

Advise and Dissent

History shows that dissent within the progressive ranks has been vital to advancing the liberal agenda. A response to Michael Tomasky.

Liberals are neurotic creatures. We tend to treat pressing global problems, small swings in the political dynamic, and minor differences of opinion among like-minded colleagues as if all were of equal world-historical importance. And so we come to believe that a blog post criticizing the President will do as much harm to progressive politics as a 9.5 percent unemployment rate; that catastrophic climate change is as consequential as a comment thread about Rahm Emanuel; and that a guy with a sign at an anti-war rally is as worthy of attention as the health-care crisis.

Some progressives, appalled by internecine warfare, believe that for the left to succeed, its members must band together and support the current Democratic President and Democratic Congress through all their compromises and concessions. These progressives urge their brethren to accept that which exists in the realm of the achievable, and form a united front against a pernicious conservative/corporate behemoth that can sniff out weakness and division, and use its

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massive resources and decades of cultural indoctrination to extinguish any hope for a progressive renaissance.

While this approach is not entirely wrong, it is deeply problematic. It assumes that unity of effort has animated political change over time. But history teaches us otherwise. In fact, what successful progressive movement politics has done over the decades is agitate, dissent, disrespect, and censure, until the forces arrayed against reform fold. Not everyone on the left has to join in this agitation—but some must. As American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) founder Roger Baldwin said, “So long as we have enough people in this country willing to fight for their rights, we’ll be called a democracy.”

In his essay “Against Despair,” [Issue #17] Michael Tomasky makes the important point that, as a matter of the historical record, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson made concessions to the conservatives of their time. As a result, while they achieved much, they also frustrated their progressive supporters, and limited the scope of their agenda. As Tomasky points out, popular history often smooths out these fits and starts, turning complicated politicians into neat archetypes. Obama shouldn’t be held to the same standard as those archetypes, Tomasky says, but should be assessed on the basis of the particular historical moment and his record of achievement despite the myriad obstacles in his path.

Although Tomasky grants legitimate grievances on the part of Obama’s progressive critics—from the backroom deals with stakeholders during the health-care debate, to the unconscionable embrace of many of his predecessor’s terrorism policies, to the preservation of the financial system’s structure in the Wall Street reform bill—he clearly aligns himself in opposition to such critics. If the argument were merely that progressives who have been critical of the Obama Administration should incorporate a sense of perspective and history into their criticisms, I would have little to complain about. Obama is working within a broken and often corrupt system, and has less ability than many on the left think to move members of either party where they often do not want to go. But Tomasky goes further than that. He seems to intimate that progressive despair disrupts liberal goals and makes them nearly impossible to achieve. As he writes:

The changes we want to see won’t happen in 18 months, or in two years, or four, or probably even eight. Indeed, the entire Obama era, if it lasts eight years, is best thought of not as a culmination, or a self-contained time frame that should be judged a failure if X, Y, and Z don’t happen. It’s the start of a process that may take 16 years, or 24; that may be along the way interrupted or undone; that will be fought tooth and nail... Liberal despair only reinforces their power and helps

to ensure that whatever gains are made during the Obama term could quickly be rolled back. And if that happens, we are back, ten years from now, to fighting the usual rearguard battles.

If this were true, then Tomasky would have to show evidence in the historical record. After all, he notes that FDR had his liberal critics, as did LBJ in the 1960s when the Great Society reforms took root. Did these critics reinforce the power of the forces trying to stop the New Deal or the Great Society, forces that existed in great numbers? Is there any evidence that liberal frustration and progressive pressure had a negative effect on Roosevelt's or Johnson's plans?

The history Tomasky provides suggests quite the opposite. Over time, the reforms put forward by FDR and LBJ only improved. But those improvements did not happen in a vacuum. They happened because passionate, well-intentioned progressives were willing to label the reforms as inadequate and to fight for their amelioration. You can argue with their methods, but not with their success.

To take but one example, consider Francis Townsend, a retired physician who, after watching old women rummage through garbage cans for food in his neighborhood at the height of the Great Depression, decided to enter politics with one simple idea: a \$200 monthly pension plan for the elderly (a princely sum in those days) paid for with a 2 percent tax on all commercial, business, and financial transactions. A committed Keynesian, Townsend believed this money would immediately get circulated throughout the economy, create jobs, and end the Depression, in addition to bringing a modicum of dignity to the frail at the end of their lives. To promote this belief, he started a series of grassroots clubs around the country in 1933; within two years, his Townsend clubs counted more than five million members. In 1935, Townsend handed President Roosevelt a petition with 20 million signatures of support. In the pre-Internet age, this was a remarkable organizing feat.

