**WHAT DO PROGRESSIVES STAND FOR?**

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In promoting this talk, the last of my three lectures this semester as a Visiting Scholar at Berkeley, I set out a premise and a series of questions that I guess, for those of you I am not related to, probably drew you here.

The premise: for the last ten years, a number of progressive donors and activists have worked to strengthen key institutions in our movement and build new ones, in response to the "infrastructure" that the right built over the previous thirty or forty years. In doing so, they were eager to overcome what they saw as “silos” of interest groups not always working together for a larger common good. In addition, many progressives sought to craft a “narrative” to contest the conservative anti-government, “trickle-down,” every-man-for-himself story that became ascendant in the Reagan-Thatcher era.

The questions: Where do these initiatives stand, some years later, following the re-election of a Democratic President? While the right is in disarray, is the left in the better shape it appears to be, or has the Obama coalition submerged tensions – over economics, race, education – that are bound to re-emerge? How have progressives navigated the complications of moving from opposition to (at least partial) power? Have civil rights, labor and environmental groups made any progress moving out of their traditional comfort zones to collaborate with other movements?

I have been struck in recent weeks by how many friends on the left, seeing the question in my title, “what do progressives stand for?”, have laughed just a bit too heartily and proclaimed: “I want to know that myself!” Behind the jokey reactions is, I believe, is an anxiety that we don’t know the answer – that there may be no coherent progressive core, or in any case no coherent “narrative” about it. Those who came here this afternoon expecting an answer in Oracle-like fashion are bound to be disappointed. Despite the breadth of my title, I can only skim the surface of some of the issues I plan to raise, but I do want to answer the questions I posed at the outset today – or do the best job I can in answering them. In thinking about them, I also found myself thinking about my own ideological journey. So I’m going to add a few recollections and reflections to my self-imposed assignment, at the end of my remarks, for whatever value it has for any other person who from time to time grapples with the question of what they believe, and why.

**Liberals and progressives**

First a few words about the term “progressive,” which over the last ten years has almost completely replaced “liberal” as the preferred term of political self-identification for … for what? For people like me, and since I know so many people in this audience, for people like most of you. Broadly speaking, for people on the political left in the United States. For several decades in the beginning of the 20th century, we had what I would call a real left in the this country, not the one conjured up in the fevered fantasies of the Wall Street Journal editorial page, Glenn Beck and Fox News, but parties and popular political, labor and intellectual figures who actually rejected the premises and practices of capitalism. We had a burst of that again in the 1960’s in much of the New Left as well. But at this moment those forces are as marginalized in the United States – and for that matter, in many other parts of the world -- as they have been in well over a century, and while how that happened would be a fitting topic for a lecture or two, it is outside the scope of what I have the time or expertise to talk about today. So I am going to stick with, apologies to Prince, the people-formerly-known-as-liberals.

Historically, the body of beliefs and attitudes that characterize liberals and progressives are connected, but distinct political philosophies. Liberals questioned traditions like hereditary privilege and monarchy, and were open-minded in matters of culture. They tended to elevate the importance of individual rights against the state, and were, for example, significant in the founding of early 20th century institutions like the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, and the New Republic magazine.

Progressives, as other uses of the word might suggest, favor and represent gradualism moving in the right – or rather, left -- direction. Progressivism has been more focused on working conditions and social welfare, not to mention conservation and stewardship of the environment, and has favored curbs and regulations on large concentrations of economic power. The progressive era in American politics, whose key political figures included Republicans like Theodore Roosevelt as well as Democrats like Woodrow Wilson, is identified with social and economic reforms along these lines.

As Tod Lindberg, a Hoover Institution fellow, recently wrote in Policy Review, “‘progressive,’ … implies not only improvement over time, but a progression: correct the perceived injustice most immediately at hand, then move on to the next one. In some cases, the next injustice comes into focus only once a previous injustice has been removed. During the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, generally regarded as the birth of the gay rights movement, it seems doubtful that participants had the goal of marriage equality in mind. The community had more immediate needs that, once satisfied, would in turn reveal its next-most immediate needs.”

