

A Revolution by Increments?

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Gleanings from Contemporary Prose

From Russell Baker, "A Revolutionary President,"
New York Review of Books, Feb. 12, 2009

Few expected very much of Franklin Roosevelt on inauguration day in 1933. Like Barack Obama 76 years later, he had succeeded a failed Republican president, and Americans had voted for change. ...

To cope with the economic catastrophe, Americans had elected a man whom many of the finest minds of his generation considered an intellectually second-rate rich mama's boy, whose obvious charm obscured a deep shallowness.

Walter Lippmann, the most prestigious syndicated columnist of that or any other era dismissed Roosevelt as "a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president." In private conversation Lippmann could be even crueler: "A kind of amiable boy scout," he wrote to a friend.

H.L. Mencken, after pronouncing Roosevelt "one of the most charming of men" went on to say that he left the impression of being "somewhat shallow and futile." Other important journalists seemed to agree. Even more remarkably, after his election some of these very critics were saying that he should be given dictatorial powers. Such was the sense of panic about the Great Depression as he took office. ...

But what so many observers failed to grasp was the Roosevelt, with all his inadequacies, was a great politician, and to be a great politician is no small thing. ... Roosevelt seems to have been born with that unique political gene that empowers otherwise ordinary men of no special intellect to shape and command events. ...

And so, having taken the presidential oath on March 4, 1933, Roosevelt proceeded during the next hundred days to create "a revolution." He shepherded 15 major laws through Congress, prodded by two Fireside Chats and 30 press conferences. He created an alphabet soup of new agencies—the AAA, the CCC, the FERA, and the NRA—to administer the laws and bring relief to farmers, industry and the unemployed. ... Within days he had declared a national bank holiday and signed the Emergency Banking Act, which immediately put the banking system on a firmer footing. ...

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the master of Roosevelt biography, called it "a presidential barrage of ideas and programs unlike anything known in American history." The period, known ever since as "The Hundred Days" made profound changes in government's attitude toward the citizen and created the ideological conflict that animated American politics through the twentieth century to the present day. ... Perhaps, in spite of himself, Roosevelt built for the ages.

Reflections

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize last month, President Obama faced a significant rhetorical challenge. Just a few days earlier he had approved an escalation of the war in Afghanistan, and now he was to receive an award given to individuals who have done outstanding work to promote peaceful and productive relations within the human family. Obama addressed the contradiction directly, arguing that at times "force is not only necessary, but morally justified."

Although the audience's response to the President's remarks was tepid at best, commentators here at home praised the speech as forceful, clear, and convincing. It reaffirmed the role of the United States as "guardian of the world's security" and pledged to use the nation's military might prudently but decisively. "We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: we will not eradicate violent conflicts in our lifetime," the President intoned.

On the campaign trail candidate Obama ran on the platform of change—deep, substantive change. "It's not enough to get out of Iraq," he proclaimed. "We have to get out of the mindset that led us into Iraq." But after nearly a year in office, the President has yet to break with previous precedent. Yes, there is somewhat less saber rattling these days, and, as Obama said in Oslo, "Quiet diplomacy is sometimes the most productive path, even if it lacks the satisfying purity of indignation." But the nation is still indefinitely committed to Iraq; more resources are being poured into Afghanistan; the prison at Guantanamo remains open and occupied; the most noxious elements of the Patriot Act remain in place.

Moreover, the federal government's commitment to the military-corporate establishment remains as staunch as ever. Since the end of World

War II, the federal government has spent more than *half* its tax dollars on past, current, and future military operations. Today the annual defense budget of the United States exceeds that of all other nations of the earth combined and efforts to trim back that budget by even a fraction of a percentage point have been few and far between. The “permanent war economy” that Seymour Mellman spoke of back in 1985 remains firmly in place, Peace Prize or no Peace Prize.

As the President completes his first full year in office, the public is clearly divided over his accomplishments. Leaving aside the yahoos who assail every reform initiative as an insidious assault on the “American way,” many are wondering whether Obama has “lost his groove.” Having created a revolution of expectations, Obama appears to have been co-opted by the Washington establishment and settled for “business as usual.”

Compared to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first-year accomplishments the new President’s performance hasn’t been all that noteworthy. Nor does Obama compare favorably with a Lyndon Johnson who, as Rick Perlstein writes, “legislated at such breakneck pace that his aides were in awe.”

