

The Stigmatization of the Liberal Label in Modern American Politics¹

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***Abstract:** Liberalism was the dominant political ideology in the United States from the early 1930s until the mid to late 1960s. During that period, Franklin Roosevelt's definition of "liberal" and "conservative" was widely accepted in America. Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing in the 1970s and 1980s, the liberal label became increasingly contested and maligned, and as a result many, if not most, liberal politicians stopped using it. Liberal politicians have not abandoned their liberal world-view, but nowadays they are much more inclined to refer to themselves as "progressives." This article describes the rise and fall of the liberal label in modern U.S. politics and explains why it became a pejorative, shunned by all the recent Democratic candidates for president, from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama.*

***Keywords:** Liberal—liberalism—conservative—conservatism—American politics—Franklin Roosevelt—New Deal—Barack Obama—Democrat—Republican—political rhetoric—linguistic change*

The Rise of the Liberal Label

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt defined the differences between liberalism and conservatism in the United States thus:

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Generally speaking, in a representative form of government there are usually two general schools of political belief—liberal and conservative . . . The liberal party is a party which believes that, as new conditions and problems arise beyond the power of men and women to meet as individuals, it becomes the duty of the Government itself to find new remedies with which to meet the . . .

The conservative party in government honestly and conscientiously believes the contrary. It believes that there is no necessity for the Government to step in, even when new conditions and new problems arise. It believes that, in the long run, individual initiative and private philanthropy can take care of all situations . . .

The clear and undisputed fact is that in these later years, at least since 1932, the Democratic party has been the liberal party, and the Republican party has been the conservative party.²

When Roosevelt made this famous statement he was well aware of the fact that not all Republicans were conservatives and not all Democrats were liberals. His purpose was not to offer an exhaustive or precise definition of the terms, but to evoke a general feeling that the New Deal reforms represented what he called “true liberalism” and those of his opponents a discredited “conservatism.” In Roosevelt’s parlance, liberalism was something good, and conservatism was bad. His usage of the terms set the standard for American political discourse for almost half a century.³

But Roosevelt’s language did not go unchallenged. Particularly during the 1930s, there was a fierce struggle over the liberal label, and Roosevelt’s opponents tried in vain to prevent his usage from becoming the accepted one. Herbert Hoover, one of Roosevelt’s most persistent critics, chose “individualism” as his main ideological label. His chief goal, as the title of one of his books indicated, was to protect *American Individualism*. But Hoover also used the words “liberal” and “progressive,” and by “liberal” he meant individual liberty and opposition to government bureaucracy and regulation. In other words, he used “liberal” in the old nineteenth-century meaning of the term.⁴

The one major label with which Hoover did not want to be identified in the 1920s and 1930s was the conservative label, but that is, ironically, the

2 Quoted in David Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness: The Language of Politics in America from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 119.

3 *Ibid.*, 119-120.

4 *Ibid.*, 95-118; Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (Washington: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, n.d.). Cf. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 8-9.

one he was eventually saddled with and reluctantly accepted, after years of resistance. According to historian David Green, Hoover would have preferred to be called a liberal, but by the early 1940s Franklin Roosevelt and the New Dealers had conquered that label and transformed its meaning. Roosevelt and his followers succeeded in broadening the popularly accepted meaning of liberal and liberalism to include not just individual freedom and property rights but also governmental activism and generosity.⁵

This important linguistic shift was made possible by various popular New Deal policies such as the public works and jobs programs, Social Security, the Fair Labor Standards Act and other social reforms, all of which were anathema to Herbert Hoover and the conservatives. For Hoover, liberalism meant restricting governmental power, whereas for Roosevelt it meant unleashing governmental power in combating social ills. In 1945, at the age of 71, Hoover for the first time grudgingly accepted the designation of “conservative” and recommended that the Republicans openly accept that label. Being a conservative is “not a sin,” he wrote, noting that “[t]he conservatives in America are akin to the nineteenth century liberals of England.” But the word “liberal” was now useless since it had been “polluted and raped of all its real meanings.”⁶

Today it is hard to fathom how complete the New Dealers’ rhetorical victory was. In 1950, literary critic Lionel Trilling described the situation thus: “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.”⁷ Even after the Republican victories in 1952, when the Party recaptured the White House and won a majority of the seats in Congress, liberalism as an intellectual and political doctrine continued to reign supreme.

