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THE NEW LIBERALISM

George Packer *

I'm not going to tell stories today. I'm going to give an interpretation, one interpretation of the times, these historic times, this earthquake we're living in. The title of this talk is "The New Liberalism," and it sounds like a pretty bold and conclusive title, doesn't it?

Actually, it's a tentative and hesitant title, and it should be visualized in quotation marks. There should probably be a question mark at the end of it.

Joan Didion once wrote, "It is easy to see the beginnings of things and harder to see the ends." That is often true in private life, in private relationships. It's less often true in public life, in politics. No one could seriously dispute that we've been living—until very recently—in a conservative era with the ideas and politicians of the conservative movement ascendant.

When did it begin? Well, Sean Wilentz of Princeton published a book last year called *The Age of Reagan: 1974 to 2008*. I am less sure of the 1974 part than of the 2008 part. Wilentz wanted to distinguish the Nixon years, which saw a continuation of some of the liberal policies of Kennedy and Johnson, from the rise to power of the New Right that came after Nixon and after Watergate.

Other historians and journalists use 1966 as the beginning, when the Republican Party scored a major midterm triumph in congressional elections, or even more commonly the apocalyptic year of 1968, when postwar liberalism at home and abroad went down spectacularly in flames.

Just before last November's election, I interviewed David Axelrod, Obama's top political adviser, and although it was probably the most intense period of the campaign, a couple of weeks before the election, he could smell victory and was willing to think in historical terms, to talk as if Obama had won,

* Staff Writer, *The New Yorker*, and author of *THE ASSASSIN'S GATE: AMERICA IN IRAQ* (2006). This article is the written version of the J. Byron McCormick Society for Law and Public Affairs Lecture delivered at the James E. Rogers College of Law, University of Arizona.

and to look back and forward—and he only did that on the condition that I wouldn't publish the article until after the election. He said:

American history runs in epics like this: the Gilded Age led to the Progressive Era, the Progressive Era ran into a truncated period in the 1920s that led to the New Deal, and the New Deal or some version of it survived until 1980. We've been essentially governed by the kind of theories that Reagan ushered in for the last 28 years.

So Axelrod said that it *began* in 1980. Neither Axelrod nor Sean Wilentz was quite willing to say it last year, but it's clear today that the conservative era is over. Just ask a conservative. They were the first to know because they actually felt it from the inside. They were like the distance runner who starts burning glycogen and feels the lactic acid building up. They knew they were on their last legs before most other people did. As early as November 2007, the flagship publication of the modern conservative movement, *National Review*, published a story called *The Coming Cataclysm*. Well, it came.

Last spring I interviewed a number of younger conservatives about the state of their movement, people like David Brooks, David Frum, Ross Douthat, Rich Lowry, Yuval Levin, and every one of them had at least reached the fourth of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, which is depression. A few were already in acceptance. It happened quickly. Only Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity have failed to move past denial, and that's because their incomes depend on it.

So while the beginning of the conservative era is hard to see, the end is not. Its tombstone reads: 1966 to 2008, or 1968 to 2008, or 1974 to 2008, or 1980 to 2008. In a few minutes I'll talk about why it ended. But its demise last year coincided with—and eventually was hastened by—the rise of the most remarkable political phenomenon since Reagan. This is the kind of coincidence that historical turning points always seem to require.

What if Barack Obama had hit his stride a little earlier and run in 2000 or 2004? Then things would be very different. But he didn't. This is why there should be quotes around my title and a question mark at the end. So far, the new liberalism is really just a death and a phenom: conservatism ended, Obama arrived.

Oh, and by the way, around the same time that these were happening, every major institution in our society started breaking down or simply stopped functioning, from government, intelligence, and the military to the financial world, big business, journalism, and book publishing. I could go on. Every week, almost every day, some titanic pillar of American life comes crashing down. And when the crisis came, the cream of our system, from General John Abizaid to former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, turned out to have no answers or the wrong answers.

All of these circumstances are favorable to the birth of a new political era, but they don't tell us what the nature of that era will be. Something new is coming, but there's no guarantee that it will take one form over another, or any discernible form at all.

And several obvious elements of a liberal revival are still missing. For example, there are no genuinely new big policy ideas. Universal health care has been on the Democratic Party's agenda since the 1930s. It was the unfinished part of the New Deal. Green energy dates back to the Carter era. Growing income inequality and wage stagnation have been around since the 1970s, and so have the various proposals for reversing them.

