

## A Plea to Liberals: Stop Marginalizing Peace and Civil Liberties

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By **Conor Friedersdorf**

*During the Bush years, fighting excessive American militarism and executive power were priorities on the left. Now they're glossed over.*

During Election 2008, Ezra Klein and I lived in the same city, Washington, D.C., where people spilled into the streets when the networks declared Barack Obama the victor. "America has forgotten," Klein wrote on November 4, 2008. "September 11 has not disappeared from our memory, of course, but we have recovered from the blow. We have forgotten how it felt to be afraid, and so, yesterday, we forgot to vote our fears. And in doing, we have elected a black president with a Muslim name. Fear again proved but a temporary detour from our history's long arc toward justice."

I am not a progressive. I don't think that the federal government is suited to managing the health-care sector from the top down, or that public employee unions should be strengthened, or that green jobs are a strategy. But in 2008, I celebrated the end of the Bush Administration and nodded along to Klein's assessment, because I witnessed what I wouldn't have thought was possible: a black Democrat rising to the presidency while unapologetically affirming that the Iraq War was a mistake; that the choice between safety from terrorists and civil liberties was a false one; that spying on Americans without a warrant was unconstitutional; that indefinite detention without charges was illegal; that it made no sense to incarcerate so many people for possessing drugs. I knew Obama would implement some domestic policies with which I disagreed, but I felt good about his victory, if only because he affirmed that an American president couldn't launch a war without Congressional permission unless we were attacked; that transparency was vital even in the executive branch; that whistleblowers were heroes.

If President Obama wins in 2012, there won't be celebrations on the streets. Should he deliver a Second Inaugural Address, it won't be possible to walk the boulevards of Washington, D.C., in the days before and after the event and witness smiles on the faces of almost everyone. The economic climate is brutal. Obama's popularity is waning. Nate Silver, America's political data geek of record, says his odds of reelection are slightly less

than even. Everywhere political observers are wrestling with the question, "Is the Obama presidency a failed one?" And in this radically different environment, Klein is again writing about the man, this time in the guise of a *New York Review of Books* [piece](#) about Ron Suskind's "[Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington and the Education of a President.](#)"

As yet, I haven't finished the book, nor do I have a stake in the disagreement between Suskind and Klein. For the sake of argument, let's grant Klein all of his points: that Obama should be judged by his performance rather than the personalities in his administration, that given the unemployment rate he was bound to be unpopular, that no president looks good in the midst of an economic crisis, that judging his performance requires an assessment of what was politically possible, and that the Republican Party has thwarted Obama on many fronts, for cynical reasons as often as substantive political or ideological ones.

What I object to are Klein's larger claims, the ones that go beyond the scope of Suskind's book, and its economic focus, to assess the Obama presidency as a whole. "Being a confidence man is almost in the job description of the insurgent presidential candidate. Having not been president before, you must, by definition, ask the American people for a trust you have not earned. And Obama was better at this than most," Klein writes. "He gave America hope. He made America believe he could deliver change. And, by the standards of Washington, he has probably done more than anyone could rightly have expected. Stimulus, health care reform, the end of 'don't ask, don't tell,' the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the payroll tax cut, new tobacco regulation--this is much more than your average first-term president achieves."

A caveat is then offered.

"But the president needs to do more than lead. He needs to govern. And when he has so convinced the American people of his leadership that their expectations for his term far exceed his -- or anyone's -- capacity to govern, disappointment results," Klein writes. "That's when they go looking for another confidence man--one whose promises aren't sullied by the compromises and concession made in the effort to deliver results -- and the cycle begins anew." Barack Obama, victim of his own excellence. If he loses in 2012, it's only because he got results.