To the chagrin of its conservative supporters, President Dwight Eisenhower’s administration (1953-61) did not try to undo the New Deal reforms

5 Compare the word “folkhem” (people’s home) in Sweden, which originally was used mostly by conservatives but which the Social Democrats in the 1920s and 1930s managed to conquer and transform. Erik Åsard and W. Lance Bennett, *Democracy and the Marketplace of Ideas: Communication and Government in Sweden and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 91-98.

6 Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness*, 162 (quote); Paul Levine and Harry Papasotiriou, *America since 1945: The American Moment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10-13.

7 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 58. Cf. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955).

or dismantle the welfare state, nor did it try to roll back communism in Europe. Instead, Social Security and unemployment benefits increased and the budget deficit sky-rocketed. "Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history," Eisenhower told his more conservative brother Edgar.⁸ For the conservatives, Daniel Bell later wrote, "eight years of moderation proved more frustrating than twenty years of opposition."⁹ Lyndon Johnson's landslide victory over the right's standard-bearer Barry Goldwater in 1964, followed by the launch of the Great Society programs and the enactment of the civil rights legislation, seemed to confirm the dominance of liberalism and the marginalization of the right. "These, without doubt, are the years of the liberal," economist John Kenneth Galbraith mused in 1964. "Almost everyone now so describes himself."¹⁰

The Fall of the Liberal Label

In retrospect, however, the 1964 presidential election was not as disastrous for conservatives as many liberal commentators thought at the time. True, Barry Goldwater suffered a major defeat, but he also managed to extend the Republican Party's support in the South, the Southwest, and the West and thereby lay the foundation for the conservative ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s. Further, he energized over 600,000 people to make financial contributions and some four million to take an active part in his campaign. Thousands of his precinct workers later became officials in the resurgent conservative movement. In addition, Goldwater's campaign helped launch the political career of Ronald Reagan. Those are a couple of the reasons why some analysts have called the 1964 election a "watershed in the history of American conservatism."¹¹

8 Micklethwait & Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 41 (quote); Levine & Papatotiriou, *America since 1945*, 59-71.

9 Daniel Bell, "The Dispossessed (1962)," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, third edition, 2002, with a new introduction by David Plotke), 3. The book was originally published in 1955 under the title *The New American Right*. See also Erik Åsard, *Hillary Rodham Clinton: En politisk biografi* (Lund: Historiska Media, 2008), 89.

10 Micklethwait & Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 9.

11 Alf Tomas Tønnessen, "Conservatives for Change: How Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich Helped Organize, Fund, and Empower the American Right Wing, 1964-1981" (Dissertation for the Ph.D. degree in humanities, Department of Literature, Area Studies, and European Languages, University of Oslo, 2008), 48-49 (quote on 49); Åsard, *Hillary Rodham Clinton*, 90. On the 1964 election campaign, see also Robert

The Republicans have won 7 of the 11 presidential elections since 1968, and they kept control of Congress for most of the time between 1995 and 2006. These changes do not only reflect a shift in the power relationship between the two main political parties. They are also the result of a purposeful transformation of the American political language. This transformation involves key words such as *values*, *elite*, *government*, *class*, and *bias*, all of which have been given a new meaning or interpretation that generally implies a conservative point of view. The people behind this linguistic campaign, according to linguist Geoffrey Nunberg, are a number of conservatives and Republican party operatives who “have managed to move the center of gravity of the language itself to the right—not just on the right-wing talk shows, but even in the mainstream media.”¹²

“Conservatives seem to have a genius for winning the all-important semantic battles,” journalist Richard Goodwin wrote presciently in 1967. There are many examples of this—anti-union laws become “right to work,” opposition to a woman’s right to choose becomes “right to life,” national health insurance becomes “socialized medicine,” same-sex marriage becomes “gay marriage,” and so on.¹³