Last month in the *New Republic*, Sam Tanenhaus of the *The New York Times* published an article called *Conservatism Is Dead*, in which he described the years 1965 to 1975 as "its peak period as an intellectual force." So this was years before Ronald Reagan was elected, years in which magazines like *The Public Interest*, *National Review*, and *Commentary* began a systematic challenge to postwar liberal ideals on every front, from the welfare state, crime, and race to nuclear weapons and the Cold War. And I don't think even senior fellows at the Center For American Progress would describe the years 1993 to 2003 or to 2008, for that matter, as liberalism's intellectual peak.

In a way, Obama came into office amid less intellectual ferment than Clinton did, although much of the ferment around Clinton was small-bore and tactical, a rearguard defense. Obama is, perhaps, the most cerebral and literate president we've had since Kennedy and maybe since Lincoln; but last fall when I asked a number of people close to him what books and writers would influence his administration, all of them had trouble naming a single one. Axelrod called Obama's reading eclectic.

One new field with which Obama is very familiar is behavioral economics. He recently named Cass Sunstein, formerly of Harvard, who is also the co-author of the recent book *Nudge*, to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. But events have overtaken the policy ideas that come out of behavioral economics. What Sunstein calls "libertarian paternalism," which is giving people a choice but coaxing them in the right direction, seems rather weak medicine for what America's economy needs right now. Someone should think about writing a sequel to *Nudge* and call it *Shove*.

So there are surprisingly few big new liberal ideas. There's also no splinter political party to drive one of the main parties in a more ideologically certain direction, like the Populist and Progressive parties of the 1890s and 1910s and 1920s, or Dixiecrats of the 1940s and 1950s. And maybe most importantly, there is no coherent social movement rising up from the grassroots that could propel politics and politicians in that more ideologically certain direction and that could, in turn, be used by the President to advance his agenda. Lincoln had the abolitionists, Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson had the Progressives, FDR had the labor movement, Kennedy and Johnson had the civil rights movement, and Reagan had the tax revolt and the Christian conservatives.

What does Obama have? He has Obamania. He has his own remarkable movement, his own campaign. A lot of people have underestimated his power—I'm not going to make that mistake today. And obviously people like David Plouffe, Obama's campaign manager, are at this very moment trying to figure out how to convert its political energy as a campaign tool into the energy of a governing apparatus that can strengthen Obama's hand in dealing with Congress.

That kind of movement would come in very handy right about now, in everything from the budget to health care. But an e-mail list and millions of small donors are not the same as a bottom-up social force that unites people around a definite cause and a shared vision and keeps them active over the long haul.

For years, liberals and Democrats tried to figure out how to rescue the idea of activist government from the ill repute in which it fell back when conservatism was at its intellectual peak. The Democratic Leadership Council, the Third Way, triangulation, Clinton's declaration that "the era of big government is over," framing and reframing and rebranding and new narratives, innumerable books and articles, countless Capitol Hill retreats, new think tanks, new magazines—I mean, people devoted their careers to this stuff. Donors contributed tens of millions of dollars to try to figure it out.

In the end, none of it really mattered. It didn't persuade the rest of the country. It didn't matter nearly as much as a decade of conservative failure and a week of financial collapse. What persuaded the country were facts, facts that opened Americans to the possibility of a new liberalism.

To begin to describe what features might characterize the new liberalism, we need to look into the three things that have made it possible: the death of conservatism, the social changes that occurred during the Reagan era—and by Reagan era, I mean 1980 to 2008—and, finally, Barack Obama. So let's take them one at a time.

Last spring, I paid a visit to Pat Buchanan, who is actually a delightful man and lives in a big house next to the CIA grounds in Virginia. He's got a gold-plated vintage firearms collection in his basement that he insisted I admire. He was happy to talk to me for hours and hours, and he is a great raconteur. And in a way I caught him in a perfect moment because he's out of the game now. So to him this is all kind of an entertainment, really. I don't think he is suffering as much as some of his young fellow conservatives.

What I wanted to talk to him about was the Nixon era, and he was delighted to talk about it because that was really his prime. Buchanan was Nixon's man. He helped invent what they called positive polarization. He showed me a memo that he wrote for Nixon back in 1971. He actually said to me, "It's a bit raw for today," and that piqued my interest. I wanted to know what was in it.