President Roosevelt borrowed elements of the Townsend Plan in the initial Social Security Act of 1935, but those elements were watered down. The legislation included a federal/state partnership for Old Age Assistance programs that provided a meager \$20 monthly benefit, and a mandatory social insurance plan that bore little resemblance to today's Social Security. It did not cover workers outside of commerce and industry, nor did it cover dependents or survivors, and the initial benefit was smaller than Old Age Assistance. To top it all off, monthly benefits wouldn't start until 1942. Nevertheless, the Social Security Act of 1935 provided a path to allowing retirees to lift themselves out of poverty and live out their lives with some measure of comfort.

Townsend went ballistic—some would say crazy. The Depression-era *March of Time* newsreel series accused Townsend of leading a “lunatic fringe.” Townsend criticized the Roosevelt plan from the day it passed, calling the benefit package completely inadequate and “suitable only for paupers.” He ramped up the Townsend clubs, which, according to political scientist Edwin Amenta, increased tenfold between the end of 1934 and 1936. He used his *Townsend Weekly* pamphlet to hammer Roosevelt’s Social Security program and its meager benefits. He joined with Gerald L.K. Smith, the head of the Share Our Wealth Society (founded by Huey Long), and the nativist demagogue Father Charles Coughlin to found the National Union for Social Justice, a new political party. The Union’s candidate for president in 1936 grabbed almost one million votes.

In short, Townsend’s reaction mirrored that of the “professional disgruntledists” cited in Tomasky’s piece. Rather than justifying the Social Security Act of 1935 as the product of the art of the possible, he loudly proclaimed Roosevelt a sellout and apostate, and did whatever he could to bring him down, even joining in a coalition with those who mostly shared a vendetta against the President instead of a similar ideology.

There’s even evidence that Townsend may have been pushed along by his own vanity and the adulation of his millions of followers rather than seriousness and principle—in his 1943 autobiography, *New Horizons*, Townsend claimed that FDR only enacted Social Security to “stem the Townsend tide.”

Obviously, Townsend’s activism didn’t topple FDR. But it did help lead to tangible, beneficial changes to Social Security. By 1939, Congress had enacted amendments to the Social Security Act that added survivor and dependent benefits. But, to FDR’s progressive opponents, that wasn’t enough. Various social justice coalitions joined Townsend in agitating for higher benefits. Eventually, in 1950, this relentless advocacy produced another round of amendments that added a host of other professions outside of industry and commerce to the Social Security program, and the first cost-of-living adjustment, so that benefits finally outstripped the miniscule amounts in Old Age Assistance. This dynamic continued apace for 30 more years. Disability insurance entered the program in 1956, early retirement became allowable in 1961, and automatic cost-of-living adjustments were added by 1972. All this happened under Democratic and Republican presidents. It’s difficult to conclude that Townsend’s persistent, forceful critique resulted in negative consequences for the policy—in fact, the result

The improvements to reforms by FDR and LBJ happened because passionate progressives were willing to label them inadequate.

was completely salutary. And Townsend wasn't alone—pension organizations like Ham and Eggs in California, Upton Sinclair's EPIC movement, the Share Our Wealth Society, and many others pressured Roosevelt in those years, often quite critically, and in the end Social Security became the successful, expansive program we have today.

You can see the same process play out in other areas of epic progressive change. Civil rights leaders reacted to the 1957 Civil Rights Act—the contents of which segregationist Democratic lawmakers dramatically degraded—by practically ignoring it and continuing their battles against discrimination. And so in 1960, Congress passed another civil rights bill. Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement refused to accept half loaves while continually pressing for changes. They were unafraid to take on the powerful: President John Kennedy had to be browbeaten into using his power and taking action on virtually anything related to civil rights. Kennedy even opposed the 1963 March on Washington, arguing that it would put undue pressure on Washington and provoke a backlash. By 1964, a more comprehensive Civil Rights Act was signed by Lyndon Johnson, and the following year the Voting Rights Act finally guaranteed the franchise to African-Americans. Progressive activists pressured Democratic presidents to do the right thing, and eventually the right thing was done.

There's an example from this year, too. From the beginning, the Obama Administration has been reluctant to move on issues of gay and lesbian civil rights, despite candidate Obama promising to end employer discrimination and federal marriage discrimination, and allow gays and lesbians to serve in the armed forces. Obama made such promises over and over, but his Justice Department fought to preserve the constitutionality of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in court. (The Administration lost the DOMA case in U.S. district court recently, when a federal judge found a section of the law unconstitutional.) Some changes were made, but they were marginal. Gay rights advocates were enraged. In response, Obama announced in the 2010 State of the Union that he intended to end the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy by the end of the year. However, Defense Secretary Robert Gates in April wrote a letter to Congressional leaders demanding no legislative changes to DADT until after the completion of a one-year Pentagon study, pushing out any action to after the beginning of a new Congress, when the votes may not be available for that policy shift.

