Obama: 3 comparisons
MLK, JFK, FDR
The coming sharp turn to the Right

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In previous articles I have addressed the Presidential campaign of Barack Obama in terms of the historical precedents of MLK, Jr. (the end of "black politics") and JFK (Iraq and the election). Now I wish to address the final and perhaps most important but problematic comparison that might be available, FDR.

MLK, Jr., JFK and FDR span the political imagination of the preceding generation, the "baby-boomers" who came of age in the 1960s, the time of the "New Left."

Obama has been received primarily as a combined incarnation of MLK, Jr. and JFK, an unstable phenomenon against which Hillary Clinton tried to rally early in the primaries by distinguishing its two different aspects. This is what was behind her provocation that it not only takes a movement to make social change but also political leadership, that the reforms MLK, Jr. called for would have come to nothing without LBJ. — By bringing in LBJ, Hillary avoided, wisely, trying to usurp the mantle of JFK from Obama. Her attack didn't exactly have the desired result, but it did raise the question of whether MLK, Jr. can run for President — whether Obama was a "movement" candidate or a politician of the elite.

As it turned out, Obama was happy to pose as JFK instead of MLK, Jr. And this is the most accurate comparison one can make historically to Obama. But the need for a new "foreign policy" that Obama represented, with his version of the "best and the brightest" to be brought to bear, like JFK, in the face of a tottering international situation (recognized by Paul Street in his characterization of JFK as having run against Nixon and the legacy of Eisenhower from the Right, in "John Kennedy, Barack Obama and the 'Triple Evils That Are Interrelated', " at blackagendareport.com July 23, 2008), has become much less important now, with the combination of the pacification of Iraq and the recent financial collapse on Wall Street. Whatever illusory hopes the 1960s generation might have had that this time McGovern would win have vacated the political stage (or have become irrelevant as props being wielded by the stage-hands on the "Left"). There is an emerging consensus that Obama is the most "liberal" candidate fielded by the Democrats since 1972.

But there is an earlier history that haunts the boomers' imagination as they struggle to get behind the Obama effect. If Obama is the "candidate that comes along once in a generation," as the Kennedys (Caroline and Ted) put it, he is not of their generation. The tasks of the historical moment Obama expresses are quite different from the 1960s.

With the financial meltdown a great shift has taken place. The Clintons are now posing as elder statesmen in their endorsement of Obama as a standard-bearer for the needed changes. Bill Clinton has accepted his part of the responsibility for the trajectory that has
brought the U.S. (and world) to its present impasse. The election of Obama would mark the end of a significant historical period, definitively closing the post-1968 era; Obama's election will be the most potentially significant at least since Reagan's in 1980.

But prior to the recent, dramatic events in the economy that have cast the election in this light, an earlier moment of necessary reform was already being recalled, the 1930s.

In its April 7, 2008 edition, *The Nation* magazine published a forum of articles on the 75th anniversary of the New Deal. In "Race and the New Deal Coalition," Adolph Reed wrote:

"[T]he fact is, most New Deal programs were anything but race-neutral — or, for that matter, gender-neutral — in their impact. Some, like the initial Social Security old-age pension program, were established on a racially invidious, albeit officially race-neutral, basis by excluding from coverage agricultural and domestic workers, the categories that included nearly 90 percent of black workers at the time. Others, like the CCC, operated on Jim Crow principles. Roosevelt's housing policy put the weight of federal support behind creating and reproducing an overtly racially exclusive residential housing industry."

Reed's point was that without the contemporary social movements, the New Deal government policy reforms would not have been "progressive" in the ways they have been remembered. Reed went on to write that

"We can use the New Deal as part of a discussion about what government can do and how its actions can change the playing field in progressive ways. What we need most of all, though, is to articulate a politics steeped in a vision like that of the industrial democracy that fed the social movements that pushed the New Deal to be as much as it was."

Waxing optimistically about both the historical record and what it can teach us today, Reed was not opposing the New Deal reforms to social movements but rather seeing such reforms as potentially changing the conditions under which movements take place:

"[B]enefiting relatively less does not mean not benefiting. The Social Security exclusions were overturned, and black people did participate in the WPA, Federal Writers' Project, CCC and other classic New Deal initiatives, as well as federal income relief. Moreover, the National Labor Relations Act facilitated the Congress of Industrial Organizations' efforts, from which blacks also benefited substantially. Black Americans' emergence as a significant constituency in the Democratic electoral coalition helped to alter the party's center of gravity and was one of the factors — as was black presence in the union movement — contributing to the success of the postwar civil rights insurgency."
What Reed leaves out is that in the 1930s, FDR's "New Deal" represented the politics of the Right against the mobilized Left of the era. Similarly, LBJ's "Great Society" programs in the 1960s were regarded by the "New Left," correctly, as representing primarily the danger of co-optation "from above" in the absence of "participatory-democratic" organizing "from below." (This is what Reed means by "industrial democracy," above.) Reed has been concerned to overcome the simple opposition of these different aspects, and to show their inherent interrelation. Government reforms matter, for better or worse. At issue are the ways they matter, in the absence of a Left.

Recent changes globally as well as in the U.S. have seemed to unravel all the political issues preoccupying the last two generations, since the end of WWII. Not only have reforms since the 1960s such as LBJ's Great Society programs been undone progressively since the Reagan-era of the 1980s and the consolidation of this undoing by Clinton in the 1990s, but reforms going back to the 1930s New Deal under FDR have been brought back into contention, ever since Newt Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America." The controversies of the 1960s that seemed to capture the most salient social and political issues since then have become superseded by the memory of the 1930s. The rationales of the New Deal are up for rehabilitation. John Maynard Keynes is being talked about again.

But there are significant risks to this nostalgia for the 1930s and the post-WWII heyday of Keynesian "solutions" to the problems of capitalism. The most obvious risk is neglect of the fact that the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state of full employment and wage and price controls itself underwent a severe crisis in the 1970s, leading to the recent period of neo-liberal "free-market" capitalism. Neo-liberalism conquered the world by the 1990s, garnering near-universal approval and was fully sanctioned by the Democrats under Clinton, who not only fulfilled his promise to "end welfare as we know it," but also implemented the deregulation of financial institutions the world is now regretting.

The crisis of Fordist Keynesianism in the 1960s, followed by the general global downturn in the 1970s-80s raised many issues for the fundamental understanding of capitalism that have never been fully investigated let alone properly grasped since then. The risk looms of a simple pendulum swing between state-centric and free-market periods of capitalism, that now we will swing "back" to a period of "government regulation" after neo-liberalism, but under worsened conditions. The early 21st Century is not the 1930s. This difference is both for the better and for the worse. For while the present world of capitalism is not (yet) in another Great Depression nor threatened by fascism, neither is it challenged by a workers movement or an international Left. Rather, it is faced with various fundamentally Right-wing alternatives. Obama is nothing but one of them.