Well, it was a memo about how to shear off, quote, "big pieces" of the old New Deal coalition, basically how to divide the Democrats. One idea was to nominate white Southern Supreme Court justices, which would create a divide between the white Democrats of the South and the rest of the party. Nixon did that. Another was to distribute bumper stickers in the country's ghettos calling for a black president or vice president, which would create problems within the Democratic Party among whites and blacks. This was pretty serious stuff. It was pretty raw for today. The memo said, "We should do what is within our power to have a black nominated for number two, at least, at the Democratic National Convention." Well, last year it finally worked and even better than expected. The memo concluded, "We could cut the Democratic Party and the country in half. My view is that we would have far the larger half."

This was Nixon's strategy. It was at times called the Southern strategy, but I think that's too narrow. It was countrywide. It involved Catholics in the North and ethnics in the cities—which is why it was called the Silent Majority—and it was a brilliant strategy for getting and holding power, and it really worked.

At the same time at the White House, Nixon, Buchanan, Spiro Agnew, and others out front were pursuing this political strategy, there was the intellectual work of William F. Buckley and Norman Podhoretz, Kevin Phillips, Irving Kristol, Charles Murray. So on three fronts, political strategy, intellectual combat, and grassroots organization (which rose up with the New Right), the conservative movement took control of the Republican Party and finally elected its leader to the White House.

Reagan learned how to seize and keep control of the terms of public debate, and he had a simple memorable line to explain the essence of Reaganism that anyone in the country could grasp, and it was a political declaration of war. And this is the line from his first inaugural: "In this present crisis, government isn't the solution to our problem. Government *is* the problem."

Twenty-eight years later, Pat Buchanan said to me, paraphrasing the social critic Eric Hoffer, "Every great cause begins as a movement, becomes a business, and eventually degenerates into a racket." Buchanan was telling me this is what happened to his movement.

So is this true? It began with Goldwater, it first came to power with Nixon, it achieved mass appeal with Reagan, it became radicalized during the Gingrich years, it turned corrupt with Tom DeLay, and it broke into pieces under George W. Bush. So, yes, in a sense, it went the way of every great cause.

But looked at in another way, its real problem was that it never stopped being a movement, a movement that knew what it was against much more than it knew what it was for. In 1995, William Kristol was interviewed by the *New York Times Magazine*. That might be the peak year of conservatism. The Gingrich Congress was feeling its power like nothing else, and Bill Clinton was having to assert that he remained relevant as president. In that year, an interviewer asked Kristol what conservatism stood for, and all he could come up with was "change the culture" and "school choice," which seems like a pretty vague proposal and a pretty small-bore government program once you finally come to power.

In other words, modern conservatism had an essentially negative character which was based on attacking the establishment of entrenched powers: the media, academics, courts, foundations, the regulators, teachers, scientists, social workers, and bureaucrats who constituted the liberal establishment class.

Conservatism was at bottom an insurgency, and when it came to power, it found that it didn't particularly care much about actual governing. Newt Gingrich tried to dismantle the government. George W. Bush came to office with a very large vision for changing the country and the world, and in defense of that vision, he imposed an ideological rigidity on his administration like nothing we've seen in a long time. He politicized the bureaucracy, and his adviser Karl Rove continued Pat Buchanan's strategy of positive polarization.

But when it came to actually running the government, the administration failed on every front, in every institution at home and abroad. This was not mere incompetence; it was much more principled than that. The administration didn't believe in the essential function of government, didn't believe in nation building, in universal health care, in raising middle-class incomes, in rebuilding infrastructure. Some of the key problems of our time—global warming, inequality, wage stagnation—were not even acknowledged as problems by conservatives. On principle their existence was denied, so the Bush presidency was blown up in Iraq and then drowned in New Orleans.

Some conservatives now deny that Bush ever was one. I think this is absurd. What the Bush years saw was conservative ideology installed in power across the board along with the bloated corruption that comes from having been in power for too long and controlling too much of the government. That's still conservatism. It's just conservatism turned corrupt.

These same conservatives who now deny that Bush was one are not going to come back to power by distilling their movement back to its essence. Buchanan said to me, "We need to return to Yenan," we need a kind of Maoist purification. Well, that's what a lot of liberals thought after 1968: they needed to get rid of the Hubert Humphreys and the neocons. It didn't work, because the country doesn't believe in purified political movements. You don't win and you don't hold power that way.

