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Column: I told you Barack Obama was a moderate

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Who would have ever thought that in his post-presidency years, Barack Obama would take a hard turn to the right? But lately he's earned praise from sharp-edged conservatives while getting the side-eye from progressives.

"Good for Obama. (Not sarcastic!)" tweeted Ann Coulter. "What's really nice to hear is Barack Obama standing up for our rights and our values of the First Amendment," said Fox News commentator Tomi Lahren.

These comments came after Obama criticized the censorious attitude of some on the left, particularly on college campuses. "There is this sense sometimes of, 'The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people,' and that's enough," he said. "That's not bringing about change."

This is the latest marker he has laid down between himself and the progressive wing of his party. At a closed-door meeting in March, **The Washington Post reported**, "Obama gently warned a group of freshman House Democrats Monday evening about the costs associated with some liberal ideas popular in their ranks."

Out on the campaign trail, Joe Biden is unusual in playing up his ties to Obama. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, by contrast, treat the last Democratic president as too nice and too cautious. They make it clear they intend to be far more aggressive in pushing drastic change.

Most of the Democratic presidential candidates have repudiated Obama, explicitly or implicitly, by endorsing single-payer, Medicare-style health care coverage — rather than an upgrade to his Affordable Care Act.

Sanders sounds nothing like Obama when he tweets, "Billionaires should not exist." Warren's favorite word, "fight," serves to separate her from the conciliatory, unifying themes Obama often deployed. Julian Castro — who was, keep in mind, a member of Obama's Cabinet — has attacked Biden over Obama's immigration policies.

Whatever happened to the symbol of hope and change who became the darling of progressives as he challenged establishment candidate Hillary Clinton in 2008? When Obama captured the nomination, liberals were thrilled; when he won the election, they were ecstatic. But today, he is increasingly seen as an under-ambitious compromiser who chased vainly after bipartisanship.

In fact, he is today what he was in 2008 and what he was in the White House: a moderate in temperament and tactics as well as policy. He hasn't veered to the right, and he hasn't migrated away from the left. He's stayed in the middle of the road, where he was all along.

Conservatives routinely depicted Obama as a Saul Alinsky radical and an angry black militant, and some still do. The other day, an editorial in **The Wall Street Journal** likened his “polarizing governance” to that of Donald Trump, which is the equivalent of equating ginger ale with tequila. For all his restraint, Obama somehow drove right-wingers crazy.

They said his health insurance plan, modeled on that of Mitt Romney when he was governor of Massachusetts, was “socialism.” When he expressed empathy for Trayvon Martin, an African-American 17-year-old killed by a white vigilante, writer Abigail Thernstrom said Obama “should be ashamed of his effort to stir America’s turbulent, dangerous racial waters.” When he reached a deal with Iran to block it from developing nuclear weapons, Republicans accused him of craven appeasement.

But Obama insisted on preserving a central role for private health insurance. Liberal economists regarded his 2009 stimulus package as far too small to overcome the Great Recession. He steadily reduced the federal budget deficit, and an analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute pronounced him the “most frugal” president since Dwight Eisenhower.

Obama reminded whites of the harmful legacy of racism, but he also lamented the absence of fathers from many black families and exhorted African Americans to take “full responsibility for our own lives.” The deal with Iran would have blocked it from getting nuclear weapons for a decade or more.

His record is not one of a scheming revolutionary or even a staunch leftist. It’s that of a sober moderate who sought practical solutions that could bridge partisan differences and yield concrete improvements.

It’s a stark contrast with what the country could expect from Sanders or Warren, who might actually live up to all the false fears once trumpeted about Obama. Republicans were eager to be rid of him, but in time, they may echo Lahren: “Just remember that we used to think Barack Obama was bad.”