as a free people were as unequivocal and straightforward an affair as pumping bullets into bin Laden, then we could accomplish a lot more—or a lot less, depending on how highly you value democratic self-government as an accomplishment. And the truth is that the

leadership paradigm values freedom and self-rule much less than it does getting things done, attacking social problems, and making sure that liberal programs survive the struggle for existence on Capitol Hill.

Leadership is a term from the military side of politics, and one of the reasons the Founders resisted it was their determination to preserve republican politics as a civilian forum, as the activity of a free people ruling itself. A standing army might be necessary for that people's defense, but citizens had no business longing to exchange political debate and deliberation for military solidarity and discipline.

On his better days, President Obama knows that, but this wasn't one of them. He went on: "When you put on that uniform, it doesn't matter if you're black or white; Asian or Latino; conservative or liberal; rich or poor; gay or straight." Nor does it matter, by the way, whether you think the war is just or unjust, prudent or imprudent.

It might seem that liberals have come a long way from the protest days of the 1960s when many of them lustily denounced the American war machine; but in fact, they're still compensating or overcompensating for their contempt of the U.S. military back then. At the same time, they are returning to an older Progressive tradition, highly visible in the New Deal, of trying vainly to make politics the moral equivalent of war. In any event, no one has to put on a uniform to be an equal citizen with equal rights under our Constitution.

Progressivism Without Progress?

To make possible a governing liberal majority, Obama has to rehabilitate liberalism's reputation, to

separate it as much as possible from the radical politics of the Sixties and the burden of defending big government.

President Clinton began this renewal in the 1990s. In some ways, Obama continues and sharpens Clinton's efforts, wringing all the benefits he can out of the appearance of post-partisanship while making few sacrifices of substance. He far outshines Clinton, however, in telling the story of America in a way that reinforces a resurgent liberalism. More than any other Democratic President since FDR, Obama has an impressive interpretation of American history that culminates in him and that reworks and counters Reagan's view of our history as the working out of American exceptionalism (including divine favor), individualism, limited government, free-market economics, and time-tested morals.

As a writer, Obama's strength is telling stories, and his account of America is a kind of story, mixing social, intellectual, and political history. It begins with the Founding—with the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. He tries to construct a new consensus view of the country that acknowledges and then contextualizes traditional views in a way meant to be reassuring but that points to very untraditional conclusions. For instance, in *The Audacity of Hope*, in a chapter titled "Values," he quotes the Declaration's famous sentence on self-evident truths and then comments:

Those simple words are our starting point as Americans; they describe not only the foundations of our government but the substance of our common creed. Not every American may be

able to recite them; few, if asked, could trace the genesis of the Declaration of Independence to its roots in eighteenth-century liberal and republican thought. But the essential idea behind the Declaration—that we are born into this world free, all of us; that each of us arrives with a bundle of rights that can’t be taken away by any person or any state without just cause; that through our own agency we can, and must, make of our lives what we will—is one that every American understands.³

It sounds almost Lincolnian until one notices that the rights in this bundle are not said to be natural, exactly, nor true and certainly not self-evident; they are an outgrowth of 18th century political thought, too recondite for most Americans to know or remember. Abraham Lincoln, when explaining the Declaration, traced its central idea to God and nature, not to 18th century ideologies. He called for “all honor to Jefferson” for introducing “into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” When Jefferson was asked about the document’s source and purpose, he looked to common sense as well as to a much older and richer philosophical tradition.⁴

A commonsense argument harmonious with the political principles

of Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, and Sidney and proceeding from an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, could hardly be a simple distillation of 18th century ideologies—unless, of course, Jefferson and Lincoln didn’t know what they were talking about. If they spoke for their age without knowing so, if they were men of their times but didn’t realize it, then like their 21st century countrymen, they too would have been ignorant of their 18th century wellsprings, but precisely because they were living in or at least not long after the 18th century!

FOR OBAMA, UNITY MEANS BEING YOUR BROTHER’S AND SISTER’S KEEPER; IT MEANS COMING TOGETHER “AS ONE AMERICAN FAMILY.” “IF FATE CAUSES US TO STUMBLE OR FALL, OUR LARGER AMERICAN FAMILY WILL BE THERE TO LIFT US UP,” HE EXPLAINS.

