

# THREE VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE | ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG

Approaching the 2012 presidential election, we see a great deal of disagreement over how to assess President Obama's first four years in office and to what extent progressives should support his re-election. To adequately address these issues, we must first take into account what I consider to be a grand debate taking place between three competing visions over the future of America.

Each of these three visions is associated with a particular politics, cultural ethos, economic diagnosis and prescription, and fundamental conception of American history and the place of the U.S. in today's world. Each vision molds how problems and challenges are identified and explained, and points to different political and policy strategies at home and abroad. The respective strength of each of these three visions makes it clear that we can and should both mobilize support to defeat the Republican Party presidential nominee and other Republicans seeking election to national or state offices, while at the same time critiquing Obama from a progressive perspective.

## **Vision I: Forward to the Past**

*Vision I* combines military adventurism, economic *laissez-faire*, and nostalgia for a return to a social and racial order from an earlier period in the country's history. In addition, it implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—endorses gender patriarchy, and ensconces issues like poverty and crime within a lens of cultural and intellectual deficit on the part of certain groups, and more specifically people of color, women, the poor, and other minorities. It strongly endorses the free market as superior to the government in “fixing problems.” While not new in American politics, the Tea Party has revitalized this vision and made itself a major influence in molding it.

The Republican Party's move to an extreme right ideological position is linked closely to this vision. The rightward shift is reflected in Mitt Romney's rants that he would never apologize for America, and his recent knee-jerk militaristic response to the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. This posture was criticized heavily by Democrats, and even some Republicans were taken back by this show of irresponsibility.<sup>1</sup> His comments implying that occupied Palestinians are the ones to blame for the lack of peace in the Middle East both indicate and indict the kind of foreign policy being embraced by the Republican Party. In Romney's words: “I look at the Palestinians not wanting to see peace anyway, for political purposes, committed to the destruction and elimination of Israel, and these thorny issues, and I say, There's just no way.”<sup>2</sup> Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian lawmaker and prominent scholar, described these comments as “irresponsible and dangerous and both ignorant and prejudiced.”<sup>3</sup>

Romney's refusal to critique racist banter and commentary by Republican Party activists like Pat Buchanan and others; his tendency to toy with "Birther" comments and jokes about President Obama; and his total void in seeking any support from Black voters—together provide a peep show into a regressive period under a President Romney. As much as he has desired to be kept a secret, it is now obvious that a Romney administration would be a close friend of Wall Street and excuse or even applaud its excesses. How would the 47% of the American people who he has disparaged fare under this kind of administration?<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as the Republican Party continues to move rightward, voices of moderate Republicans have increasingly been drowned out or chased away, leaving a dearth of options to challenge this rightward drift.

At the same time, and linked to this trend and the vision of America it represents, we see growing right-wing ideological activism in the courts threatening the integrity of our judicial system. This can currently be witnessed in states like Iowa and Florida, where Republican activists try to oust liberal judges.

This disrespect for judicial independence can have devastating effects on the federal level. Given the ages of some justices on the U.S. Supreme Court it seems likely that the next president will have the opportunity to make replacement appointments. As national politics become more intensely partisan and ideologically divisive, so too do the deliberations and decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. The culmination of this trend was seen in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which permitted corporations free reign to finance elections to the tune of billions of dollars. Later, when Chief Justice John Roberts sided with the majority in declaring constitutional the 2010 *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* mandating a system of national health insurance, we witnessed the fury of conservatives grown accustomed to the Court behaving as a partisan vessel. Associate Justice Anthony Scalia had made no qualms about expressing political views about this legislation even before the U.S. Supreme Court decided the case.<sup>5</sup> As the institutional arbiter of any laws in the nation, it is a crucial matter to be concerned about the ideological tenor of any new members of the U.S. Supreme Court, especially when individuals like Scalia are not defensive or cautious about broadcasting political leanings.