Conservatism died because it stopped answering or even asking the questions that mattered to most Americans, and because when it had the chance to govern by the lights of its own ideas, it got bored. It could never tell the country what to come together for.

The second element of the moment we're in now is the social change that happened during the conservative era. Conservatism launched a very powerful attack on what Irving Kristol called the "new class," which is that liberal governing class I itemized earlier, and which other conservatives call the liberal elite. This attack reflected a new kind of Populism.

Populism in America has an old history, but it can move to the right or to the left, and sometimes it can move in both directions at once. A lot of the energy of this attack came from below. There was a tremendous resentment toward elites, toward institutions, and toward government fueled, I think, by conditions—by the growing economic squeeze of the middle and working classes. This squeeze created a hostility to the idea of expertise and professionalism and, above all, a hatred of media. The conservative movement traveled a very long way riding on these currents. And they washed up last year, and, when the tide went out, it left behind two remarkable new figures on the American political scene—Sarah Palin and Joe the Plumber. So beginning in the 1970s, the Democrats lost more and more of the white working class, and beginning in the 1990s, the Democrats claimed more and more of the educated classes.

Part of the story of recent decades, I think, has been the story of how the mass of Americans and American elites betrayed each other. In some ways the 1960s and the 1980s, which are usually seen as polar opposites, were continuous;

they were part of the same trend. They were both about freedom, cultural and political and then economic. They were both about the individual, and they produced the highest level of inequality that we've seen in this country in a century. Three hundred thousand Americans now have the same income as the bottom half of Americans—that's 150 million. The bottom 90% have the same income that they had in 1980 and less than in 1973, and it is continuing to go down rapidly this year.

For me this is the biggest domestic problem of our time. It has its tentacles in every other problem, from the tax code to health care to education, and the political scientist Larry Bartels of Princeton, in a book called *Unequal Democracy*, shows how Republican policies furthered this trend toward inequality. We all know it was at bottom caused by the forces of globalization and de-industrialization, but policies entrenched it. But for some reason, it didn't make itself felt politically for years and years, until last year.

Instead, I think it led to a kind of irresponsibility on all sides of society, a kind of breakdown of the civic sense. The era of inequality was also the era of irresponsibilities. The thinking went like this: if people at the top were going to cut corners, amass wealth, and look out for themselves, why shouldn't people in the middle or at the bottom cut corners, amass debt, and look out for themselves? And why should anyone respect someone with a degree or a title? The elites were freed up to cheat on their taxes, and the masses were freed up to take out subprime loans.

This is what I found on a recent trip to Florida for an article I published called *The Ponzi State*. Beneath the sunny and abundant-seeming surface of life, there was a real rot that was quite advanced and that people there were conscious of. Everywhere I went, I found debt and foreclosure. Housing was a kind of disposable commodity. People on moderate incomes owned five or ten properties and flipped them as speculators. There was a pervasive fear of fraud, a sense that anyone could be a con man and that everyone was somehow out to get you, to cheat you.

For me it was almost like the end of the American dream. One woman, a realtor in Fort Myers, Florida, which is truly ground zero of the foreclosure crisis, said to me, "You open the paper and read the foreclosures in the back of the classified section, and you can't help but feel for all those people who wanted the American dream."

Now, a lot of people in that part of Florida come from the Midwest—she did, too—and so they have a kind of nagging Midwestern conscience that's like the super-ego sitting in judgment of their id, their Florida id. She said to me, "My parents were always savers. My father was an asphalt contractor in Illinois. He retired here because he saved. Today we are so different from that generation. After seeing this, is it going to swing back the other way?" And a young woman named Jennifer Formosa, who didn't have that Midwestern super-ego and had gotten into so much financial trouble that she hadn't made a payment on her house in 12 months, said, "I don't think I'll ever want to buy a house again," which is a pretty dramatic thing for an American to say.

For a long time this gaping inequality and the social pathologies that it helped produce did not further the political interest of the Democrats, even when they talked about it and offered solutions. Instead, what it did was make everyone suspicious of government's ability to do anything. And when government can't do anything, the Democrats lose, because they're the party associated with government's ability to solve problems.