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The editor of *The New Yorker*, David Remnick, is the sort of man it's easy for a journalist to envy. He got sent to Moscow in 1988. Good timing! He's won a Pulitzer Prize and has an archive of pieces any magazine writer younger than John McPhee would envy. He runs one of the most prestigious publications in the world. Yet he's impossible to dislike. The only time I saw him in person, he was being interviewed by my colleague Ta-Nehisi Coates at the New York Public Library, where he discussed his book on President Obama, a read that's worth your while. And in *The New Yorker*, where he inexplicably finds time

to write, he [opined](#) recently on the president's decision to invade Libya, the president's critics, and the end game. Affirming Chris Cilliza's judgment that Obama wouldn't get an electoral bump from Qaddafi's death, Remnick observed that "there's something strange about the backseat status often given to foreign policy in Presidential campaigns. Presidents have a great deal more sway over the matters of war, peace, and diplomacy than they have over the economic weather. (Globalism and the House of Representatives make sure of that.) Even stranger is the lack of attention given to foreign affairs by the candidates themselves."

He proceeded to run through the absurd foreign policy positions taken by various GOP primary candidates, including their most dubious attacks on Obama, and concluded with a defense of the president's record: "Obama is responsible for an aggressive assault on Al Qaeda, including the killing of bin Laden, in Pakistan, and of Anwar al-Awlaki, in Yemen. Beginning with his 2009 speech in Cairo, the President has walked a deliberate, effective path on the question of Arab uprisings, encouraging forces of liberation in the region without ignoring the complexities of each country or threatening Iraq-style interventions. He has drawn down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; awakened to the miserable realities of Pakistan and Iran; and, most recently, played a crucial role, without loss of American lives, in the overthrow of the world's longest-reigning dictator. If a Republican had been responsible for the foreign-policy markers of the past three years, the Party would be commissioning statues. In Tripoli, Benghazi, and Surt, last week, Obama won words of praise; on Republican debate platforms, there was only mindless posturing." Barack Obama, foreign policy success story. If he loses in 2012, it's only because of the economy and the groundless attacks of his rivals.

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Its useful to highlight these pieces by Klein and Remnick for several reasons. For all the differences in their age and careers, both are knowledgeable Obama supporters; their worldviews generally resonate with liberals and independents; they're talented enough to persuade readers that their analysis has merit, and disagreeing with them therefore means taking on strong rather than weak arguments. A common thread runs through their assessments of Obama circa 2011: both writers believe he is less popular than he would otherwise be due to economic woes that aren't his fault and partisan opponents who are intransigent and unfair.

For the sake of argument, let's grant all those points.

What vexes me about their pieces -- and they're emblematic of the whole center left take on Obama as he prepares to run for re-election -- is their narrow focus. The issues they fail to raise. The broken promises they don't acknowledge. In an article that touches exclusively on a narrow area of domestic policy, Klein arguably demonstrates that Obama is being judged too harshly by his critics, and then draws sweeping conclusions about his presidency. Remnick looks at one military effort, the war in Libya, selectively cites criticisms levied by incoherent GOP office seekers, and quickly runs through a complimentary counter-narrative presented as though it touches every aspect of his

foreign policy.

This is how centrist liberals make themselves [complicit in the indefensible](#).

These are the sorts of treatments that permit well-educated Obama supporters to evade certain uncomfortable truths, like the fact that the president to whom they'll give campaign contributions and votes violated the War Powers Resolution when he invaded Libya; that in doing so he undermined the Office of Legal Counsel, weakening a prudential restraint on executive power; that from the outset he misled Congress and the public about the likely duration of the conflict; that the humanitarian impulse alleged to prompt the intervention somehow evaporated when [destitute refugees from that war were drowning in the Mediterranean](#).

