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Peter Dreier

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CLINTON DESERVES A NEW DEAL

THE AGENDA HE STARTED WITH IN '92 WAS MORE AMBITIOUS THAN LBJ'S; LIBERALS' WHINE ABOUT ITS FAILURE IS HYPOCRITICAL.

By PETER DREIER. *Los Angeles Times*. Aug 30, 1996. pg. 9

President Franklin Roosevelt used to tell his liberal allies when they lobbied him to support their legislative agenda, "I agree with you. Now make me do it." He was urging the progressives to help create a political climate that would pressure Congress to vote for New Deal programs--Social Security, the Works Progress Administration, the Wagner Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps, subsidized housing and other measures that many Americans at the time considered dangerously radical, even socialistic.

Today's liberals and leftists should listen to FDR's advice. Instead of just complaining that President Clinton has moved too far to the center or sold out to conservative forces, progressive activists need to make it easier for Clinton to carry out his original liberal agenda. That means focusing their political energy on Congress to regain a Democratic majority in November.

Liberal activists have spent much of the past four years attacking Clinton's legislative compromises. The president angered labor unions for supporting NAFTA. Environmentalists think he's failed to protect endangered species and clean air laws. Common Cause assails Clinton for abandoning his pledge to end the legalized bribery that is our campaign finance system. Gays and lesbians view Clinton's embrace of the "defense of marriage" bill as a political brushoff. Many civil rights groups and urban mayors think the president has ignored the deterioration of our inner cities.

Recently, many liberals have attacked Clinton for signing a regressive welfare bill that will certainly jeopardize the well-being of millions of children. By eliminating the 60-year federal commitment of cash assistance for the poor, they say, Clinton showed his lack of conscience or backbone, final proof that he's become a moderate Republican in "New Democrat" clothing.

Liberals have such short memories. Way back in 1993, soon after taking office, Clinton proposed an agenda of government activism that went beyond anything offered by John Kennedy's New Frontier or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The centerpiece was a proposal for universal health insurance, the most dramatic social reform since the New Deal's Social Security program. Clinton wanted to fund it with a major tax increase on tobacco, the most sure-fire way to reduce teenage smoking. Clinton also submitted a huge public investment blueprint to repair the nation's crumbling roads, bridges, public schools and sewer systems. Like the New Deal's WPA program, it would have jump-started economic growth and stimulated new jobs primarily in our older cities.

In its first two years, the Clinton administration also put forward plans to increase affordable housing, restrict campaign contributions and significantly expand job training and school-to-work programs.

What happened to this ambitious agenda? It was thwarted by Congress--not only by Republicans (then still the minority on the Hill) but also by conservative and moderate Democrats closely linked to big business interests.

The critics forget that Clinton was elected without a majority mandate, receiving only 43% of the vote. His efforts to use the office's bully pulpit to sway public opinion and change key votes on behalf of his agenda failed. On his most important initiative, health care reform, Clinton was simply outgunned in Congress by big business, the insurance industry and small business lobbies.

Unable to enact his big-ticket items, Clinton had to settle for less dramatic victories: expanding the earned income tax credit, raising the minimum wage, expansion of Head Start, a ban on replacing striking workers, the motor voter law, family and medical leave, a crackdown on redlining, the Brady gun control law and Supreme Court appointments that will preserve women's choice on abortion.

When the GOP gained a majority in Congress in 1994, Clinton had to retreat even further from his original goals. When he announced in last year's state of the union speech that "the era of big government is over," many liberals saw it as a failure of will or a lack of strong beliefs. To them, his signing the welfare bill was grounds for political divorce.

But these liberals should recall that FDR did not enter the presidency in 1932 with a progressive platform of government activism. Most of his New Deal agenda emerged after the election of an activist Congress in 1934. Public opinion had been changed in those two years by massive protest on the left--rallies, marches, civil disobedience and get-out-the-vote drives by unionists, the unemployed, reformers and radicals. They gave FDR the political cover he needed to appear moderate by contrast.

Rather than blame Bill Clinton, progressives need to get their act together between now and November. That means doing the grunt work necessary to reelect the president and restore a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress. Should that occur, we can expect a better welfare bill, more aid to cities and perhaps a modest jobs program. But until we change the nation's political climate, progressives can't expect to do much more than put our finger in the dike.

Real progressive reform, an agenda of economic growth and social justice, won't take place until liberals, not just Democrats, comprise a congressional majority. To achieve that, liberals need to set aside their individual causes and focus on a common agenda and common strategy to win the key 1988 and 2000 elections. As Newt Gingrich understood more than a decade ago, real change requires a long march.

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