There's a study by Lane Kenworthy of the University of Arizona. It's a very interesting look at elections from the early 1970s to the present and how the white working class voted, and it's kind of an argument against the book *What's the Matter With Kansas?* The thesis of that book is essentially that the white working class has been duped by corporations and mega-churches into voting against its own economic interest, which is why people in Kansas vote Republican, even when they're working three jobs and barely making ends meet.

Well, Lane Kenworthy's study shows that that's not quite true. Instead, what happened was people in that class began voting Republican not in the 1990s, when social issues took hold of the Republican Party, but in the 1970s, and that's because that was when their incomes began to go down. Against the other parts of society their own position eroded, and for that they blamed the Democrats because the Democrats showed that government was unable to stop it.

I found this to be deeply true last September when I went to Ohio to do some campaign reporting and focused specifically on the white working class voters there. A woman in Columbus, Ohio, who worked two jobs and was still terrified of losing her house, a woman named Bobbie Snodgrass, met me at a Kentucky Fried Chicken, and we talked about Obama's tax plan.

She didn't know whom she was for, so she was the kind of voter I wanted to talk to, someone who was undecided. I said, "Why wouldn't you vote for someone who is going to cut your taxes and raise taxes on the rich?" And here's what she said:

How many people do you know who make more than \$250,000? What is that, 5% of the United States? He'll keep going down, and when it's to people who make \$45,000 or \$50,000, he's going to hit me. I'd have to sell my home and live in a \$500 a month apartment with gangbangers out in my yard, and I'd be scared to death to leave my house.

So Obama raises taxes on people making more than a quarter of a million, and Bobbie Snodgrass becomes a prisoner of a rented house in a slum. That was her concept of what a more activist government raising some taxes, cutting others, would end up doing. It shows how profound the skepticism of any government action had become in people like that who needed it more than most.

So 2008 came, and a lot of things converged last year, and I think we're still trying to make sense of it. It's still in flux, but my sense of what happened last year is this: Sarah Palin, the perfect incarnation of right-wing populism, arrived on the scene and began to try to exploit the same resentments and angers against elites that Republicans have successfully exploited for decades. I talked with a number of people in Ohio and elsewhere who said they wanted her to win because she was

just like them. “She’s just like me.” I heard that over and over. And I would say, “Since when is that a qualification? Do you want the vice presidency?”

It’s easy to smile and laugh, but it’s a deep problem. Qualifications are in disrepute. Anyone can be vice president. That was the message of Sarah Palin’s campaign, just as the message of Joe the Plumber’s career is that anyone can be a political commentator, a foreign correspondent, and an adviser on Capitol Hill, all of which he’s been.

It’s sort of the *reductio ad absurdum* of the populism that’s been with us since the founding of the Republic. Jefferson said, “State a moral case to a plowman and a professor, the former will decide it as well and often better than the latter.” But Jefferson meant a *moral* case. He didn’t mean a political one.

And this idea, this idea of equality as Joe the Plumber—I was just thinking about it today. Throughout U.S. history, there have been two ideas of equality: equality of opportunity, which has been the dominant idea, and equality of result, which has mainly been an idea of the radical left—that government should ensure an equal result. Sarah Palin and Joe the Plumber represent the move of this idea of equality of result to the right. In other words, that we don’t live in a meritocracy but we live in a kind of pseudo-populism in which anyone has the ability to do any job because there is no merit, there is no qualification.

And for a while last year it seemed as if Joe the Plumber might get Obama defeated. I was in Kentucky last April in the middle of a terrible streak of losses that Obama was suffering in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Texas, West Virginia, Kentucky. He didn’t do himself any favors when he talked about bitter voters clinging to their guns and their religion. It seemed to me that this was going to be the thing that would defeat him, if anything did—his inability to connect with voters in those places.

Then in September, I began to hear a bit of a change in Wisconsin and in Ohio from similar voters. One farmer in Wisconsin said to me, “McCain is more of the same, and Obama is the end of life as we know it.” I met people in Southeast Ohio who freely used the “N word” and said they planned on voting for Obama. And a lot of the people were far from charmed by Sarah Palin.

It finally seemed last year that things had gotten too serious and her combination of identity politics and culture warfare was so obviously not serious enough and not what was called for. It was a bygone political strategy of a shrinking political party, and the anger against elites that has always in our lifetime undermined Democrats this time focused on the Bush Administration and on Wall Street, which means that populism last year was on the side of Democrats for the first time since Roosevelt and Truman.

