



# Obama's Last Clear Chance: True Universal Health Coverage, Libertarian Style

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President Obama famously wished to be a transformational president.

Recent court rulings have placed Obamacare into jeopardy. It may be compromised beyond salvation.

There may be but one last clear chance for him to salvage his signature domestic policy legacy. Will he take it?

The promise of transformation need not die. Ironically, however, the way forward is blocked not by the right but by progressives' ignorance, and hatred, of the right. The solution lies within a paradox.

Prominent members of the left take a position sanctifying themselves as standing for using state power to help the rank-and-file and the marginalized. Many progressives then go on to demonize conservatives as heartless shills for the wealthy.

Caricaturing the right as heartless shills was sure to turn universal coverage into a partisan football. It did so.

Prof. Paul Krugman, for one example among many, relentlessly castigates us right-wingers as heartless. Krugman, in the *New York Times*:

And here's the thing: Republicans don't want to help the unfortunate. They'll propound undefined-care ideas that will, they claim, help those with pre-existing conditions and so on – but those aren't really proposals. They're diversionary tactics designed to stall real health care reform. Hence the rage of the right.

Demonization is wrong and counterproductive. It makes commentators into rock stars among low-information progressives. It does so at the cost of creating insurmountable obstacles to

progress. Health care reform may be set back a generation or more by its proponents rather than by its opponents.

Where to begin? Begin here: most elite progressives have conservatives and libertarians all wrong.

The toxic polemics of the left come, in part, from their failure to grasp (or even try, in good faith, to explore) the narrative of the right. If progressive political hooligans laid down their rhetorical brass knuckles they would discover that there are ways to state-sponsored universal undefined coverage very palatable to the right.

Shocking, but true. Frederick Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* is at the heart of the libertarian canon. Hayek, like Krugman, received the Nobel Prize in Economics. Here is what Hayek therein had to say about the very issue of state-sponsored universal undefined coverage:

Nor is there any reason why the state should not assist the individuals in providing for those common hazards of life against which, because of their uncertainty, few individuals can make adequate provision. Where, as in the case of sickness and accident, neither the desire to avoid such calamities nor efforts to overcome their consequences are as a rule weakened by the provision of assistance—where, in short, we deal with genuinely insurable risks—the case for the state's helping to organize a comprehensive system of social insurance is very strong. ... [T]here is no incompatibility in principle between the state's providing greater security in this way and the preservation of individual freedom.

No road to serfdom there. Keynes read *The Road to Serfdom* and wrote to Hayek: "It is a grand book... Morally and philosophically I find myself in agreement with virtually the whole of it; and not only in agreement, but in deeply moved agreement." Neo-Keynesians would do well to emulate their icon.

So what's the problem? OK, the wealthy really do have an empathy problem. Consider Lisa Miller's powerful *New York Magazine* article entitled *The Money- Empathy-Gap*. There Ms. Miller explored the implications of the work of Berkeley College psychologist Paul Piff.

This research is not intended to prosecute the one percent, those families with an average net worth of \$14 million. Nor does it attempt to apply its conclusions about the selfishness and solipsism of a broad social stratum to every member within it: Gateses and Carnegies have obviously saved lives and edified generations, and one of the biggest predictors of a person's inclination to donate to charity is how much money he has. But when the top fifth of American families have seen their incomes rise by 45 percent since 1979, whereas the bottom fifth has seen a decline of almost 11 percent, these researchers want to explore a timely question: How does living in an environment defined by individual achievement—measured by money, privilege, and status—alter a person's mental machinery to the point where he begins to see the people around him only as aids or obstacles to his own ambitions? Piff won't name a tipping point after which the personality transformation kicks in, only that his studies of ethical behavior indicate a

strong correlation between high socioeconomic status and interpersonal disregard. It's an "additive" effect; the fever line points straight up.

The left's attributing exclusively to conservatives and Republicans lack of empathy for the have-nots demonstrably is false. This condition applies equally to progressives and Democrats. Nobody in Washington wears a real halo. If the left really yearns for humanitarian transformation it needs to start throttling back on its sanctimony.

Progressives are no more noble than conservatives ... despite liberal pretensions. A recent, very insightful, feature in *Salon.com*, *Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League: The nation's top colleges are turning our kids into zombies* by William Deresiewicz makes telling points about the situation right within progressive's proudest, most fortified, bastion, academe:

The college admissions game is not primarily about the lower and middle classes seeking to rise, or even about the upper-middle class attempting to maintain its position. It is about determining the exact hierarchy of status within the upper-middle class itself. In the affluent suburbs and well-heeled urban enclaves where this game is principally played, it is not about whether you go to an elite school. It's about which one you go to. It is Penn versus Tufts, not Penn versus Penn State. It doesn't matter that a bright young person can go to Ohio State, become a doctor, settle in Dayton, and make a very good living. Such an outcome is simply too horrible to contemplate.