Returning to Obama’s American story, we see that it blends two themes: individualism (symbolized in the Declaration) and “unity” (symbolized in the Constitution’s commitment to “a more perfect Union”). The latter phrase, plucked from the Preamble, has long been a favorite of liberals from Wilson to Bill Clinton. For Obama, unity means being your brother’s and sister’s keeper;

it means coming together “as one American family.” “If fate causes us to stumble or fall, our larger American family will be there to lift us up,” he explains.

In real life, he hasn’t exactly been there to lift up his aunt in Boston or his hut-dwelling half brother in Kenya, but then families in real life often disappoint. Even so, the family’s failings only leave more work for the State. Membership in it confers or protects our “dignity,” Obama argues, in the sense of guaranteeing “a basic standard of living” and effectively sharing “life’s risks and rewards for the benefit of each and the good of all.” And no one can enjoy “dignity and respect” without a society that guarantees both “social justice” and “economic justice.”

These ramify widely, demanding, in Obama’s words, that “if you work in America you should not be poor”; that a college education should be every child’s “birthright”; and that every American should have broadband access. Lately, he’s feeling even more generous. The “basic American promise,” he said in his 2012 State of the Union address, was and should be again that “if you worked hard, you could do well enough to raise a family, own a home, send your kids to college, and put a little away for retirement.”⁵

That sounds more like winning life’s lottery than a *promise* that anyone could justly demand be fulfilled. Notice how craftily, however, Obama

3. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 53.

4. Abraham Lincoln, Letter to H. L. Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 3, p. 376; Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, and Letter to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), pp. 1501, 1517. For a commentary, see Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), ch. 2.

5. Barack Obama, “A Hope to Fulfill,” Remarks of Senator Barack Obama at the National Press Club, April 26, 2005, <http://obamaspeeches.com/014-National-Press-Club-Speech.htm>; Remarks Following the Wisconsin Primary, February 19, 2008, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76558&st=&st1=#axzz1lvulJr36>; Remarks in St. Paul, Minnesota, Claiming the Democratic Presidential Nomination Following the Montana and South Dakota Primaries, June 3, 2008, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=77409&st=&st1=#axzz1lvulJr36>; Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, January 24, 2012, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index/index.php?pid=99000#axzz1lvulJr36>; and James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 89–110, 139–40.

shifts his examples of social duty from picking up the fallen to sending someone else's kids to college. How easily liberal magicians transform needs into desires and desires into rights. They do it right before our eyes and never explain the secret of the trick. Still, it's revealing that he doesn't go whole hog, turning such socioeconomic goods explicitly into rights and cataloging them for our wonderment. Chastened by the right-wing and middle-class backlash against welfare rights, he follows Bill Clinton in silently recasting, say, the right to go to college on someone else's money as an "investment" in "opportunity." As Obama presents it:

...opportunity is yours if you're willing to reach for it and work for it. It's the idea that while there are few guarantees in life, you should be able to count on a job that pays the bills; health care for when you need it; a pension for when you retire; an education for your children that will allow them to fulfill their God-given potential.

Actually, there are quite a few "guarantees" in a life lived in Obama's America. Even as he's wary of rights talk after the Sixties' implosion, he also denies any fondness for "big government." Newfangled rights would imply a big government to provide them. He's not in favor of that; he supports "active government." These aren't blank-check rights because the recipient has some reciprocal responsibilities—filling out the enrollment forms, showing up at class, making passing grades, and the like. But the obligations are usually

minimal, and besides, don't responsibilities and rights usually keep a house together? So these *are* rights of a sort, and Obama said so explicitly a month before the 2008 election in a CNN debate with John McCain. Asked whether health care was a privilege, a responsibility, or a right, he replied, "Well, I think it should be a *right* for every American."⁶ But he had avoided saying so up to that point.

OBAMA DEPLORES THE BILE IN OUR CONTEMPORARY POLITICS, AND IT MUST PUZZLE HIM THAT HE CAUSES SO MUCH OF IT. BUT HE'S ASKING FOR IT.

Obama leaves the relationship between individualism and "a more perfect union" up in the air, to be settled pragmatically. Every society has a similar tension between "autonomy and solidarity," he writes, and "it has been one of the blessings of America that the circumstances of our nation's birth allowed us to negotiate these tensions better than most." The circumstances, not the principles, of our nation were key, because the wide-open continent allowed individuals to head west and form new communities to their liking whenever they wanted to.