Cultural issues finally gave way to economic issues, and in the end Obama held his own with the white working class, doing no better or worse than Kerry, and that was all he needed to do. And, by the way, that farmer in Wisconsin voted for the end of life as we know it. So the country turned back to government for answers by default. It took a crisis, and it took a candidate who had a gift for inspiration.

A few weeks ago in the *Times Magazine*, the economic correspondent David Leonhardt said or wrote: "For the first time in more than 70 years, the epicenter of the American economy can be placed outside of California or New York or the industrial Midwest. It can be placed in Washington." David Axelrod said to me in that interview before the election:

The reigning philosophy has been sort of deregulation, supply side, and I think what you're seeing now is one of those historical rejections that happen at the end of these epics where they just lose energy and there's usually a concomitant economic downturn. And that's where we are today. And that's sort of what the theory of our race was, that this was one of those periods of change that we encounter every once in a while in our history.

So all this has given liberalism an extraordinary new chance, but all the pathologies of the previous era are still with us: declining educational standards, declining wages, the loss of industrial jobs, inequality, debt, short-term thinking, and that corrosive distrust of elites and institutions.

Everything that brought liberals to power last year could drive them out again. The liberals of another era, the 1960s and 1970s, were very slow to grasp that their good intentions had lost their charm for what Nixon shrewdly called the Silent Majority. And I think one of the great questions of the next few years will be whether the mass of people will eventually turn against that shining product of American meritocracy, Barack Obama.

How does Obama see this moment and his presidency? Let's start with his inaugural address. The key words of it were "a new era of responsibility," "let us set aside childish things." The words "earn," "spirit," "accountability," "trust," "humility," "restraint," "common humanity," "citizenship," "character," and finally a recitation of what Kipling called the gods of the copybook headings: "honesty," "hard work," "courage," "fair play," "tolerance," "curiosity," "loyalty," "patriotism." Obama said, "These things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history."

There was, in other words, a noticeable streak of conservatism in his inaugural address. In the *Washington Post*, E.J. Dionne wrote, "President Obama intends to use conservative values for progressive ends." Among other things, I think he was closing the book on the era that's just gone by, and not just the Reagan era but the 1960s. The inaugural address was an argument against individualism. Although his presidency is the remarkable realization of struggles from the early 1960s, it's also the end of the 1960s spirit.

What were the key words of the 1960s? "Rights," "freedom," "revolution," "establishment," "system," "power," "individual," "radical," "crusade," "action." Obama talked about freedom, but in his words it became the legacy of a tradition, something passed down the generations and only secured and hard won with sacrifice and a sense of obligation. It does not mean leaving fetters behind. It means accepting them. So I think the 1960s is exactly the wrong analogy to think about in terms of what the new liberalism might look like.

What about earlier eras? Richard Hofstadter in his great book *The Age of Reform* compared the key words of the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century and of the New Deal, and here's what Hofstadter found: "The key words of Progressivism were terms like *patriotism, citizen, democracy, law, character, conscience, soul, moral, service, duty, shame, disgrace, sin, and selfishness*—terms redolent of the sturdy Protestant Anglo-Saxon moral and intellectual roots of the Progressive uprising."

And then Hofstadter looked at the key words of the New Deal: "organization," "results," "technique," "institution," "realistic," "discipline," "skill," "expert," "habits," "practical," "leadership"—"a vocabulary revealing a very different constellation of values arising from economic emergency and the imperatives of a bureaucracy."

Which era's language more closely resembles Obama's? Pretty clearly it's the Progressive Era's. Hofstadter called Progressivism:

[A] rather widespread and remarkably good-natured effort of the greater part of society to achieve some not very clearly specified self-reformation. Its general theme was the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost.

That era saw the beginning of the use of the word "liberal" in its modern sense, in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The new magazine, *The New Republic*, during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson used the term to distinguish itself from "Progressive," which had been tarnished by Teddy Roosevelt's jingoism and his political defeats.

And, similarly, in his inaugural, Obama's language and Obama's example answered a longing for stability, for a sense of being looked out for, a belonging to the whole, and I would say of a return to those earlier values that the realtor in Fort Myers ascribed to her parents. This language and this vision go back further than the Progressive Era. In the eighteenth century, they were known as republicanism. So maybe the new liberalism has something to do with the old republicanism. But there are differences. Progressivism was a movement of self-reformation led by the educated middle class at a time of prosperity, even complacency.