As a fairly close observer of developments on the U.S. political left in recent years, and a participant in some of the history I will be talking about, I don’t have the sense that the shift from “liberal” to “progressive” was for the most part deeply grounded in a close look at the historic roots of these terms or much of a conscious choice to, say, elevate economic considerations over cultural ones. Despite the general lack of intellectual rigor in the process that led to “progressive” as a substitute for “liberal”, there are a few exceptions, like the work of John Halpin at the Center for American Progress. But on the whole I think it was much more motivated by the tarnishing of the “liberal” brand after years of constant assault from the right, not to mention the successive defeats of old-line liberals like Humphrey, McGovern, Mondale, and, to some extent, Dukakis. The initial response by prominent and ambitious Democratic politicians to these developments – and you can see it in both Carter and Clinton, the exceptions during this period -- was to question the appropriateness of any political label at all, to emphasize a kind of post-ideological, problem-solving approach to politics, or, at the worst, to embrace the world-view of the other side, as in “the era of big government is over.” While Barack Obama came to power in a different environment, when in the wake of the Iraq war and the financial collapse the right seemed exhausted and discredited, and while he was lifted up in the first place and continued in office for a second term by a new majority of people of color, young people and women, and while he has had more room than Carter and Clinton to pursue some progressive policies, I don’t see the Obama Presidency as a sharp departure from this tendency, nor would I expect it from a Hillary Clinton Presidency. In any case, it’s hard to find a liberal in American politics today, and we all seem to be progressives now.

**State of the right**

Across the divide, the conservative political movement is still trying to figure out what hit it in the November elections. It should come as no surprise that a party increasingly unhinged from reality, which has embraced climate change denial and evolution know-nothingism, which sees President Obama as a Manchurian candidate for socialist domination, which wages war on women’s health and see tax cuts as the answer to everything, believed its own skewed polls and cheerleading pundits to the extent that it practically ordered bunting for the Romney inauguration. So the reckoning taking place now is all the more intense for its apparent unexpectedness. Apparently they don’t follow Nate Silver at the Republican National Committee.

 The coming months will tell us much about whether the remnants of what used to be mainstream conservativism (moderate and liberal Republicanism having been interred some time ago) can pull the party from the brink. Not the brink of irrelevance, since irrelevance would be a welcome alternative to its current role, but the brink of the even worse destruction that an intransigent hard-right minority can sow. Despite a few feints from Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and Florida Senator Marco Rubio on immigration reform, and conversions by Senators Rob Portman and Mark Kirk on same-sex marriage, and despite a blunt post-mortem report commissioned by the Republican National Committee, most of the early signs are not encouraging, at least not for those who believe democracy works better with more than one political party that is connected to reality and feels a sense of public responsibility for governing.

 But while most people have been paying attention to what is now roiling in the political wing of the conservative movement, over in its philanthropic wing some soul-searching has been going on for a while. Tevi Troy, a former Bush administration official now at the Hudson Institute, who’s also had affiliations with most of the other right-wing think tanks, caught my attention last year with an article, “Devaluing the Think Tank,” in National Affairs that was critical not only of progressive ones like the Center for American Progress, but also of the Heritage Foundation and the Manhattan Institute. “At a moment when we have too much noise in politics and too few constructive ideas,” Troy wrote, “these institutions may simply become part of the intellectual echo chamber of our politics, rather than providing alternative sources of policy analysis and intellectual innovation.” With the recent move of Jim DeMint, political godfather of the Tea Party movement, from the Senate to the Heritage Foundation, this trend is not likely to abate.

 Yet Troy is not the only voice on the right wondering if the movement has lost its intellectual vibrancy. A few months back, I took part in a forum sponsored by the Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal. (Bradley makes a practice of including some ideological diversity in its lunchtime forum series, and on several occasions I’ve been invited to provide a progressive perspective. We have such a good relationship that when I was due for a sabbatical from the Open Society Foundations in 2007, I was planning to spend it as a Hudson Institute Fellow, a plan that had to be shelved when I became President of the Atlantic Philanthropies, so sadly I never really got to see how the other half lived.) I came to Hudson that day prepared to critique the conservative foundations on several grounds – that they’d run out of ideas (say what you will about the content of those ideas, but the “Blueprint for America” that the Heritage Foundation prepared in 1980 helped shape the Reagan administration, and the Manhattan Institute played a similar role for Rudolph Giuliani in New York a decade later); that they were beginning to ape the worst philanthropic practices, like obsession with measurement, of the the large, so-called progressive foundations they were trying to counter; that they’d been seduced and co-opted by the political world. But I was surprised to find, as the last of four speakers, that the conservative panelists had beaten me to the punch.