Perhaps the best example of the change is the stigmatization of the word *liberal*. In the 1960s, most liberal politicians had no qualms owning up to the label. For example, John F. Kennedy spoke eloquently about the term meaning “someone who cares about the welfare of the people—their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties.”¹⁴ But today, “liberal” has become a feared or dirty word that few politicians, including those on the left, use as a self-designation. All the recent Democratic candidates for president, from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama, have run away from it, disclaimed it, or tried to distance themselves from it, preferring to use other labels such as “New Democrat,” “centrist,” “moderate,” or

Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 181-237, and Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face: Organizing the American Conservative Movement 1945-65* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 261-289.

12 Geoffrey Nunberg, *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism Into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), quote on the dust jacket. Nunberg is a linguist at the School of Information of the University of California at Berkeley.

13 Sam Tanenhaus, “A Once-United G.O.P. Emerges, in Identity Crisis,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2008. Cf. George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

14 <http://dickpolman.blogspot.com/2007/07/democrats-and-box-populi.html>.

(the current favorite) “progressive.” During the 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry not only refused to call himself a liberal, which in fact he is; in a failed attempt to placate his opponents and reassure voters that he wasn’t some suspicious foreign individual who preferred French wine and food, Kerry claimed that he was the real candidate of *conservative* values. All of which made him an easy target of Republican attacks and ridicule.¹⁵

At the margins, this development has led to the publication of odd book titles such as *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* and *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*.¹⁶ But it has also infected the political mainstream. In July of 2007, during one of many televised debates between the Democratic candidates for president, Hillary Rodham Clinton was asked how she would define the word “liberal” and whether she would use the term to describe herself. This was her answer:

It is a word that originally meant that you were for freedom, that you were for the freedom to achieve, that you were willing to stand against big power and on behalf of the individual. Unfortunately, in the last 30, 40 years, it has been turned up on its head . . . I prefer the term “progressive,” which has *a real American meaning* . . . So I consider myself a proud modern American progressive.¹⁷

In other words, at least to Hillary Clinton, the word “liberal” does not seem to have a “real American meaning” anymore. Today, it has almost acquired an un-American connotation, as dated and useless as “conservative” was half a century ago. Liberal politicians have not abandoned the liberal worldview, or their support for liberal-leaning programs, but nowadays they are much more likely to describe themselves as “progressives,” a more appealing but also vaguer term. Barack Obama is another case in point. He has also distanced himself from the liberal label, considering it part of the “old politics” that he wants to change. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama repeatedly uses the term “we progressives” to refer to himself and his followers.¹⁸

15 Nunberg, *Talking Right*, 109; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 413.

16 Sean Hannity, *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* (New York: Regan Books, 2004); Ann Coulter, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (Crown Forum, 2003).

17 <http://dickpolman.blogspot.com/2007/07/democrats-and-box-populi.html>. I added the italics.

18 Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 213-216 (quote on 216).

The last time a Democratic candidate for president used the liberal label was in 1988, when Governor Michael Dukakis, defensively and belatedly (in fact, just a few days before the election), confessed that he was a liberal in the tradition of Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy, this after George Bush senior had attacked him in a series of political ads for being soft on crime and lacking in patriotism during the 1988 election campaign. It was during the 1988 campaign that Ronald Reagan proclaimed to the Republican National Convention: "The masquerade is over. It's time to . . . say the dreaded L-word; to say [that] the policies of our opposition are liberal, liberal, liberal." From then on the liberal label, once so proud and signifying the Democratic Party's proudest achievements in government, would be branded as the unspeakable "L-word."¹⁹

By contrast, many of today's Republicans have followed Herbert Hoover's recommendation and proudly refer to themselves as conservatives. In the 2008 primary campaign for the Republican nomination for president, virtually all the leading GOP candidates competed for the conservative label and portrayed themselves as the true heir to Ronald Reagan, including former moderates such as Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney. Even John McCain, who has a reputation for being a reform-minded maverick, repeatedly stressed his conservative credentials and stated that he was "very proud to have come to public office as a foot soldier in the Reagan Revolution."²⁰ This shift to the right among the Republican leadership and party activists reflects the fact that over the last decades, the number of people willing to identify themselves as liberals has gone down to 22 percent, whereas 34 percent now describe themselves as conservatives; the rest (44 percent) claim that they are moderates or centrists.²¹