This system is exacerbating inequality, retarding social mobility, perpetuating privilege, and creating an elite that is isolated from the society that it's supposed to lead. The numbers are undeniable. In 1985, 46 percent of incoming freshmen at the 250 most selective colleges came from the top quarter of the income distribution. By 2000, it was 55 percent. As of 2006, only about 15 percent of students at the most competitive schools came from the bottom half. The more prestigious the school, the more unequal its student body is apt to be.

Physician, heal thyself. Lack of true empathy for the have-nots is as pervasive on the elite left as it is on the right.

The most formidable obstacle to true universal health coverage is not conservatives, nor Republicans. It is paralyzing liberal sanctimony. Being "progressive," for many, merely salves the conscience of those possessed by what Marxist theory astutely calls "false consciousness." Authentic progressives would do well to gaze within and repeat, after T.S. Eliot, "*You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!*"

Are there "Republicans who don't want to help the unfortunate?" Of course. Lots, actually.

Are there Democrats who, paying lip service to helping the downtrodden, use power mostly to aggrandize and enrich themselves? Yes. Innumerable.

So let's play fair. Many morally serious right wingers, conservatives and libertarians, oppose Obamacare out of grounded concern that (among other problems) it will take the quality of

American health care out of the frying pan and into the fire. Progressives might disagree with this view. It, however, is not a heinous position or a “tactical diversion.”

To play fair, awaken to the diversity within the right’s narrative.

For example, public intellectual Arthur Brooks, head of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, presented a conservative counter-narrative eloquently on the front page of the July 20<sup>th</sup> *New York Times Sunday Review*. His essay is entitled *Love People, Not Pleasure, and Happiness Will Follow*.

As the Dhammapada (the Buddha’s path of wisdom) puts it: “The craving of one given to heedless living grows like a creeper. Like the monkey seeking fruits in the forest, he leaps from life to life... Whoever is overcome by this wretched and sticky craving, his sorrows grow like grass after the rains.”

This search for fame, the lust for material things and the objectification of others — that is, the cycle of grasping and craving — follows a formula that is elegant, simple and deadly:

Love things, use people.

... You want to be free of the sticky cravings of unhappiness and find a formula for happiness instead. How? Simply invert the deadly formula and render it virtuous:

Love people, use things.

Brooks, recently, hosted the Dalai Lama at AEI. In his ensuing *New York Times* column Brooks reflects:

Tibetan Buddhists actually count wealth among the four factors in a happy life, along with worldly satisfaction, spirituality and enlightenment. Money per se is not evil. For the Dalai Lama, the key question is whether “we utilize our favorable circumstances, such as our good health or wealth, in positive ways, in helping others.” There is much for Americans to absorb here. Advocates of free enterprise must remember that the system’s moral core is neither profits nor efficiency. It is creating opportunity for individuals who need it the most.

The president of AEI quoting the Dhammapada? Hayek blessing state-sponsored social insurance?

These seem paradoxical because they are paradoxical. As Niels Bohr once said: “How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress.”

This card-carrying member of the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy certainly desires universal health insurance. Do progressives? (Or is their agenda just more Big Government and Big Patronage?)

I know, personally, many honest progressives. I know them, despite our differences, to be authentic humanitarians.

So what is to be done? The most elegant path forward is for the left's thought leaders to ask Barack Obama to read *The Road to Serfdom* and have a candid discussion of it with some representatives of the conservative and libertarian right.

Invite, maybe, AEI's Arthur Brooks and Cato Institute's John Allison over to 1600 Pennsylvania for an afternoon. Invite a few other humanitarian conservatives, such as Sen. Rand Paul and Rep. Jim Jordan. Invite, as well, some authentically humanitarian progressives, such as MoveOn co-founder Joan Blades and SEIU's Eliseo Medina, Reps. John Delaney and Chris Van Hollen.

Just invite them for an afternoon-long friendly living room conversation. There appears one last clear chance for Obama to effect political transformation. One living room conversation, to explore what Hayek meant by "[T]here is no incompatibility in principle between the state's providing greater security in [comprehensive social insurance] and the preservation of individual freedom," could do it. Such a conversation can place the paradoxical libertarian state-sponsored universal health coverage within reach of the 114th Congress. (Always worthwhile to discuss the Dhammapada, of course. Maybe invite the Dalai Lama too.)