 James Piereson, who for many years before it spent all its assets and closed headed the John M. Olin Foundation, one of the most influential foundations on the right (among other things, Olin was the principal backer of the Federalist Society), had this to say: “Conservatism has evolved from a movement independent and outside of the major parties to one that is almost wholly identified with the Republican Party. In the 70s and 80s many conservatives were estranged liberals and Democrats who hoped to exercise influence over both parties. That is no longer true. .. indeed, there are few independent intellectuals around today on either side of the ideological fence.”

Piereson expressed a certain nostalgia for “The decades of the 1970s and 1980s [which] were periods of institutional invention on the conservative side. With the founding and evolution of magazines, think tanks, book publishers, academic programs and the like, often with funds supplied by conservative foundations. That is much less the case today when conservative foundations and conservative institutions are more focused on building out from the infrastructure created in those earlier decades and adapting their message to the internet.”

Lenore Ealy, Executive Director of the Philanthropic Enterprise, followed Piereson to say: “The future of conservative philanthropy is also being shaped by non-conservative forces. Conservative donors have not been immune to pressures of professionalization. I would not be shocked … that some conservative donors may even imitate their progressive counterparts with grant management systems in which values clarification, theories of social change, and process models are used … conservative philanthropy has been seduced by what Thomas Bertonneau recently described with wonderful conservative aplomb as ‘the global apocalypse of total politicization and the outlawing of judgment.’”

So the right is in the midst of some soul-searching, its very political relevance being questioned the way the left’s has been at points of earlier electoral failure. Meanwhile, the most progressive President in many years was comfortably re-elected backed by another campaign combining people power and technological savvy that his opposition at the moment can only dream of. While progressives are never complacent when they have power, always fearing (not without precedent) that it will be snatched away from them, they can be forgiven a bit of *schadenfreude* at the difficulties of the right. But I don’t sense that much reflection is taking place about how we got here and where we are going, perhaps understandably because success tends not to have the tonic effect of failure. So what I mainly want to do today is take stock. I want to start with what we have done well, move to a few areas where the record is mixed, and wind up with an assessment of where we have fallen short – where much more work needs to be done.

**State of the left: what we’ve done well – institutions and alliances**

There are a number of things I think we have managed well in the last ten years. First, with unusual but so far largely sustained coordination among donors, we’ve consciously built new institutions to fill gaps on the progressive side, and strengthened the capacity and sustainability of some key organizations that were already in place. In the former category I’d include the Center for American Progress, a wide-ranging think tank and messaging operation which, while still outgunned financially by the Heritage Foundation, has considerably evened the score between left and right in this realm; Media Matters for America, which monitors the conservative press, among other things publicizing over-the-top behavior, shaming and pressing for accountability; America Votes, which coordinates progressive campaigns at the state level; and the American Constitution Society, inspired by the success of the right’s Federalist Society in forging a pipeline of ideas and personnel for Republican Justice Departments and federal judges. In the latter category I’d cite the budget watchdog the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, launched in the Reagan era, and the organizing support group, the Center for Community Change, founded in the wake of Robert Kennedy’s assassination. Among others, the NAACP, the nation’s oldest civil rights organization, and SEIU, the country’s largest labor union, have also shown strong signs of revitalization.

Tod Lindberg, looking at this from the right with some envy, writes of what he calls “Left 3.0”: “… funder networks now gather periodically to strategize where best to deploy resources. Money for the cause appears to be abundant. Activists meet to share information and coordinate plans. Opinion journalists offer up articles and blog posts and tweets. None of this is unique to the Left, of course. But to the extent that the emerging Left 3.0 considered itself lagging efforts on the Right — what the Left likes to call the “right-wing noise machine” — Left 3.0 has now fully caught up.”

Campaigns aimed at more specific issues have also been much better funded and coordinated. I note with some pride that one of them, Health Care for America Now, of which the Atlantic Philanthropies, which I led at the time, was the largest funder, made a significant difference to the passage of the Affordable Care Act. As Harvard professor Theda Skocpol, a keen analyst of movements for public policy change, told the Washington Post: “The investments that philanthropies made in [the [Health Care for America Now campaign](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_Care_for_America_NOW%21)] helped cement links between the national players and the state and local players. The HCAN campaign touted the idea of the public option—which, ironically, wasn’t included in the final bill, but it served as a bridge. It allowed people to push for the health care bill without feeling like they were selling out. There wasn’t the equivalent of that in the environmental arena….[HCAN] …create[d] the kind of links that made it possible to push at the very end when many Democrats were ready to drop the whole thing, after Scott Brown’s election in Massachusetts. Everyone in Washington was getting ready to run for the hills at that point. But the network that had been built dropped its demand for the public option and pushed for the law to pass.”