But the continent filled up; big corporations gradually took over from the family farm, just as Wilson and FDR had explained generations before; and soon our "values" were in a more serious conflict that required a bigger government to help reconcile. Unfortunately, that government proved enduringly unpopular with conservatives, who refused to adjust

to the new times; and so finding the proper balance between the individual and the community continues to stoke our increasingly polarized and polarizing political debates.

Though he hails the Constitution as a mechanism of "deliberative democracy," Obama doesn't mean by that a back-and-forth on public policy conducted by the executive and legislative branches with input from the people. Deliberation of that kind, endorsed by *The Federalist* and consistent with natural rights, would seek means to the ends of constitutional government. That's too narrow for Obama, who seeks deliberation about the ends, or at least about what our rights will be and what the Constitution should mean in the age that is dawning. He wants to turn all of the Constitution's mechanisms—separation of powers, federalism, checks and balances—into ways of forcing a "conversation" about our identity. In such a conversation, "all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent."⁷

Required? *An* external reality? And who judges whether the resulting conversation meets the requirements of democracy or not? Obama deplores the bile in our contemporary politics, and it must puzzle him that he causes so much of it. But he's asking for it. As Bill Buckley used to say, liberals always talk about their tolerance and eagerness to engage with other views, but they're always surprised to find that there *are* other views.

Obama expects 21st century people to have, roughly speaking,

6. Barack Obama, Comments at Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, October 7, 2008, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=84482&st=&st1=#axzz1lvulJr36>.

7. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, pp. 55, 92.

21st century views, as he does. What then of Jefferson and his 18th century compeers? Obama soon makes clear that despite their fine words, Jefferson and the other Founders were less than faithful to the liberal and republican inferences of the principles they proclaimed. Like a good law school professor, in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama lines up evidence and argument on both sides before concluding that, in fact, the Founders probably did not understand their principles as natural and universal, despite their language, but rather as confined to the white race. The Declaration of Independence “may have been,” he says, a transformative moment in world history, a great breakthrough for freedom, but “that spirit of liberty didn’t extend, in the minds of the Founders, to the slaves who worked their fields, made their beds, and nursed their children.” As a result, the Constitution “provided no protection to those outside the constitutional circle,” to those who were not “deemed members of America’s political community”: “the Native American whose treaties proved worthless before the court of the conqueror, or the black man Dred Scott, who would walk into the Supreme Court a free man and leave a slave.”

Obama doesn’t argue, as Lincoln did, that the Supreme Court majority was in error, that Dred Scott was wrongly and unjustly returned to slavery, and that Chief Justice Roger Taney’s dictum—that, in the Founders’ view, the black man had no rights that the white man was bound to respect—was a profound solecism. On the contrary, Obama accepts *Dred Scott* as rightly decided according to the standards of the time. He agrees, in effect, with Taney’s reading of the

Declaration and the Constitution, and with Stephen Douglas’s as well. Despite his admiration for Lincoln, Obama sides with Lincoln’s *opponents* in their interpretation of Jefferson and the Declaration as pro-slavery.⁸ Obama regards the original intention of both the Declaration and the Constitution to be racist and even pro-slavery, but he refrains from making the point explicit.

OBAMA’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE PAST PAYS LIP SERVICE TO SUCH THINGS AS SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS, ORIGINAL INTENT, AND FIRST PRINCIPLES BUT QUICKLY CHANGES THE SUBJECT TO VALUES, VISIONS, DREAMS, IDEALS, MYTHS, AND NARRATIVES.

His understanding of the past thus pays lip service to such things as self-evident truths, original intent, and first principles but quickly changes the subject to values, visions, dreams, ideals, myths, and narratives. This is a postmodern “move.” We can’t know or share truth, postmodernists assert, because there is no truth “out there,” but we can share stories and thus construct a community of shared meaning. It’s these ideas that mark his furthest departure from old-fashioned liberalism.