What does this transformation of the American political language mean? First of all, it means that by altering the meaning of their opponent's main ideological label, the Republicans have won an important rhetorical victory

19 Nunberg, *Talking Right*, 43. Cf. Gerald M. Pomper et al., *The Election of 1988: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1989), 65, 82, 87, 94; Erik Åsard, *Den konservativa eran: Amerikansk politik från Reagan till Bush* (Uppsala: Uppsala North American Studies Reports #7, 1991), 66-72.

20 Sasha Issenberg, "McCain touts conservative record," *The Boston Globe*, February 8, 2008. For a critical study of how the U.S. media have covered McCain, see David Brock and Paul Waldman, *Free Ride: John McCain and the Media* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

21 Robert G. Kaiser, "Pollsters Debate America's Political Realignment," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2008. The figures come from the 2008 National Election exit poll of 17,836 randomly selected voters. Cf. Nunberg, *Talking Right*, 42.

not unlike the one achieved by Roosevelt and the New Dealers during the 1930s. If your main label gets so contaminated that you can no longer use it or be associated with it, you are at an enormous communication disadvantage. Imagine the Tories in Great Britain not being able to use “conservatism” as their self-designation, or the Swedish Social Democrats having to disassociate themselves from the concept of the “welfare state.”²² Many of the grand words used in today’s political discourse are old and dated, but they are still important in conveying the values of a candidate or a party. Those who are able to shape the publicly accepted meaning of key terms have a distinct rhetorical advantage.

Second, by not wanting to own up to being liberals, liberal Democrats run the risk of distancing themselves from ordinary voters, many of whom still use the “L-word” as a point of reference when talking about politics. Thus, the divide threatens to grow even greater between ordinary people and the political elite. In a populist political culture such as the American one, anything that puts you in the camp of elitists is bad. Third, by disowning the liberal label the Democrats haven’t just lost a label – they have lost a whole narrative, the New Deal reform era narrative which they were able to capitalize on politically for so long. In politics, it has always been important to have a compelling narrative, one which voters can relate to and which can be used for launching policies for the future. If you lack such a narrative, you leave the field open for your opponents to fill in the blanks.

The Right Turn in U.S. Politics

The decline of the liberal label may seem strange considering that the United States is still often referred to as a “liberal democracy.” Indeed, classical liberalism is one of the key ingredients in the intellectual heritage of the nation. Both the Constitution and the formation of the early Republic were highly influenced by renowned liberal thinkers such as John Locke and James Madison. “The revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings,”

22 The Swedish Social Democrats face a different rhetorical dilemma than the U.S. Democrats. Since all political parties in Sweden nowadays speak approvingly of the welfare state, the term is uncontroversial and has lost much of its former specific meaning. Whereas the U.S. Democrats are suffering from a rhetorical destruction, the Swedish Social Democrats have to deal with the problems of rhetorical imitation. Erik Åsard, “Liberalen stämplad som freak,” *Dagens Nyheter*, January 14, 2007.

writes Seymour Martin Lipset.²³ Since that time, however, the meaning of liberal and liberalism in the United States has changed at least twice. Such shifts in language have occurred quite frequently in American history, and they are usually connected with changes in public attitudes and in changing political and social environments.