Contrasting the path of health care reform with the parallel effort on climate change, Skocpol says she was “startled by the level of contempt that many environmentalists had for the health reform push.” But she concludes that progressives “have to build broader coalitions. That was one of the things that health reformers did this time around. They buried hatchets and forged ties with groups they needed to, like medical providers, and reached out to small businesses. Health care reformers spent years talking about what went wrong, what they could do differently. But that also took 15 years, from 1994 to when health care finally made it over the top. I’m not sure climate can wait 15 years.”

The broad coalition of groups pressing for immigration reform at this moment, the Alliance for Citizenship, includes, as HCAN did, both labor and civil rights groups, along with faith-based movements and community organizing networks, forging strategy together at the same table.

 In part because these developments have been handled in a deliberate and coordinated manner, there is a great deal more collaboration between and among progressive organizations than has been the place for many years. Indeed, one of the most encouraging developments is that the collaboration is not just taking place among groups that have had shared goals like health care and immigration reform, which is significant enough – it is causing a number of organizations in the progressive constellation to step outside their traditional “silos” to stand in solidarity with other movements.

I first had the feeling something was changing a few years ago when I attended the NAACP’s 100th anniversary dinner, and was struck by the prominence of underwriting from gay and lesbian donors. I noted that Urvashi Vaid, the longtime progressive activist, then Executive Director of the LGBT-focused Arcus Foundation, was sitting at the head table with NAACP President Julian Bond.

Not long after, the NAACP, led by its new Executive Director, Ben Jealous, helped to forge, not follow, the momentum toward support of same-sex marriage. Some months later, a number of LGBT leaders stood with black and Latino activists at a press conference in New York denouncing the city’s stop-and-frisk practices. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force leader Rea Carey had this to say: “LGBT people, of course, have their own history of unjust treatment from law enforcement, not the least of which was the raid on the Stonewall Inn in 1969, launching the modern LGBT movement. But the Task Force does not just stand in solidarity with LGBT people; we stand against racial profiling for all people of color. The entire concept of it goes against not only the principle of ‘innocent until proven guilty,’ it undermines the free society we fight for every day.”

More recently, the NGLTF, joined by the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Human Rights Campaign and other LGBT groups, stepped out strongly in favor of immigration reform, asserting: “We stand shoulder to shoulder with those striving for and dreaming of a nation that embraces all who come here seeking a better life. We look forward to working with Congress, the White House and every community harmed by our broken immigration system to finally achieve the comprehensive reforms we all so desperately need.”

Center for Community Change Executive Director Deepak Bhargava, a leader in anti-poverty efforts as well as the movements for immigration reform and health care, addressed the NGLTF’s Creating Change conference earlier this year, expressing optimism about the progress made on LGBT rights and immigration and noting “ it is no coincidence that two movements that have been unafraid to make noise and cause trouble have made real progress.”

Writing a few weeks ago in the Washington Post, Frank Sharry, the director of America’s Voice, talked about how the immigration movement learned from the successes of the LGBT movement, often telling his colleagues “it’s time to go all LGBT on their asses” … quite simply, that it was time to be confrontational.”

 If all the solidarity was taking place only between the LGBT and civil rights movements, that would be reason enough to applaud, but it is not limited to that. Just last week the Communications Workers of America, the NAACP, the Sierra Club and Greenpeace all signed a joint letter urging reform of the Senate filibuster rule. Not long ago, a significant segment of the environmental movement was anti-immigration, on population control grounds. While the nativist forces in the Sierra Club were defeated, there has until recently been little common ground expressed between the green and immigrant rights movement. Yet in the current push for immigration reform, a number of environmental leaders and their organizations have spoken out.

Phil Radford, Executive Director of Greenpeace, wrote in the Huffington Post: “Undocumented workers are among the most vulnerable workers in our society, from their exposure to toxic pesticides and chemicals in agricultural work and manufacturing, to their isolation in pollution-choked neighborhoods caring for vulnerable families and children. Every human being deserves the dignity and right to stand up to polluters in the workplace and at home without fear of being deported and taken from their families.”