Gay rights activists—especially those less established and with fewer historical ties to power—went to work. They heckled the President at rallies. They threatened to withhold money from Democratic campaign committees.

They ruthlessly criticized the President and his advisors for being turncoats, sellouts, and hypocrites. Lt. Dan Choi, a gay Arabic translator then awaiting discharge from the New York Army National Guard for coming out, became one of Obama's fiercest critics on the issue. Choi said in a Harvard speech that the President was effectively telling him, "Our country is not grateful. We do not welcome your sacrifice." Within one month, Obama and the Defense Department reached a compromise—one that Gates and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen were reluctant to accept—that would create a legislative repeal, with enactment dependent on the President and his military advisors after the Pentagon study and a review period. These same gay rights activists remain dissatisfied with this compromise—Choi went on a hunger strike shortly after the deal was struck—and I expect them to continue to fight right up until the day the actual repeal is signed.

This is how change gets made. We have a broken, corrupt democracy, dominated by special-interest money and a clueless media, and dependent on antiquated rules and structures that in fact make any change nearly impossible. But that has not stopped progressives from working hard for change—contra Tomasky's claim that the only mass movement to come out of the Great Recession "is a right-wing populist one." Clean elections advocates just poured millions into a campaign to secure House passage of a public financing bill. Democrats in the Senate, responding to the liberal base's revulsion at the chamber's almost comic dysfunction, are preparing to challenge the Senate's rules at the beginning of the next Congress, which could lead to abolition of the modern incarnation of the filibuster. (Not incidentally, many Great Society reforms broke through legislative gridlock after House Speaker Sam Rayburn added enough members to the House Rules Committee to circumvent its segregationist chairman.) Labor activists are creating mass social justice movements like Good Jobs Now and One Nation, and thinking in ways they hadn't in recent years when protecting their contracts and fiefdoms was the priority. Bob King, the new president of the United Auto Workers, recently told columnist Bob Herbert, "[T]he only way, ultimately, that we protect our members and workers in general is by fighting for justice for everybody."

These are not the actions of despair. And everyone has a role to play in them, both institutional players on the inside and agitators on the outside. The agitators may not line up with the President's agenda at every moment, or even at any moment, but history has shown them to be crucial to achieving what was previously thought impossible. Of course, the left has disadvantages, particularly when it comes to money and infrastructure. But those disadvantages become even more insurmountable when criticism of a Democratic president is placed

off-limits, and when loyalties to party take precedence over loyalties to policy. You cannot alter the structural imbalance of American politics with a presidential cheering section.

In fact, in many cases, uncritically lining up behind the President, no matter his attendant faults and imperfections, serves to create false consensus where none exists. Division is not only healthy—it helps us avoid especially negative outcomes. According to a study in the July 2010 issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics*, polling never revealed a true majority in favor of torture until six months into the Obama Administration. When George W. Bush authorized torture, his supporters lined up behind him; as Obama continues to turn a blind eye to torture and the disregard for civil liberties practiced under the Bush Administration, his supporters are compelled to either defend him or dismiss the criticisms. The result is the appearance of bipartisan support for a surveillance state, tilting the balance of power toward security over liberty.

Progressive defenders of Obama, like Tomasky, often acknowledge their disappointment with him on these issues, while noting progress on others. But to others, these issues are fundamental and cannot be waved away with “on the one hand, on the other hand” equivocation. When the ACLU of Northern California decided in 1942 to defend Fred Korematsu for resisting entry into a Japanese internment camp, despite extreme pressure from the national organization to drop its representation, it was affirming the idea that some principles are worth defending regardless of the political context. While Korematsu and the other Japanese-Americans who saw their rights violated did not receive justice for more than four decades, what progressive can now dispute the decision to heckle, raise hell, and stand up on their behalf?

Ultimately, progressive “despair” has more utility than Tomasky allows. It represents more than the smug carping of dilettantes who would rather take down a presidency so they can prove the correctness of their own nihilism. There’s some of that, of course. But progressive critics of the President are working to figure out the choke points in our busted democracy, and either leverage or fix them to achieve goals in which they truly believe. They also mean to present an argument for a grander progressive vision that can endure over time, through the next president and the one after that. They have yet to succeed, but they have no choice but to try. **D**