More and less radical, more and less nihilist—Obama comes in on the “less” side, but then a little bit of nihilism goes a long way. “Implicit... in the very idea of ordered liberty,” he writes in *The Audacity of Hope*, is “a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or ‘ism,’ any tyrannical consistency that might lock future

generations into a single, unalterable course, or drive both majorities and minorities into the cruelties of the Inquisition, the pogrom, the gulag, or the jihad.” There is no absolute truth—and that’s the absolute truth, he argues. Such feeble, self-contradictory reasoning is at the heart of Obama’s very private and yet very public struggle with himself to determine whether there is anything anywhere that can truly be known, or even that is rational to have faith in. Anyone who believes, really believes, in absolute truth, he asserts, is a fanatic or in imminent danger of becoming a fanatic; absolute truth is the mother of extremism everywhere.

Although it’s certainly a good thing that America avoided religious and political tyranny, no previous President has ever credited this achievement to the Founders’ rejection of absolute truth, previously known as “truth.” Is the idea that human freedom is right, slavery wrong, thus to be rejected lest we embrace an “absolute truth”? What becomes of the “universal truths” Obama himself celebrates on occasion? Surely the problem is not with the degree of belief, but with the falseness of the causes for which the Inquisition, the pogrom, the gulag, and the jihad stood. A fervent belief in religious liberty is not equivalent to a fervent belief in religious tyranny any more than a passionate belief in democracy is equivalent to a passionate longing for dictatorship.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, within two pages of his criticism of the Founders for allegedly excluding black Americans from constitutional protection as equal human beings and citizens, he warns against all such sweeping truth claims and

8. Ibid., p. 95.

indeed praises the Founders for being “suspicious of abstraction.” On every major question in America’s early history, he writes, “theory yielded to fact and necessity.... It may be the vision of the Founders that inspires us, but it was their realism, their practicality and flexibility and curiosity, that ensured the Union’s survival.”⁹ Obama cannot decide whether to blame the Founders as racists or to celebrate them as relativists; to assail them for not applying their truths absolutely to blacks and Indians along with whites or to praise them for compromising their too absolute principles for the sake of something concrete.

OBAMA CANNOT DECIDE WHETHER TO BLAME THE FOUNDERS AS RACISTS OR TO CELEBRATE THEM AS RELATIVISTS; TO ASSAIL THEM FOR NOT APPLYING THEIR TRUTHS ABSOLUTELY TO BLACKS AND INDIANS ALONG WITH WHITES OR TO PRAISE THEM FOR COMPROMISING THEIR TOO ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLES FOR THE SAKE OF SOMETHING CONCRETE.

His attempt to resolve this contradiction carries him into still deeper and murkier waters. Obama turns for inspiration to the abolitionists, drawing no distinction between a superb publicist and reasoner like Frederick Douglass and a butcher like John Brown, who was happy “to spill blood and not just words on behalf of his visions.” Both were “absolutists,” which, by Obama’s definition, means they were “unreasonable” but willing to fight for “a new order.” He goes

on to confess he has a soft spot for “those possessed of similar certainty today”—for example, the “antiabortion activist” or the “animal rights activist” who’s willing to break the law. He seems to suffer from certainty envy. He respects passionate, even fanatic commitment as such. Though he may “disagree with their views,” he admits that “I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty—for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.” Not true, necessarily, but *absolute*. It’s hard to know what he means exactly. That the “truths” are fit for the times, are destined to win out and forge a “new order”? That they are willed absolutely, not pragmatically or contingently? Even his rejection of absolute truth is now uncertain.

So, finally, in his perplexity, he turns again to Lincoln. Like “no man before or since,” Lincoln “understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation.” His presidency combined firm convictions with practicality or expediency. Obama seems never to have heard of prudence, the way a statesman (and a reasonable and decent person) moves from universal principles to particular conclusions in particular circumstances. The 16th President, he ventures, was humble and self-aware, “maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas,” that we are all imperfect and thus must reach for “common understandings” and that at times “we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence.”

For a man like Lincoln, there is no such thing, he says in effect, as acting with moral certainty, only acting

“as if we are certain,” God help us. Unlike John Brown, Lincoln was an absolutist who realized the limitations of absolutism yet still brought forth a new order. “Lincoln, and those buried at Gettysburg,” Obama concludes, “remind us that we should pursue our own absolute truths only if we acknowledge that there may be a terrible price to pay.”¹⁰ *Our own absolute truths?* Those words ought to send a shudder down Americans’ constitutional spine, assuming we still have one.