And Bill McKibben of 350.org wrote in the Los Angeles Times that: “… immigrants, by definition, are full of hope. They’ve come to a new place determined to make a new life, risking much for opportunity. They’re confident that new kinds of prosperity are possible. The future beckons them, and so changes of the kind we’ll need to deal with climate change are easier to conceive.”

These encouraging connections are not just taking place among organizations and movements, but there are other gaps being bridged as well – for instance, in a gathering I attended of the new Gettysburg Project, launched by Anna Burger, the former SEIU Secretary-Treasurer, which brought together many movement leaders with scholars like Marshall Ganz, Lani Guinier, and Archon Fung.

These long-overdue developments, giving the lie to the oft-repeated critique of progressives that they are too bound up in their own issues – their own identities, it is often said, though mostly by white men who think everyone has an identity but them –did not happen by accident. The comprehensive view of progressive infrastructure – a bloodless kind of word, I usually prefer the metaphor of an interdependent ecosystem – taken by the Democracy Alliance, a gathering of progressive donors founded by Rob Stein, was one big contributing factor. Stein had closely studied the right and admired not only the sums contributed by conservative donors, and the focus with which they operated, but the way their network operated to foster connection and collaboration among donors, organizations, intellectuals and allies in government.

Another big factor, less well-known and chronicled than the Democracy Alliance, is the Rockwood Institute, a progressive leadership development group based in nearby Oakland. Over the last ten years, hundreds of activists from labor, economic justice, civil rights, women’s and environmental organizations and philanthropy have gone through Rockwood trainings and forged closer personal and professional relationships that have led to the kinds of organic connections resulting in many of the collaborative actions I’ve detailed above.

**Where the record is mixed: narrative and power**

So this is the good news and it is very good, possibly even transformational over time. Where the record of progressives has been more mixed, I think, has been around two areas: creating a unified “narrative” and in relating to power once acquired, in the ascent of the Obama administration and majorities in the Senate, and at one time, the House. Let’s take narrative first.

I have to confess to some ambivalence about the quest for narrative, even though, or maybe because, I have been involved in so many discussions about it, and even though – I am the chair of the board of StoryCorps, for God’s sake! – I am a big believer that every life, organization, movement and country has a story to tell. To use the dustups over recent films as an example, if we tell the story of the ending of slavery only through Lincoln, or segregation in baseball only through Branch Rickey or even Jackie Robinson himself, and slight the powerful contributions that social movements made to the outcome, we dishonor history and the struggles of millions who paid a steep price, and these false or incomplete narratives hobble the future as well.

I’m an admirer of many aspects of the work of Berkeley’s own George Lakoff about the framing of issues and debates, and also of the Emory psychologist, Drew Westen, who seemed for a while to take Lakoff’s place as progressive guru of the moment. Yet something bothers me about the tendency of political movements both right and left to assume, in the wake of repeated failure, that what’s wrong is not their policies and stances – not, for instance, to cite an example from our side, policies that are too pro-corporate at a time of growing inequality -- but that their message is just not getting through. Despite the more recent electoral successes that progressives have had, we’ve been living through a spate of narrative-forging efforts, and sitting down to review them recently I was underwhelmed, despite my regard for many of the people involved.

These efforts include the Progressive Economic Narrative Project sponsored by the US Action Education Fund, the American Values Project, and the Hero’s Handbook by the Washington Progress Alliance.

Here are some of the recommended narratives emerging from these worthy efforts:

* “Everyone gets a fair shot, everyone does his or her fair share, and everyone plays by the same rules.”
* “Everyone who wants to work would have a good job, with wages and benefits that could support a middle-class family.”
* There are either “four foundational values: freedom, opportunity, responsibility and cooperation…”
* Or ten: “freedom and justice for all; honesty and integrity, equal opportunity, hard work, personal responsibility and shared accountability, everyone does their fair share, the Golden Rule, diversity makes us strong, our children should inherit a better world.”
* Or how about this as a tag line: “We all do better when we all do better.”

I’m not sure how much good a narrative does if it is possible to use it to justify both tax increases and tax cuts, a stronger social safety net or a weaker one.

Richard Kirsch of the Roosevelt Institute, a gifted organizer and advocate whose work I was proud to support when he led HCAN, explained the need for a stronger narrative when he wrote that “even though progressives might win from time to time, we do so within a narrowly constrained framework of conservative ideas, values and principles that are deeply embedded in the public debate.”