In saying that Obama has "awakened to the miserable realities of Pakistan and Iran," Remnick elides an undeclared drone war that is destabilizing a nuclear power, the horrific humanitarian and strategic costs of which [Jane Mayer documents at length](#) in *The New Yorker*; "Obama is responsible for an aggressive assault on Al Qaeda, including the killing of bin Laden, in Pakistan, and of Anwar al-Awlaki, in Yemen," Remnick writes, never hinting that al-Awlaki was an American citizen killed by a president asserting the unchecked write to put people on an assassination list that requires no due process or judicial review, and that the administration justifies with legal reasoning that it refuses to make public. "He has drawn down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan," Remnick writes, obscuring the fact that there are many more troops in Afghanistan than when Obama took office, and that in Iraq he has merely stuck to the timetable for withdrawal established by the Bush Administration, [after unsuccessfully lobbying the government of Iraq to permit US troops to stay longer](#) -- instead, he plans to increase the presence of American troops elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, and to leave in Iraq a huge presence of State Department employees and private security.

Klein's piece relies heavily on the reality that, for all his hope and change rhetoric, Obama was constrained in dealing with the economic crisis when he took office. Quite right. Only unjustifiable extrapolation permits Klein to reach the larger conclusion that GOP opposition and a bad economy explain his broken promises. Had Klein tried to come up with a control group to test his hypothesis, he might've looked to the policies over which Obama has substantial or complete control. Is [Obama's war on whistleblowers](#), also documented in the *New Yorker* by Jane Mayer, something that Republicans and a bad economy forced on him? Are they responsible for the White House's utter failure to deliver anything like the transparency that Obama promised, and its abuse of the state secrets privilege? How does the economy explain the escalation of the drug war and federal raids on medical marijuana dispensaries in states where they are legal, or the Department of Homeland Security's escalation of security theater to the point that Americans are being groped and undergoing naked scans in airports?

During the Bush Administration, up right until the end, it was unthinkable that mainstream media organizations or prominent center-left writers would offer general assessments of President Bush that just glossed over his aggregation of executive power,

his secrecy, the unchecked militarism and collateral damage of his foreign policy, his attacks on journalists working to shed light on his actions, or the domestic civil liberties abuses, whether the Patriot Act, which Obama extended, the warrantless spying on Americans, which is ongoing, and other policies besides. Ask someone at the ACLU or the Center for Constitutional Rights or the Cato Institute and they'll affirm that *all* of these post-9/11 excesses are still problems -- that Obama is better on torture, but that he's also gone farther than the Bush Administration on [various objectionable policies](#), and that his actions have lent to Bush/Cheney policies the veneer of bipartisan consensus.

But to read about the Obama Administration, even in publications like *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, both of which do phenomenal work on these subjects *in isolation* -- to read pieces even by exceptional journalists who agree with the ACLU on most issues -- it is too often the case that these policies are invisible, as if they're so insignificant that they need not be mentioned, when it comes to articles that step back and assess the Obama presidency.

They're just left out of the master narrative.

Is Obama better than all the Republican candidates on these issues? Certainly not. He is worse than Gary Johnson and Ron Paul; arguably worse than Jon Huntsman too. Is he better than anyone likely to win the GOP nomination? Perhaps. Does it matter? What does "better than the Republicans" get you if it means that executive privilege keeps expanding, the drones keep killing innocents and inflaming radicals and destabilizing regions, the Pentagon budget keeps growing, civil liberties keep being eroded, wars are waged without Congressional permission, and every future president knows he or she can do the same because at this point it doesn't even provoke a significant backlash from the left? Is the dysfunction of the Republican Party license to oppose those policies less vociferously than they were opposed during the Bush Administration?

These aren't fringe concerns, or peripheral disappointments to lament in the course of leaving them to the Charlie Savages and Jane Mayers of the world -- they are issues of maximal importance that are central to the Obama Administration. They ought to be raised as such in *every* assessment of Obama's tenure. What few of us saw in 2008 is that Bush Administration wasn't "a temporary detour from our history's long arc toward justice," and the Obama Administration wasn't a vehicle of change -- it was the normalization of the post-9/11 security state. If it is still to be a detour, there must be a backlash. The Republican establishment isn't inclined to help. And libertarians, civil and otherwise, are too few to bring about a backlash alone.