## **Vision II: Neoliberalism Dressed Up**

*Vision II* is inconsistent regarding military action but will not fight the "military-industrial complex" Eisenhower cautioned against. It promotes economic neoliberalism but seeks to curb its most egregious excesses, and eschews reactionary social and racist positions without actively pursuing equality. It can also be described as neoliberalism dressed up with "centrist" rhetoric.

This centrism argument is dominant throughout the Democratic Party, particularly articulated through the Democratic Leadership Council. While big business must be regulated under this vision, this regulation must not be carried out in ways that would undermine the priorities of powerful

corporations. Concentration of wealth is not a problem under this second vision either. Reducing deficits is far more important and effective than Keynesian remedies for sustaining economic health. The privatization of social welfare is also broadly endorsed under the argument that the free market can fix problems more effectively than government.

In the face of this “centrist” onslaught, there is not a sustained national social change movement aimed at ensuring that U.S. society continues to evolve in the direction of social justice and economic democracy. This is not to disparage the many organizations working hard at the grassroots level, and in a multitude of arenas, to ensure that the nation responds to the needs of all people, and that we not turn the clock backwards regarding civic and political rights. The Occupy Wall Street phenomenon has opened an important arena for raising issues and challenging corporate-oriented public policies. But the latter has yet to emerge as a social movement connecting masses of working-class people across racial and ethnic lines, while the former remain largely splintered and lacking in wide scale national projection.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, and to go a step further, it would not be off base to accuse the Democratic Party of inhibiting and discouraging the possibility of a social change movement at the national level. While the Democrats do contain a progressive wing, it has been largely sidelined by those who believe that the Party must move towards the center of the political ideological spectrum lest it lose electoral clout among white voters. Given the electoral base that helped to trigger the election of the nation’s first black president in 2008, perhaps President Obama has missed a historic opportunity to challenge this centrism argument in the Democratic Party. A number of policy positions and policy reversals—for instance his change of heart regarding the call for a single payer health system—as well as early key appointments and his choice of advisors, showed that he too would go along with the Democratic Party’s move to the middle.

One example for this is that the President has supported “fracking” for natural gases, a practice described by environmentalists as destructive and wasteful.<sup>7</sup> Also, in 2010, he opened the U.S. coastlines to oil drilling, something that had been banned since 1981 under the Outer Continental Shelf Moratorium. This concession to corporations was justified by President Obama as resulting from the “need to move beyond the tired debates of the left and the right, between business leaders and environmentalists, between those who would claim drilling is a cure-all and those who would claim it has no place.”<sup>8</sup> This represents yet another change from his stated position as a presidential candidate: “When I’m president, I intend to keep in place the moratorium here in Florida and around the country that prevents oil companies from drilling off Florida’s coasts.”<sup>9</sup>

About a year ago, the organization PolicyLink claimed in a report entitled *An Equitable Budget for the 99%* that “The President’s budget represents a robust framework for recognizing that equitable access to opportunity is the superior growth model for the future of our nation.” Though it is important to remind ourselves that a phrase like “equitable access to opportunity” is hard to

find in Republican Party dialogues today, PolicyLink's assessment is not completely accurate. The Obama administration has gutted both programs aimed directly at the most vulnerable populations in the U.S. and programs that curtail corporate excess. This is true even for health care: a public health fund has been reduced by \$4 billion over ten years, and funding for chronic disease prevention was cut by \$39 million for the year 2013.

While urban initiatives to improve the quality of inner city life—for example *Choice Neighborhood*—should be commended, funding for this kind of program has been relatively small (\$250 million) compared to earlier efforts like empowerment zones or the community services block grant, which reached into the billions of dollars. Meanwhile, the Department of Education's *Promise Neighborhoods* seeks “to transform high poverty neighborhoods” with a budget of \$60 million in 2012.<sup>10</sup>

Altogether, there has been timidity regarding social policies benefitting the so-called “99%” in the country. While there has been some improvement in the area of housing—at least in the sense that fewer people are losing homes compared to the last several years—initial responses to the recession and the foreclosure crisis definitively prioritized Wall Street over Main Street. The persistent (and growing) problem of poverty is also considered off the table, lest the political cart be disrupted in favor of the Republican Party.