The Liberal Crisis

Liberals like crises, and one shouldn’t spoil them by handing them another on a silver salver. The kind of crisis that is approaching, however, is probably not their favorite kind—an emergency that presents an opportunity to enlarge government—but one that will find liberalism at a crossroads, a turning point. Liberalism can’t go on as it is, not for very long. It faces difficulties both philosophical and fiscal that will compel it either to go out of business or to become something quite different from what it has been.

For most of the past century, liberalism was happy to use relativism as an argument against conservatism. Those self-evident truths that the old American constitutional order rested on were neither logically self-evident nor true, Woodrow Wilson and his followers argued, but merely rationalizations for an immature, subjective form of right that enshrined selfishness as national morality. What was truly evident was the relativity of all past views of morality, each a reflection of its society’s stage of development. But there was a final stage of development when true

9. Ibid., pp. 93-96. Obama echoes, and radicalizes, Woodrow Wilson’s distinction between the Founders as time-bound theorists and as competent statesmen.

10. Ibid., pp. 97-98.

morality would be actualized and its inevitability made abundantly clear—that is, self-evident.

Disillusionment came when the purported end or near end of history coincided not with idealism justified and realized, but with what many liberals in the 1960s, especially the young, despaired of as the infinite immorality of poverty, racial injustice, Vietnam, the System, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Relativism rounded on liberalism. Having promised so much, liberalism was peculiarly vulnerable to the charge that the complete spiritual fulfillment it once promised was neither complete nor fulfilling.

INTELLIGENT AND MORALLY SENSITIVE LIBERALS MAY TRY TO SUPPRESS OR INTERNALIZE THE PROBLEM OF RELATIVISM, BUT IT CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN OR IGNORED. DESPITE HIS INVESTMENT IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, COMMUNITARIANISM, AND PRAGMATIC DECISION MAKING, HE'S WILLING TO THROW IT ALL ASIDE AT THE MOMENT OF DECISION BECAUSE IT DOESN'T SATISFY HIS LOVE OF A CERTAIN KIND OF COURAGE OR RESOLUTE ACTION.

As Obama's grappling shows, intelligent and morally sensitive liberals may try to suppress or internalize the problem of relativism, but it cannot be forgotten or ignored. Despite his investment in deliberative democracy, communitarianism, and pragmatic decision making, he's willing to throw it all aside

at the moment of decision because it doesn't satisfy his love of justice, or rather his love of a certain kind of courage or resolute action. "The blood of slaves reminds us that our pragmatism can sometimes be moral cowardice," he writes.¹¹ In a moment like that, a great man must follow his own absolute truth, and the rest of us are left hoping it is Lincoln and not John Brown, much less Jefferson Davis, whose will is triumphant. The great man doesn't anticipate or follow or approximate history's course; he creates it, *wills* it according to his own absolute will, not absolute knowledge.

When combined with liberalism's lust for strong leaders, this openness to Nietzschean creativity looms dangerously over the liberal future. If we are lucky, if liberalism is lucky, no one will ever apply for the position of liberal "superhero," in Michael Tomasky's term, and the role will remain vacant. But as Lincoln asked in the Lyceum speech, "Is it unreasonable then to expect, that some man possessed of the loftiest genius, coupled with ambition sufficient to push it to its utmost stretch, will at some time, spring up among us?"

And when such a one does, it will require the people to be united with each other, attached to the government and laws, and generally intelligent, to successfully frustrate his designs. Distinction will be his paramount object; and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down.

More worrisome even than the danger of a superman able to promise that everything desirable will soon be possible is a people unattached to its constitution and laws; and for that, liberalism has much to answer.

In one crucial respect, our situation would seem more perilous than the future danger Lincoln sketched insofar as the very definitions of political "good" and "harm" are now uncertain. Avant-garde liberalism used to be about progress; now it's about nothingness. You call that progress? Perhaps, paradoxically, that's why Obama prefers to be called a progressive rather than a liberal. It's better to believe in something than in nothing, even if the something, Progress, is not as believable as it used to be. His residual progressivism helps insure him against his instinctual postmodernism. Still, liberalism is in a bad way when it has lost confidence in its own truth, and it's an odd sort of "progress" to go back to a name it surrendered 80 years ago.

