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The Real Obama Betrayal

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Has Barack Obama betrayed the progressives who supported him in the 2008 election cycle?

Lefties have been outraged about Obama's repeated lunges to the right -- on the budget, on war, on the rule of law. Yet to hear pundits' tut-tutting response, you'd think these critics are naïfs.

In *Politico*, former administration official Sean Smith said Obama was never going to be a "left-wing Reagan" and is "governing exactly as he said he

would": through pragmatic problem-solving rather than confrontation. On *Charlie Rose*, Fareed Zakaria of *Newsweek* [snickered](#) that Obama's critics are gripped by "some kind of [fantasy version of liberalism](#) where a Democratic president comes in and America becomes, I don't know, Sweden... That's certainly not where Barack Obama is politically." Even *The American Prospect's* Paul Waldman [says](#) "no one who was paying attention in 2007 and 2008 can say that the Obama they got wasn't the one they should have expected" given Obama's belief that if "you bring everyone together, hear their concerns, and treat them respectfully, you can arrive at policy solutions together."

So why *did* so many idealistic progressives pick a candidate who has turned out to govern as a moderate conservative, [according to](#) former Reagan official Bruce Bartlett? Did Obama pretend to be something he wasn't? Or were progressives just too starry eyed about this charismatic candidate to see the plain truth?

In reality, Obama did betray progressives, but not, technically, by concealing his true identity. He did it by pretending to be more than that identity.

For on the campaign trail, there were really two Obamas. One, yes, was Obama the Conciliator -- the one pundits now find it easy to remember. But there was another Obama that many have forgotten ever existed: Obama the Transformer. This was the Obama who wanted to [curb](#) special interest influence and [keep](#) lobbyists and [other powerful factions](#) from dominating our politics. This Obama openly [admired](#) Ronald Reagan for achieving major change in a way that Bill Clinton never did. This Obama said that at key moments in history, the U.S. has a chance to make fundamental policy shifts, and 2008 [was](#) one of those [moments](#).

A perusal of Obama's 2008 [nomination acceptance speech](#) reveals precisely that candidate. "Now is not the time for small plans," he said in various ways, repeatedly. "Our government should work for us, not against us... [and] ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and

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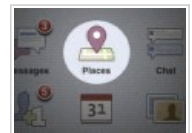
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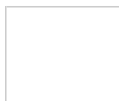







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influence, but for every American who's willing to work."

And let's not forget: on perhaps the most important progressive litmus test of the last decade, Obama had [opposed the invasion](#) of Iraq from the start. Many other elected Democrats -- including the other two major primary candidates, [Hillary Clinton](#) and [John Edwards](#) -- had not.

The two Obamas were, of course, at odds. You don't achieve transformation without creating conflict with those who benefit from the status quo. But Obama, once a community organizer trained in Saul Alinsky's model of power building, knew that. And given what we heard in 2007 and 2008, progressives were not irrational to expect a President Obama to be serious about policy transformation.

As one of those pro-Obama progressives, I figured he would vacillate between his two personas -- pursuing conciliation on some issues so he could go big on others. Maybe he'd fail to prosecute Bush's torture regime but then take on Wall Street with gusto. Perhaps he'd neglect climate change but insist on a robust public option in the health care bill. Maybe he'd undertake a massive escalation in Afghanistan but only after restoring the rule of law to our national security apparatus. No president can take on the whole world, and progressives did not expect Obama to be Dennis Kucinich.

Progressives did, however, expect Obama to push strategic, selective transformation. Obama was supposed to seize the moment of our greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression and pursue reforms that would lay the economic foundation for the next generation. He was supposed to try -- *try*, at least -- to change Washington.

But that is not what he did. If progressives had known that he would immediately hire [Larry Summers](#), [Tim Geithner](#) and other insiders who had helped push the country off the financial cliff; that he would give a pass both to [Bush-era torturers](#) and to [Wall Street fraudsters](#); that his "Keynesian" stimulus would fall far short of what Keynesian economists said [was needed](#); that he'd not only [escalate](#) far more than he [pledged](#) in Afghanistan but also get us ensnared in [Libya](#) and [Yemen](#) without the congressional approval required by law; that his civil liberties record would lead ACLU president Anthony Romero [to be](#) "disgusted with this president"; that the U.S. would be even [more hated](#) in the Middle East than it was under Bush; that Obama's biggest progressive win would be a health care bill that lacked a public option (honoring a backroom deal [he made](#) with the insurance industry) and [was eerily](#) similar to what the conservative Heritage Foundation proposed two decades ago; that he would make virtually no effort at all on climate change and immigration; that he'd [propose](#) (propose!) cutting Social Security and sign a debt ceiling deal agreeing to [slash spending](#) at levels that Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush could only dream of -- in short, if we'd known that Obama the Conciliator would make it to the White House and Obama the Transformer would be left in Chicago's Grant Park on election night -- many of us would have gambled on someone else. I certainly would have.

In short, we were misled. We were sold two Obamas but only got one. And Obama himself bears responsibility for that deception.

Not *all* responsibility; there's plenty of blame to go around, especially given the weakness of the progressive movement that's supposed to be applying pressure from the Left and the strength of the Tea Party movement pushing from the other direction. But Obama does have power. He has agency. And he is not who he said he'd be.

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It is not possible to understand fully why moderates are no longer welcome within the Republican Party -- indeed why for all practical purposes the Party has been completely taken over by extremists -- in conventional terms alone.

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