The new liberalism has come to power also driven by the educated middle class at a time of economic desperation and a general gloom about America's future amid a crisis that is worldwide. In this sense, there may be an internal weakness in the new liberalism that it is going to have to resolve.

Obama overwhelmingly won the vote of wealthier and better-educated Americans in the wealthier, better-educated states. This class has become the base of the Democratic Party, and in the coming years many of these same people will see their taxes go up while the Administration seeks to distribute a drastically shrunken pie of wealth and opportunity more equally. How long will Obama's educated supporters cheer on a set of policies that seem at odds with their short-

term economic interests? How long before a conservative writer publishes a book called *What's the Matter With Connecticut*?

For now, the economic crisis is so great that these questions of class difference and interest are overwhelmed by a common sense of desperation. For now, the only real opposition is going to come from ideological conservatives, from Republican politicians, and from financiers who haven't figured out that they're the equivalent of Reagan's welfare queens.

For now the circumstances are closer to 1933 and the coming of the New Deal. Since November 4th there have been many articles written about the analogy between Obama and FDR I know—I wrote one. But I'm more and more struck by the differences between the two presidents, both as politicians and as men.

For example, look at their intellectual interests. A few weeks ago, I was in a bookstore in Manhattan where one table was dedicated to Obama's favorite books. It was pretty heavy stuff: Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, selections from Nietzsche, Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, the *Bible*, *The Essential Writings of Emerson*, Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Gandhi's autobiography, Lincoln's *Life and Writings*, and, most importantly, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

What kind of mind does this reading list suggest? I'd say an idealistic one, a restless one, open to questions, to uncertainty, aware of the difficulty of answering the big philosophical questions. It's basically the bookshelf of an intellectually hungry twenty-year-old, which is actually quite impressive because most of our libraries get less interesting as we get older.

This is no second-class mind as Holmes said of FDR, whose reading tended toward naval histories. Another difference—FDR was happy to work with party bosses and lobbyists. They were all he knew. How else could you get things done? In this way he was different from both Obama and the Progressives who paved the way for FDR. He was also willing and even eager to make enemies and to use them. He used terms like “economic royalists.” In the 1936 campaign he said, “They are unanimous in their hate for me, and I welcome their hatred.”

It's hard to imagine Obama saying anything close to that, but his post-partisan ambitions, which have been much discussed, have also been much misunderstood. I don't think post-partisanship means that Obama is a centrist or a moderate or a politician who splits the difference, which is how some people, perhaps willfully naively, have chosen to interpret it.

I think it means—and you can read this in *The Audacity of Hope*—that he knows how puny our politics has become, how inadequate its ideas are for our problems. It's not enough to change the policy: we have to change the modes of thought and even of speech, because, as Orwell taught us, political language and thought are inextricable.

The other element of his post-partisanship is his simple old-fashioned courtesy and respect, the willingness to listen to other views, to argue with them honestly, to speak in terms that don't inflame the conflict, to treat the public as if it's capable of reasoning. In his first weeks in office, Obama has already violated

every one of these maxims, but the fact that we're aware of these violations indicates a higher than usual standard of political discourse.

So this is the new style of politics that sometimes is called post-partisan. It turns out to have very little to do with philosophy or ideology. It does not mean moderate. Philosophically, Obama is a liberal, a word that has begun to lose its longtime stigma and to be used without insult or apology.

Before the election I wrote that on foreign policy Obama would be very cautious, perhaps disappointingly cautious to some of his supporters, keeping in place many of the decisions that were made in Bush's second, post-neoconservative term: moving slowly on Iraq, intensifying the effort in Afghanistan, perhaps changing the rhetoric in a way that signaled a break with the unilateralism of Bush's first term, expressing a willingness to talk to enemies but not changing the basic direction of American foreign policy. And thus far, I think this has been borne out.

But I also wrote that on economic issues, on domestic issues, he would be far more liberal than most people expected. And I think this, too, has largely proved true, in part because events have been relentlessly pushing him in the direction of more and more government intervention—maybe not enough to arrest the massive slide of the economy toward a real depression, but if you turn away from the details of the stimulus package, the budget bill, the homeowners' rescue plan, the bank bailouts, you see exactly what *The New York Times* said in a front-page headline the day after Obama's budget message: "A Bold Plan Sweeps Away Reagan Ideas."