Overall, the first Obama administration could be characterized as defending politically safe and compromised positions as its basis for political decision-making—as the President's silence concerning continued racial disparities in this country demonstrates as well.

### **Vision III: Fighting Inequality and Poverty**

*Vision III* condemns any form of “Wild West” militarism. It maintains that economic policies which increase inequality and exacerbate poverty are unacceptable, and seeks a government that will truly pursue equal protection and opportunity to all Americans.

Generally, this vision is best described by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, dated April 16, 1963. Dr. King attempted to describe the kind of politics and policies, as well as the values, that should form the foundation of a “Beloved Society.” He used an explicit social justice lens for framing public policy in this and other statements. According to this vision, social and economic policies should help to expand social and economic democracy. Health and well-being are treated as human rights and not simply a question of who does or does not have insurance. The embarrassing concentration of wealth at the cost of the livelihood of impoverished and working-class people is not simply unjust, not only unfair, but economically backward and downright unacceptable. In this vision, government has a responsibility to pursue policies that maximize the opportunities for all Americans to be socially and economically productive. Meanwhile, international peace is pursued not through threats to kill, or through Wild West militarism, but on the basis of respect for human rights and international law.

It seems that Obama as a presidential candidate was able to mobilize many Americans, and gain the support of many people across the planet, on the basis of *Vision III*. But as President, he has operated very much within the framework of the neoliberal *Vision II*. In these competing visions we see the cause of the disconnect between the rhetoric of Obama's campaign and his subsequent positions and policies as President. More than any other explanation, it is the recalcitrance of *Vision I* and compromising omnipotence of *Vision II* that have dampened any hopes that the President would pursue a genuinely progressive agenda.

In spite of this disappointment, and as a strong believer in *Vision III*, I will still support the defeat of the Republican Party candidate. The dominant dynamic here should not be one of disappointment or anger at President Obama's positions and actions during his first administration, even if we allow those sentiments to remain as an undercurrent in our thought. Rather, we should see the upcoming election as a crucially important debate between *Visions I, II, and III*. First and foremost, at least in my opinion, *Vision I* has to be defeated. Only after defeating this right-wing extremist conception of America can we organize and mobilize at local and national levels against neoliberalism and on behalf of *Vision III*.

Proposing electoral support for President Obama in the context above does not mean automatic endorsement of his policies or politics. Electoral support should not mean lack of discourse, debate or critique surrounding the administration's domestic and international policies, and it certainly should not hinder our efforts to foster mobilization on behalf of serious social change.

This is the real election battle, and how it turns out will have enormous consequences, not just in defining U.S. society but for people seeking peace and justice all around the world.

**James Jennings** has published extensively on race, community, and politics. He is Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University.

1 Linda Madison, "Amid Criticism Romney doubles down on criticism of White House's response to Egypt, Libya attacks," CBS News, September 12, 2012.

2 Christina Salvo and Leslie Miller, "Mitt Romney says Palestinians have 'no interest whatsoever' in peace with Israel," ABC News, September 18, 2012.

3 Ken Thomas, "Mitt Romney says Palestinians have 'no interest whatsoever' in peace with Israel," The Seattle Times, September 18, 2012.

4 Kate Andersen Brower, "Romney's 47% Victims More Like 96% Who Get Government Boost," Bloomberg News, October 02, 2012.

5 Mark Sherman, "Antonin Scalia Criticized For Appearing More Political Than Judicial", Huffington Post, July 4, 2012.

6 Rinku Sen, "Race and Occupy Wall Street," The Nation, October 26, 2011.

7 Christopher Rowland, "Obama's stance on natural gas carries risks," The Boston Globe, September 27, 2012.

8 Michael Riley, "Obama's drilling decision seen as compromise," The Denver Post, April 1, 2010.

9 Quoted in Hiram Lee, "Obama opens US coastlines for oil drilling," www.wsws.org, April 1, 2010.

10 U.S. Department of Education, "242 Applicants Compete for Share of \$60 Million 2012 Promise Neighborhoods Fund", Press Office, July 30, 2012.