LBJ used his 1964 electoral mandate to push for a series of reforms that rivaled the New Deal. He launched a multi-faceted “War on Poverty” that significantly reduced the ranks of the poor. Then came Medicare, preschools for poor children, college prep for poor teenagers, legal services for indigent defendants, redevelopment funds for depressed areas, landmark immigration reform, a new department of Housing and Urban Development, and national endowments for the humanities and arts. There was also a Highway Beautification act, the Water Quality Act, and the Clean Air Act.

And then, despite fierce opposition from Southern members of his own party, Johnson rammed the landmark Civil Rights Act through Congress. “I’m not going to cavil and I’m not going to compromise,” the President told Georgia’s segregationist Senator Richard Russell.

LBJ and FDR—one an old fashioned populist from the Texas hill country and the other a Northeastern blue blood—had this in common, Perlstein writes. They both understood that if revolutionary legislation was to be passed at all, it would have to be passed quickly, before the window of opportunity slammed shut. “All monuments of lasting, structural change in the American state happened fast,” Perlstein observes, “and I

hope Barack Obama grasps that.”

When it comes time to govern, an ingrained habit of incrementalism may be a very profound problem indeed. . . . We have learned to think of strategic incrementalism as a positive good, even an end in itself. . . . But if you take it slow you might not get anything at all. . . . Those who want true progress have to be juggernauts.

This is not invariably the case, though. Profound social transformations have come about as the result of small tremblers rather than sudden, dramatic shifts in the tectonics of our civilization. For instance, the Civil Rights Act championed by President Johnson was preceded by decades of steady pressure by African Americans and their allies. Ben Jealous, the 35-year-old national president of the NAACP, believes that significant, sustainable change often requires a 20 to 30 year cycle. Counseling patience and encouraging reformers to take the long view, Jealous notes that “The founders of the NAACP were going to eliminate lynch mobs, and 30 years later we did it.”

In 1918 we said we were going to desegregate the military; 30 years later we did it. In 1932 we said we were going to outlaw Jim Crow; 22 years later we did it. In 1954 we said we were going to desegregate every institution in this country, from the local school to the global corporation. It took 40 years, but we succeeded. In 1960 we said that we were going to level the political playing field, and now we’ve done it.

The saga of America’s LGBT community is similar: incremental gains adding up to a quantum shift in people’s perceptions and our public policies. Consider what *Time* Magazine had to say about homosexuals in a major feature article published in 1966. While acknowledging “homosexuals are present in every walk of life,” America’s premier news magazine condemned same-sex relationships as

a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life. As such, it deserves fairness, compassion, understanding, and, when possible, treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as a minority . . . no sophistry about simple differences in taste—and, above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.

Forty-odd years later, marriage equality still eludes us and barriers to full inclusion remain, but homosexuality no longer carries the social stigma it once did. Not only are two of the most influential progressives in the U.S. Congress—Barney Frank and Tammy Baldwin—openly gay, but so is the newly elected mayor of one of America’s more conservative cities—Houston, Texas.

Gradual revolutions marked by many incremental gains—that appears to be a perspective Barack Obama shares as well. For better or worse, our President is an incrementalist who feels that it’s more important to establish a *precedent*—even a weak one—than to engage in a bare-knuckled fight for a bigger prize. This is the approach he has taken with respect to health care reform. “The Obama theory,” Michael Tomasky writes, “is to pass a bill, take what you can get, and fix it later.” The question is, in coming years will the President have sufficient political capital to fix anything?

It’s also important to ask whether we can afford the luxury of incrementalism, given the gravity and urgency of some of our problems. The natural environment is a case in point. Within the last century CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have risen by as much as they normally do in a 100,000- year glacial cycle and will rise farther even *if* stringent control measures are taken. Over the past half century the chemistry of our oceans has been fundamentally altered, with PH levels falling to their lowest level in 50 million years and endangering many forms of aquatic life. At present rates of extinction, fully half of the planet’s living species will be gone by the end of this century, with potentially grave consequences for the biosphere.

“The most deadly aspect of human activity,” *The New Yorker’s* Elizabeth Kolbert writes, “may simply be the *pace* of it.” Is it any wonder that scientists wring their hands as Congress dithers and delays in a belated attempt to pass “cap and trade” legislation proposed by the White House—a measure most experts agree doesn’t go nearly far enough.

“I can no longer see the slower, tinkering-inside-the-paradigm option as anything more than an attractive but delusional refusal to admit the enormity of the challenges before us,” Clarkson University philosopher Bill Vitek wrote recently:

The economic concerns of middle and lower class Americans may also require the President to rethink his commitment to incrementalism. Franklin Roosevelt was elected an unprecedented four times, at least in part because he moved quick-

ly to put people to work, protect their assets, provide older adults with social security, and repair the nation’s infrastructure. In pushing for these measures Roosevelt, despite his privileged background, convinced the folks on Main Street that he had their interests at heart.

