



## 'Vladimir' Obama and the 'Mainstream' Republicans

In a sharply critical assessment of President Obama's handling of the BP oil spill crisis, the influential British news weekly *The Economist* has dubbed the U.S. President "Vladimir Obama," concluding: "The collapse in BP's share price suggests that he has convinced the markets that he is an American version of Vladimir Putin, willing to harry firms into doing his bidding."



*The Economist* argued in separate article, however, that Obama is not to be confused with another Vladimir, whose name is forever linked with the establishment of socialism in Russia. Obama is not Lenin and the British journal defends — sort of — Obama against the charge from opponents on the American Right that he is pushing a socialist agenda.

"Government has expanded on Mr Obama's watch," *The Economist* concedes. "His administration is spending \$1 trillion on economic stimulus, has propped up two of the big three car firms instead of letting them implode and introduced a far-reaching reform of health care. Whatever you think of the merits of the first two decisions it takes a peculiar mixture of amnesia and paranoia to see them as a master plan to turn America socialist, rather than as a series of ad hoc responses to the exigencies of the crisis Mr. Obama inherited. As for the third, it is a funny socialism that gives private, for-profit insurance firms the main responsibility for delivering health care."

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Okay, so Obama has not proposed — yet anyway — government ownership of the means of production, except for two of the three largest domestic auto producers in what is supposed to be a temporary acquisition. Obama is not consistent enough to be a true socialist, which is why his friends on the Left often seem as frustrated as his foes on the Right are furious over his policies and programs. But it is hardly reassuring to be told that the growing control over private enterprise by an increasingly ambitious government is the result of "ad hoc responses" to "exigencies," rather than the conscious following of an ideological blueprint. The cumulative effect of such responses — from Roosevelt's New Deal to Nixon's embrace Keynesian economics ("We're all Keynesians, now.") to the budget-busting, big-government "conservatism" of Reagan and the Bushes — has been, contrary to the free-market rhetoric, a virtually uninterrupted march to a larger, more intrusive, spendthrift government.

But if Obama is not a socialist, neither is he a friend of free markets. *The Economist*, which favored his election in 2008, has lately observed that he has "all too often given the impression that capitalism is something unpleasant that he found on the sole of his sneaker." Whatever theory he may hold, if any, about the value of private enterprise, his reaction to the Deepwater Horizon spill and his dealings with BP indicate a strong anti-business sentiment. "If he sees any impropriety in politicians ordering



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executives about, upstaging the courts and threatening confiscation, he has not said so," *The Economist* noted.

A few months back, Norman Omstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in the *Washington Post* that Obama is a "pragmatic moderate" unfairly tainted by the socialist "smear." Obama, he suggests, is not much different from a good many "mainstream" Republicans. The President is "center-left, perhaps, but not left of center." Such hair-splitting distinctions are apparently meant to convey the minute subtlety of American politics to those of us inclined to paint the political scene with a somewhat broader brush. They call to mind former White House speechwriter Peggy Noonan's assurance several years back that George W. Bush was really a "high-budget conservative," unlike his father, who was a "low-budget liberal." Perhaps that explains all those "deep doo-doo" deficits.

Omstein offered plenty of evidence to support his argument that Obama is really no more radical than a lot of "moderate" and even "conservative" Republicans. The \$787 billion stimulus plan the President pushed through Congress last year couldn't have been radical, because "many mainstream observers," including Omstein, thought it was "too timid in size and scope given the enormity of the problems." It included a "fix for the alternative minimum tax" demanded by Republican Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa and funding for school construction projects insisted on by Susan Collins, Republican of Maine. Sen. Collins and her colleagues no doubt have a great many projects that are shovel-ready, including the vast majority of their speeches. None have produced a significant stimulus to the economy.

The Grand Old Party may be united in finding "ObamaCare" loathsome and pernicious, but Obama and the Democrats at least dropped the public-option provision. And the individual mandate, now being challenged as unconstitutional, came out of a plan put forward by the conservative Heritage Foundation, Omstein said. It is a key feature of the Massachusetts plan whose progenitor was none other than former Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican who may be eying another attempt to win the party's presidential nomination. The federal program, wrote Omstein, could be described as "Romneycare crossed with the managed-competition bill proposed in 1994 by Republican Sens. John Chafee, David Durenberger, Charles Grassley and Bob Dole — in other words, as a moderate Republican plan. Among its supporters is Durenberger, no one's idea of a radical socialist."

Nor is Sen. Bernie Sanders, Independent of Vermont, who describes himself as a socialist. Socialist, maybe, but radical? Not in that crowd. Not in the U.S. Congress. Much of what Omstein describes as "mainstream" might cause us to wonder about the direction of the stream and how it's been diverted. Much of what is considered mainstream at any given time was unthinkable a few years earlier. That's true of social as well as economic policy. Consider how short a time it took for abortion to go from something not mentioned in polite society to a cherished "constitutional right" discovered and proclaimed by our nation's highest court. If a generation ago you had told people that children would be receiving condoms as part of their public-school education and that *Heather Has Two Mommies* would be a textbook for grade-school sex education, some compassionate soul might have offered you directions to the nearest asylum or detox center.

And on fiscal matters, who expected when Ronald Reagan took office that what was supposed to be the most conservative administration since the days of Calvin Coolidge would give us \$200 billion deficits for "as far as the eye can see"? Who knew during all those presidential campaigns when the Republican Party pledged to abolish the federal Department of Education that a Republican President and a Republican Congress would give us the No Child Left Behind Act and a DOE funded at some \$50 billion a year?



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Who knew that by the time George W. Bush left office, the U.S. government would be taking over much of the banking industry and Venezuela's Marxist President Hugo Chavez would be telling the world that "Comrade" Bush was to the left of him? Who would have thought when the Cold War ended that 20 years later we would still have troops protecting NATO allies from a Soviet Union that no longer exists, while we spend billions on the latest high-tech weapons to defend ourselves and rest of the world against terrorists with homemade bombs and box-cutters?

Now we have deficits of a trillion dollars a year and a government that has yet to demonstrate its competence *at anything* has taken over large portions of the insurance, banking, healthcare, and automotive industries. But there are no radicals in Washington. Just "mainstream" Republicans and Democrats, all fiscal conservatives and all promising to keep the country safe.

I wonder what danger looks like.

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