All great presidents set about to change the acceptable terms of debate. Back in 1967, Buckley wrote in an essay about Reagan, "They say that his accomplishments are few, that it is only the rhetoric that is conservative. But the rhetoric is the principal thing. It precedes all action. All thoughtful action." I think we should pay careful attention to the rhetoric of the Obama presidency. The key word set out in his inaugural address is "responsibility." The key idea articulated in his budget message is equality. Obama said, "There's nothing wrong with making money, but there is something wrong when we allow the playing field to be tilted so far in the favor of so few."

Now the relation between responsibility and equality is not entirely clear yet. Obama has not spelled it out, but I think everything he is saying and doing is based on a perception that inequality lies at the heart of our problems, that inequality has led to epic irresponsibility, and that a new era of responsibility will lead to greater equality of opportunity.

In a very simple summation: for society to become more fair and just, individuals must behave better, they must be better citizens. For Obama to have put this simple and profound insight front and center in American political discourse is itself a marker of historic change.

The back and forth over the stimulus package showed that between Obama's liberal philosophy and his post-partisan style there's still unresolved tension. I think that by giving Obama the back of their hand, the Republicans made

it easier for him, if not to resolve these tensions, at least to press on in spite of them.

It's commonplace to say that Obama, who inherited an economic crisis perhaps greater than any since the 1930s, two wars, and a massive deficit, came into office facing more difficulties than any president since FDR and maybe even Lincoln. But this list doesn't even do justice to the scale of the task that faces him.

Beyond addressing and beginning to resolve immediate material problems, Obama has to restore Americans' faith in the institutions of our democracy, which has systematically failed over the past decade after being criticized and even ridiculed by two generations of politicians.

It should not be a surprise that if our leaders believe that the Securities and Exchange Commission should regulate Wall Street as lightly as possible, the SEC will eventually be at the center of a great failure of oversight. In other words, at the heart of the Reagan era lay a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, and it has produced a tide of populist anger. It is not quite the same as the populism of Sarah Palin, because it is directed primarily at Wall Street. But it can change directions without notice, ferociously, and swallow up political careers.

American history shows that populism is a force to reckon with. Obama would be well-advised to harness its power so that it doesn't swallow him. He has to convince Americans that government can be on the side of ordinary people, something that liberalism's own failures and three decades of conservative assault have made seem almost impossible.

During the campaign, *The New York Times* correspondent David Leonhardt wrote that Obama's advisers described his central theme as the middle-class squeeze. In an interview, Leonhardt asked Obama whether he had an effective story about this scheme, as simple as Reagan's message of less government and lower taxes. After a pause—and when he isn't using a teleprompter, there's always an Obama pause, sometimes between every word—the candidate said this:

I think I can tell a pretty simple story. Ronald Reagan ushered in an era that reasserted the marketplace and freedom. He made people aware of the cost involved in government regulation or, at least, a command-and-control style regulation regime. Bill Clinton, to some extent, continued that pattern, although he may have smoothed out the edges of it. And George Bush took Ronald Reagan's insight and ran it over a cliff. And so I think the simple way of telling the story is that when Bill Clinton said the era of big government is over, he wasn't arguing for an era of no government. So what we need to bring about is the end of the era of unresponsive and inefficient government and short-term thinking in government, so the government is laying the groundwork, the framework, the foundation for the market to operate effectively and for every single individual to be able to be connected with that market and to succeed in that market. And it's now a global marketplace.

Now, that's the story. Now, telling it elegantly—"low taxes, smaller government"—the way the Republicans have, I think is more of a challenge.

In other words, to answer the question: the answer is no, not yet. The new liberalism is not a coherent doctrine or even a clear political strategy, because for these to become apparent requires the sustained exercise of power.

It has certain stylistic traits that can already be described. It is morally serious, high-minded, youthful, and a bit naive. It shares certain things in common with conservatism—not with the modern ideology, but with the older sense of obligation to the larger community, the concern with the moral condition of the country. It sees progress by looking backward as much as forward. It breaks sharply with the recent past but not with the past itself. The new liberalism will ultimately define itself by what it does and by whether it succeeds.