Adding to liberal self-doubt is that liberalism's monopoly on the social sciences, long since broken, has been supplanted by a multiple-front argument with conservative scholars in economics, political science, and other fields. In the beginning, Progressivism commanded all the social sciences because it had invented or imported them all. Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson could be confident in the inevitability of progress, despite temporary setbacks, because the social sciences backed them up. An expertise in administering progress existed, and experts in public administration, Keynesian economics, national

11. Ibid., p. 98.

planning, urban affairs, modernization theory, development studies, and a half-dozen other specialties beavered away at bringing the future to life.

What a difference a half-century makes. The vogue for national planning disappeared under the pressure of ideas and events. Friedrich Hayek demonstrated why socialist economic planning, lacking free-market pricing information, could not succeed. In a side-by-side experiment, West Germany far outpaced East Germany in economic development, and all the people escaping across the Wall traveled from east to west, leaving their workers' paradise behind. Keynesianism flunked the test of the 1970s stagflation. The Reagan boom, with its repeated tax cuts, flew in the face of the orthodoxy at the Harvard Department of Economics but was cheered by the Chicago School. Milton Friedman's advice to Chile proved far sounder than Jeffrey Sachs's to Russia. Monetarism, rational choice economics, supply-side, "government failure," "regulatory capture," "incentive effects"—the intellectual discoveries were predominantly on the Right. Conservative and libertarian think tanks multiplied, carrying the new insights directly into the fray.

The scholarly counterattack proceeded in political science and the law, too. Rational choice and "law and economics" changed the agenda to some degree. Both politics and the law became increasingly "originalist" in bearing, enriched by a new appreciation for 18th century sources and the original intent of the Founders and the Framers of the Constitution. Above all, the Progressives' attempt to replace political philosophy with social science foundered.

After World War II, an unanticipated and at first unheralded revival of political philosophy began, associated above all with Leo Strauss, questioning historicism and nihilism in the name of a broadly Socratic understanding of nature and natural right. New studies of the tradition yielded some very untraditional results. Though there were left-wing as well as right-wing aspects to this revival, the latter proved more influential and liberating. The *unquestionability* of both progress and relativism died quietly in classrooms around the country. Economics is an instrumental science, studying means not ends, and so much of the successes of free-market economics could be swallowed pragmatically by liberalism's maw. The developments in political philosophy challenged the ends of Progressivism, proving far more damaging to it.

THE SHEER SUPERFICIALITY OF PROGRESSIVE SCHOLARSHIP IS NOW EVIDENT. PROGRESSIVES COULD NEVER TAKE THE IDEAS OF THE DECLARATION AND CONSTITUTION SERIOUSLY FOR MANY OF THE SAME REASONS THAT OBAMA CANNOT ULTIMATELY TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY.

In sheer numbers, the academy remained safely, overwhelmingly in the hands of the Left, whose members in fact grew more radical, with some notable exceptions, in these years. But they gradually lost the unchallenged intellectual ascendancy, though not the prestige, they once had enjoyed.

Thanks to this intellectual rebirth, the case against Progressivism and in favor of the Constitution is stronger and deeper than it has ever been.

Progressivism has never been in a fair fight, an equal fight, until now, because its political opponents had largely been educated in the same ideas, had lost touch, like Antaeus, with the ground of the Constitution in natural right, and so tended to offer only Progressivism Lite as an alternative.

The sheer superficiality of Progressive scholarship is now evident. Progressives could never take the ideas of the Declaration and Constitution seriously for many of the same reasons that Obama cannot ultimately take them seriously. Wilson never demonstrated that the Constitution was inadequate to the problems of his age—he asserted it, or rather assumed it. His references to *The Federalist* are shallow and general, never betraying a close familiarity with any paper or papers, and willfully ignorant of the separation of powers as an instrument to energize and hone, not merely limit, the national government. Though he thought of himself as picking up where Hamilton, Webster, and Lincoln had left off, Wilson never investigated where they left off and why. Neither he nor his main contemporaries asked how far *The Federalist's* or Lincoln's reading of national powers and duties might take them, because they assumed it would not take them very far, that it reflected the political forces of its age and had to be superseded by new doctrines for a new age. They weren't interested in Lincoln's reasons, only in his results. Not right but historical might was the Progressives' true focus.

