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Gene Healy on Obama's statist ambitions

By: [Gene Healy](#)

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"I am a firm believer in the power of the free market," President Obama told the Wall Street Journal recently. The "irony" surrounding his public image as a collectivist, the president insisted, was that "I actually would like to see a relatively light touch when it comes to the government."

Either Obama is as confused about the definition of irony as pop singer Alanis "rain on your wedding day" Morissette, or he was being disingenuous. Given the president's ambitious, state-bloating agenda and longtime disdain for free enterprise, the latter is more likely the case.

Back in 2008, then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton declared "we need a president who is ready on day one to be commander in chief of our economy." You can't find that role in the Constitution, but Barack Obama has embraced it nonetheless. The president is hell-bent on further extending government control over Americans' health care, and the administration-backed cap and trade bill that passed the House Friday, would, among other things, create a national building code. A "light touch," indeed.

Despite what the president told the Journal, there's little in his biography to suggest he's ever been a defender of markets. To recognize that, you don't need conspiracy theories about connections to leftist radicals; you need only look at what Obama himself has said in his franker moments.

Fresh out of college, before becoming a community organizer, Obama took a job with a consulting firm that helped American companies operating abroad. The horror of editing business manuals for a year gave Obama a lesson in the "coldness of capitalism," he told biographer David Mendell. "I would imagine myself as a captain of industry, barking out orders, closing the deal, before I remembered who it was that I had told myself that I wanted to be."

As his career progressed, Obama tempered his critique of capitalism, and developed an uncanny ability to make free-marketeers believe he's simpatico. Meanwhile, he amassed one of the least business-friendly records in the Senate (the "most liberal senator" in 2007, according to the nonpartisan National Journal.)

But in a 2005 commencement address at Illinois' Knox College, Obama let his guard down, and let loose a leftist stemwinder that would have done Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-OH, proud.

"There is no individual salvation without collective salvation," Obama proclaimed, making clear that

government would stand in for God as our savior.

In that speech, Obama excoriated President George W. Bush's "Ownership Society" as "Social Darwinism--every man or woman for him or herself;" an oddly venomous take on an umbrella term for increased citizen control over health care and retirement options. The "Ownership Society" was hardly capitalism unbound: it included giveaways like free pills for seniors and down-payment assistance for low-income homebuyers.

In his inaugural address, Obama took aim at the "cynics" who dared to "question the scale of our ambitions" (was that the royal first person plural?) Lately, though, the cynics have been making a comeback. Even the president's supporters are wondering if his reach has exceeded his grasp.

Nearly half of Americans now think the unspent portion of the stimulus package should be cancelled. Fewer than half approve of Obama's "speculator"-denouncing, CEO-firing approach to the auto bailouts, and six in 10 tell pollsters that he lacks a clear plan for taming our burgeoning deficit.

Cap-and-trade is likely to stall in the Senate, and with the Congressional Budget Office scoring the leading health-care bill at \$1.6 trillion over 10 years, "sticker shock" may kill Obamacare as well.


Obama's popularity remains substantially higher than that of his policies. But that gap can't persist indefinitely. Our last Democratic president, Bill Clinton, came into office with ambitious plans to take over the health-care sector, then one-seventh of the US economy. The electorate slapped him back. Will Obama meet a similar fate?

Obama is as dedicated to enhancing federal power as any president in 50 years. But increasing public resistance may yet frustrate Obama's ambitions. If so, it may turn out that, when the final record is tallied, the nominally pro-market George W. Bush will--with TARP, the Iraq War, and the prescription drug entitlement--have done more to grow government than the dedicated statist Barack Obama. Wouldn't that be ironic?

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