The first transformation I have already mentioned—it began during the Progressive era and was completed during the New Deal, when the meaning of liberal changed from an emphasis on individualism and property rights to government-sponsored social welfare programs. The second shift is closely connected with the right turn in U.S. politics which began in the 1960s and 1970s, after the civil rights legislation was passed, making the Republicans the dominant party in the South and leading to the subsequent unraveling of the New Deal coalition. It was a highly complex confluence of events which involved the white backlash to the civil rights laws, the deep divisions over the Vietnam War, the Great Society programs, abortion, women's rights, gay rights, and affirmative action. Controversies over tax rates, welfare spending, and "stagflation" were other contributing factors. "OPEC, the Ayatollahs in Iran, and skyrocketing crime rates also did their part to further deepen the crisis of American liberalism."²⁴

To quote James Sundquist, a social scientist:

In the public's perception, all these things merged. Ghetto riots, campus riots, street crime, anti-Vietnam marches, poor people's marches, drugs, pornography, welfarism, rising taxes, all had a common thread: the breakdown of family and social discipline, of order, of concepts of duty, of respect for law, of public and private morality.²⁵

And Peter Beinart, a journalist:

Traditional liberalism died . . . because Americans—who had once associated it with order—came to associate it with disorder instead. For a vast swath of the white working class, racial freedom came to mean riots and crime; sexual freedom came to mean divorce; and cultural freedom came to mean disrespect for family, church and flag. Richard

23 Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 31. Cf. Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: A Modern Library Chronicles Book, 2003), 59-62; James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 5-7, 31-33.

24 Bjerre-Poulsen, *Right Face*, 296. Cf. Thomas Ferguson & Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

25 Quoted in Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" in Steve Fraser & Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 257.

Nixon and later Reagan won the presidency by promising a new order: not economic but cultural, not the taming of the market but the taming of the street.²⁶

Now the meaning of liberalism was broadened once again, this time to include not just statism and social welfare programs but also waves of protests and demonstrations, sexual permissiveness, and alternative ways of living. Through a skillful use of books, magazines, think tanks, talk radio and other media, the Republicans and their conservative supporters were able to link liberalism to these developments, to somehow make liberals responsible for the excesses of the 1960s and 1970s and thereby move the political discourse to the right. This was not accomplished easily or quickly; it took years of intense political debate and propaganda before the effect was fully evident. The result, as we know, is that in a country which prides itself on being seen as the cradle of liberal democracy, the word liberal has nowadays been reduced to a pejorative.

The Democrats' fear of the liberal label has pushed the meaning of it to the political margins. According to Geoffrey Nunberg, "[t]here was a time when *liberal* and *leftist* were contrasting terms; now the right tends to use them interchangeably." All of which has created a vicious rhetorical circle: "the more Democrats shun the liberal label, the easier it is for the right to demonize it, making Democrats even more reluctant to wear it than before."²⁷

Barack Obama and the Future of the Liberal Label

Will Barack Obama and his new administration make a difference in this regard? That remains to be seen, but my sense is that liberals in the U.S. have pretty much given up on the liberal label, and that the new president has no intention of re-fighting old semantic battles. For all the eloquence displayed by Barack Obama during and after the 2008 presidential campaign, he has not shown any interest in reviving the liberal label, nor has he come up with a new slogan of similar stature and resonance. "Yes, we can" is a catchy phrase, but no substitute for a comprehensive governing vision.

26 Peter Beinart, "The New Liberal Order," *Time*, November 24, 2008, 25. Cf. Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), passim. See also Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

27 Nunberg, *Talking Right*, 46 f.

Barack Obama's Inaugural Address on January 20, 2009, is instructive in this regard. In his speech Obama presented a standard liberal view of government's role in a modern society. Unlike Ronald Reagan, who in 1981 proclaimed that government was the problem and not the solution, Obama suggested that government and markets both are needed to make society work. In a passage which can also be seen as a late rejoinder to Bill Clinton's 1996 announcement that "the era of big government is over," Obama stated, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works, whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified."