However, given the array of powerful forces committed to maintaining the status quo, it may no longer be possible for a politician—even a president—to act boldly. No real progress on climate change is likely to be made without the consent of at least some major players in the fossil fuel industry. Ditto for the pharmaceutical and insurance interests when it comes to health care. Ditto for the Pentagon in restoring sanity to the defense budget.

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The obstacles a reform-minded politician faces are indeed formidable. Senate rules that permit a determined minority to block any important piece of legislation; an electoral and lobbying system that allows unlimited amounts of money to be spent on influence peddling; a self-aggrandizing financial system that refuses to be reigned in; and an irresponsible media that distracts Americans with “junk politics” while giving short shrift to issues that matter the most.

As an example of the latter—junk politics—consider the attempted sabotage on Christmas Eve of an international flight by a deeply troubled young man from Nigeria. For an entire week the networks have worked this story relentlessly, often using it to diminish the Obama administration’s credibility. While the story had any number of interesting angles, in the end it has been horribly overplayed.

Deterring attacks on our transportation systems is undoubtedly important, but in an integrated world in which thousands of planes take off and land daily no one’s safety can be guaranteed. To travel in such a world is to incur risk, and it’s up to the individual to determine how much is acceptable. To suggest that unless Americans can be kept *perfectly* safe the President has been negligent isn’t, as Glenn Greenwald observes, responsible politics; it is emotional manipulation. “What this actually illustrates,” Greenwald wrote on Thursday,

is that many people are addicted to the excitement and fear of Terrorist melodramas.

... But this was not the Cuban Missile Crisis or the attack on Pearl Harbor, as disappointing and unfulfilling as it is to accept that. It merits ... investigation and possibly policy changes by the responsible government agencies but not a red-alert, siren-sounding government-wide emergency that venerates Al Qaeda into a threat so profound that the President can't even be away from Washington lest they get us all.

This is "junk politics" pure and simple, and in the end it fatally compromises our government's ability to accomplish anything meaningful and monumental.

Politics today are much different than they were when FDR began to tackle America's mounting problems in the early 1930s. Back then, corporations and the military wielded far less influence, and the public was less polarized. Thus Roosevelt was quickly able to regulate Wall Street with only token resistance and to marshal support for highly original measures like the federal art program that put thousands of musicians, actors, and visual artists to work.

Russell Baker tells us that Franklin D. Roosevelt was lightly regarded by the best minds of his generation, yet he succeeded where a much more accomplished President had failed. Herbert Hoover was a brilliant self-made man with a successful track record as both a scientist and entrepreneur, and he was a more rigorous thinker than Roosevelt. But according to Russell Baker, Hoover was incapable of thinking "outside the box."

He could not convince himself ... that the basic economic tenets he had believed in all his life were discredited and that something wholly new was required. ... By contrast, the first and second New Deals were a hodge-podge of ideologies, which is precisely why they worked.

Like Hoover, Obama is highly regarded for his intelligence—perhaps the brightest President we've had for many years. But to be the kind of *revolutionary* president we need, he must try to emulate the boldness of a Roosevelt or a Johnson—at least on those few issues that matter the most.

It may be impossible for Barack Obama or any progressive to be more than marginally successful in the present environment, with so many powerful, moneyed interests ready to deter and, if necessary, destroy them. But if notable successes are *not* forthcoming, the window of opportunity may close and a right-wing backlash of chilling dimensions ensue—the kind of reaction that could set this country back for decades. The United States escaped that fate 70 years ago because Franklin Roosevelt acted decisively and thus became a genuine source of hope for millions of desperate people. We need leaders of comparable daring and originality today.

No President—however popular—can bring about deep change on his or her own. If we think that the nation's afflictions require stronger medicine than is being prescribed, we need to say so. As the historian Howard Zinn notes, "Where progress has been made, whenever any kind of injustice has been overturned, it's been because people spoke their minds, acted as citizens and were not easily satisfied."

If we are still pondering a resolution for this problematic but promising new year, let it be to renew our commitment to alert, intelligent, and engaged citizenship.

If we are still pondering a resolution for this problematic but promising new year, let it be to renew our commitment to alert, intelligent, and engaged citizenship. Let it be to enable the revolution that our teetering world now requires.