Today liberalism looks increasingly, well, elderly. Hard of hearing, irascible, enamored of past glories, forgetful of mistakes and promises, prone to repeat the same stories over

and over—it isn't the youthful voice of tomorrow it once imagined itself to be. Only a rhetorician of Obama's youth and artfulness could breathe life into the old tropes again.

Even he can't repeat the performance in 2012. With a track record to defend, he will have to speak more prose and less poetry. With a century-old track record, liberalism will find it harder than ever to paint itself as the disinterested champion of the public good. Long ago, it became an Establishment, one of the estates of the realm, with its court-party of notoriously self-interested constituencies: the public employee unions, the trial lawyers, the feminists, the environmentalists, and the corporations aching to be public utilities paying private-sector salaries. Not visions of the future, but visions of plunder come to mind. This is one side of what Walter Russell Mead means when he criticizes the "blue state social model" as outmoded and heavy-handed.¹²

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is about as sleek and innovative as the several phone books' worth of paper it takes up in printed form. Can one imagine Steve Jobs's reaction if he had been tasked with reading, much less implementing, the PPACA? It is exhibit A in the case for the intellectual obsolescence of liberalism.

Finally, we come to the fiscal embarrassments confronting contemporary liberals. Again, Obama-care is wonderfully emblematic. President Obama's solution to the problem of two health care entitlement programs quickly going bankrupt—Medicare and Medicaid

—is to add a *third*? Perhaps it is a stratagem. More likely it is simply the reflexive liberal solution to any social problem: Spend more.

OBAMA IS THE FIRST LIBERAL TO SUGGEST THAT EVEN CAPITALISM CANNOT PAY FOR ALL THE BENEFITS PROMISED BY THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE, PARTICULARLY REGARDING HEALTH CARE.

From Karl Marx to John Rawls, if you'll excuse the juxtaposition, left-wing critics of capitalism have often paid it the supreme compliment of presuming it so productive an economic system that it has overcome permanently the problem of scarcity in human life. Capitalism has generated a "plenty." It has distributional problems, which produce intolerable social and economic instability; but eliminate or control those inconveniences and it could produce wealth enough not only to provide for every man's necessities, but also to lift him into the realm of freedom. To some liberals, that premise implied that socioeconomic rights could be paid for without severe damage to the economy and without oppressive taxation, at least of the majority.

Obama is the first liberal to suggest that even capitalism cannot pay for all the benefits promised by the American welfare state, particularly regarding health care. Granted, his solution is counterintuitive in the extreme, which makes one wonder if he is sincere. To the extent that liberalism is the welfare state, and the welfare state is entitlement spending,

and entitlements are mostly spent effecting the right to health care, the insolvency of the health care entitlement programs is rightly regarded as a major part of the economic and moral crisis of liberalism. "Simply put," Yuval Levin writes, "we cannot afford to preserve our welfare state in anything like its present form." According to the Congressional Budget Office, by 2025, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and the interest on the federal debt will consume all—all—federal revenues, leaving defense and all other expenditures to be paid for by borrowing; and the debt will be approaching twice the country's annual GDP.¹³

Conclusion

If something can't go on forever, Herbert Stein noted sagely, it won't. It would be possible to increase federal revenues by raising taxes, but the kind of money that's needed could only be raised by taxing the middle class (defined, let us say, as all those families making less than \$250,000 a year) very heavily. Like every other Democratic candidate since Walter Mondale, who made the mistake of confessing to the American people that he was going to raise their taxes, Obama swore not to do that.

If the bankruptcy of the entitlement programs were handled just the right way, with world-class cynicism and opportunism, in an emergency demanding quick, painful action lest Grandma descend into an irreversible diabetic coma, then liberalism might succeed in maneuvering America into a Scandinavia-style überwelfare state, fueled by

12. See, for example, Walter Russell Mead, "Beyond the Blue Part One: The Crisis of the American Dream," *American Interest*, January 29, 2012, <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2012/01/29/beyond-blue-part-one-the-crisis-of-the-american-dream/>.