Obama continued:

Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched. But this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control. The nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous.²⁸

This part of the speech, which clearly illustrates Obama's pragmatism, was an attempt to move the discussion beyond the ideological battles of the 1980s and 1990s. Missing from Obama's address, Timothy Garton Ash noted, "was only the proper name of the political philosophy, coded into the constitutional DNA of the United States, that proposes this and other balances: liberalism." In substance, the Inaugural Address presented "a blend of classical constitutional and modern egalitarian liberalism. The thing, but never the word." The reason for this omission was of course that liberalism in America has become a foul term denoting—in Garton Ash's colorful wording—"some unholy marriage of big government and fornication."²⁹

Obama's pragmatism and focus on achieving results lead him to eschew traditional ideological labels. Some of the president's liberal supporters have been unhappy with his lack of ideological clarity and would want him to fully embrace the liberal label. Surveying Obama's first weeks in office, Leon Wieseltier was discouraged with the new administration's "reluctance to attach the grandeur of its initiatives to the grandeur of liberalism. Instead the president's distaste for division, and his Chicago practicality, set the tone." Wieseltier wanted the president to publicly declare "that the values

28 Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009.

29 Timothy Garton Ash, "A Liberal Translation," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2009.

of liberalism and the values of conservatism are not the same values, even if compromises may be cobbled together; and that there is dignity in the contradictions."³⁰

However, saying so would probably be too confrontational for a president who ran on a platform of post-partisanship and who throughout his career has demonstrated that he favors compromise over combat. But Obama's platform and his first months in office raise the question of whether he has any coherent political philosophy to guide his actions. Here it may be instructive to compare him with Franklin Roosevelt, who also took office in the midst of a severe economic crisis without having a clearly articulated governing philosophy. FDR had run on a promise to balance the budget, reduce taxes and try new solutions until something worked. "The country needs, and unless I mistake its temper, the country demands, persistent experimentation," Roosevelt stated during the 1932 campaign. "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."³¹

Roosevelt had promised action and experimentation, but there was no overriding philosophy tying the various ideas together. Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and the first woman ever to serve in a U.S. cabinet, later confirmed this. "The notion that the New Deal had a preconceived theoretical position is ridiculous," Perkins said. "The pattern it was to assume was not clear or specific in Roosevelt's mind, in the mind of the Democratic party, or in the mind of anyone else."³² Not until 1936 did Roosevelt run on a full-fledged New Deal platform.

Barack Obama is similar to Roosevelt in his focus on action and in his unwillingness to subscribe to a fixed ideological position. Whether he is also interested in "persistent experimentation" is still unclear. For now, no one knows what Obama's equivalent to the New Deal will be. Perhaps it will emerge gradually as he grapples with the economic and financial crisis, the energy problem, health care, and so on. As political philosopher Michael Sandel said after Obama's victory, "These challenges are so great that he will only succeed if he is able to articulate a new politics of the common good."³³

30 Leon Wieseltier, "Washington Diarist: Love Me I'm A Liberal," *The New Republic*, March 4, 2009.

31 Åsard & Bennett, *Democracy and the Marketplace of Ideas*, 56.

32 Russell Baker, "A Revolutionary President," *The New York Review of Books*, February 12-25, 2009, 6.

33 Quoted in Thomas L. Friedman, "Finishing America's work," *International Herald Tribune*, Nov. 6, 2008, 15.

Obama is not the first president who has come to power promising to change the ways of Washington politics. Facing him is an opposition which likes to call itself “loyal,” but which seems more interested in obstruction than in cooperation. Obama’s initial economic stimulus package passed without any Republican support in the House of Representatives, and with just three Republicans voting for it in the Senate. This was an early indication of the daunting task facing the new president.

In general, it seems as if Democrats are more inclined to work with Republicans than the other way around. This fact may well be rooted in their ideological differences, as Alan Wolfe suggests in his recent book, *The Future of Liberalism*. Conservatives, he argues, like to stand on principle, whereas liberals are more action-oriented and like to get things done.³⁴ If that is the case, Obama’s opponents are not likely to lay down their arms, and unlikely to be swayed by his call for bipartisanship and cooperation.

Above all, it is worth remembering that even with an extremely unpopular incumbent president, a deep economic crisis and the U.S. engaged in two wars abroad, John McCain managed to get almost 46 percent of the vote in the 2008 presidential election. The conservative network of advocacy groups, think tanks, and media outlets is still there, eager to continue the trashing of liberalism and the liberal label. Barack Obama’s historic and impressive victory notwithstanding, his party’s rhetorical dilemma is not likely to disappear anytime soon.

³⁴ Alan Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).