13. Yuval Levin, "Beyond the Welfare State," *National Affairs*, Spring 2011, pp. 21–38, 30, 32.

massive and regressive taxes cheerfully accepted by the citizenry. But odds are we stand instead at the twilight of the liberal welfare state. As it sinks, a new, more conservative system will likely rise that will feature some combination of more means-testing of benefits, a switch from defined-benefit to defined-contribution programs, greater devolution of authority to the states and localities, a new budget process that will force welfare expenditures to compete with other national priorities, and the redefinition of the welfare function away from fulfilling socioeconomic “rights” and toward charitably taking care of the truly needy as best the community can afford when private efforts have failed or proved inadequate.

Currently, the welfare state operates almost independently alongside the general government. Taken together, these reforms will work to reintegrate the welfare state into the government, curtailing its state-within-a-state status and, even more important, integrating it back into the constitutional system that stands on natural rights and consent.

Is it just wishful thinking to imagine the end of liberalism? Few things in politics are permanent. Conservatism and liberalism didn’t become the central division in our politics until the middle of the 20th century. Before that, American politics revolved around such issues as states’ rights, the wars, slavery, the tariff, and suffrage. Parties have come and gone in our history. You won’t find many Federalists, Whigs, or Populists lining up at the polls these days. Britain’s Liberal Party faded from power in the 1920s. The Canadian Liberal Party collapsed in 2011.

Recently, within a decade of its maximum empire at home and

abroad, a combined intellectual movement, political party, and form of government crumbled away, to be swept up and consigned to the dustbin of history. Communism, which in a very different way from American liberalism traced its roots to Hegel, Social Darwinism, and leadership by a vanguard group of intellectuals, vanished before our eyes, though not without an abortive coup or two. If Communism, armed with millions of troops and thousands of megatons of nuclear weapons, could collapse of its own dead weight and implausibility, why not American liberalism?

COMPOUNDED OF THE HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, SOCIAL DARWINISM, THE LIVING CONSTITUTION, LEADERSHIP, THE CULT OF THE STATE, THE RULE OF ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERTS, ENTITLEMENTS AND GROUP RIGHTS, AND MORAL CREATIVITY, MODERN LIBERALISM IS SOMETHING NEW AND DISTINCTIVE. UNDER THE PRESSURE OF IDEAS AND EVENTS, THAT COMPOUND COULD COME APART.

The parallel is imperfect, of course, because liberalism and its vehicle, the Democratic Party, remain profoundly popular, resilient, and changeable. Elections matter to them. What’s more, the egalitarian impulse, centralized government (though not centralized administration), and the Democratic Party have deep roots in the American political tradition—and reflect permanent aspects of modern democracy itself, as Tocqueville testifies.

Some elements of liberalism are inherent in American democracy, then, but the compound, the peculiar

combination that is contemporary liberalism, is not. Compounded of the Hegelian philosophy of history, Social Darwinism, the living constitution, leadership, the cult of the State, the rule of administrative experts, entitlements and group rights, and moral creativity, modern liberalism is something new and distinctive, despite the presence in it, too, of certain American constants like the love of equality and democratic individualism.

Under the pressure of ideas and events, that compound could come apart. Liberals’ confidence in being on the right, the winning side of history could crumble, perhaps has already begun to crumble. Trust in government, which really means in the State, is at all-time lows. A majority of Americans oppose a new entitlement program—in part because they want to keep the old programs unimpaired, but also because the economic and moral sustainability of the whole welfare state grows more and more doubtful. The goodwill and even the presumptive expertise of many government experts command less and less respect. Obama’s speeches no longer send the old thrill up the leg, and his leadership, whether for one or two terms, may yet help to discredit the respectability of following the Leader.

The Democratic Party is unlikely to go poof, but it’s possible that modern liberalism will. A series of nasty political defeats and painful repudiations of its impossible dreams might do the trick. At the least, it will have to downsize its ambitions and get back in touch with political, moral, and fiscal reality. It will have to—all together now—*turn back the clock*. Much will depend, too, on what conservatives say and do in the coming years. Will they have the prudence

and guile to elevate the fight to the level of constitutional principle, to expose the Tory credentials of their opponents?

President Obama's decision to double down aggressively on the reach and cost of big government just as the European model of social democracy is hitting the skids provides the perfect opportunity for

conservatives to exploit. His course makes the problems of liberalism worse and more urgent, as though he is eager for a crisis. Sooner or later, the crisis will come. If the people remain attached to their government and laws and American statesmen do their part, the country may yet take the path leading up from liberalism.

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