But if you look closely, or even cursorily, at these bromides, you’d be hard pressed to find one – possibly, diversity makes us strong – that could not have come from the lips of Ronald Reagan or any of his heirs. Or for that matter, President Obama, though for most of his first term he was widely faulted by progressives for not using his communications skills to foster a compelling narrative. I am tempted to call for a voice vote adopting all of the above and then for a moratorium on narrative work for the next few election cycles.

As for relating to power, it is by now clear to most of us that progressives – with some exceptions noted above in the immigrant rights and LGBT movements – lost traction in the first year or two of the Obama administration by playing primarily an inside game. Everyone, including the President, went around reciting the story of Franklin Roosevelt, meeting with labor leaders and telling them: “OK, you’ve convinced me – now go out and make me do it.” But in fact many of us were seduced by access and still a little starry-eyed by the 2008 election, and we struggled to find ways to support the President while holding his feet to the fire.

The administration, for the most part, did not make our jobs any easier. In the first two years of the first term I was heavily involved in health care reform and other issues, and baffled by the administration’s efforts to restrain progressive health care campaigners from turning up the heat on Democrats like Max Baucus who seemed to be hurting the President’s own agenda or at least retarding it considerably. I didn’t expect the President to be publicly dissing Baucus and other moderate Democrats, but I thought they’d welcome outside pressure that they could keep their distance from. Not so. The White House wanted to control events, always. Right after the 2008 election, I was one of a number of voices calling for the President to convert his powerful campaign organization, and its millions of activists and donors, into a force to help him govern. I thought he made the wrong decision to fold it into the Democratic National Committee, and I thought the absence of that external force was costly to the new administration – for example, the so-called stimulus program was enacted with virtually no outside movement, and the choices it reflected for too modest an overall package and a heavy dose of tax cuts reflected political reality, to be sure, but there was little effort to change that reality through organized public pressure.

Now, though, that Obama for America has been converted into Organizing for America, I have more mixed feelings, both about the way they it is raising money and about the unsurprising fact that supporters are being mobilized to support the President’s agenda, which will often be less ambitious than we would like – or, as in the case of proposed Social Security cuts – sometimes wrong. It is important for the President’s campaign supporters to remain mobilized, but no substitute for organized, independent social movements.

**Audacity and debate**

There are two areas in which progressives could do better that I want to reference here, but in the interest of time, and because I have discussed them at length elsewhere, I will only cite, not explain. First is our general failure to couch our arguments in fundamental moral terms. It’s not enough, obviously, to carry the day in most campaigns, but without that grounding we leave ourselves vulnerable and give potential supporters little to get excited about. No one marches to war under the flags of improved infrastructure or best practices. And second, a point addressed more to donors than to donation-seekers, though both are implicated, we have generally failed to structure funding in a way that will lead to a more truly sustainable financial base for movement organizations.

Finally, then, to one more area that I think progressives have not handled well in the last few years – or put a different way, the challenges we still face. For all our investment in architecture, we’ve had little meaningful debate about a number of important policy matters. Lindberg, the conservative observer, writes, “Left 3.0 is an entity whose internal divisions are miniscule in comparison to the shared convictions that hold it together,” but I’m not so sure.

First, we have generally lacked, to borrow one of the President’s favorite words, audacity. The right when it came to power pushed a number of radical ideas, from giant tax cuts to Social Security privatization to regime change, not all of which came to pass – and the last two of which contributed to its at least temporary undoing – but it had a transformational program and pushed it hard. This is not the place to delve deeply into how progressives behave governmentally when in office and opposition – how we enable the right when it’s in power, supporting its tax cuts, wars and judges, and compromise with ourselves when we’re in power – but what I’m talking about is the absence of a similarly audacious agenda on the left.

Maybe this is just a matter of lead time. George W. Bush was elected a few decades after the Heritage Foundation and others laid the policy groundwork for his benighted policies, and we are playing catch-up. But I worry, because as I look around the landscape I see few signs of audacity. Perhaps we need to widen our lens when looking for it; if we did, I think we would find that the boldest ideas on the progressive side in the last ten years or so have come not from universities or think tanks, despite their critical role, but from social movements – think of same-sex marriage, paid sick leave and marijuana legalization.

With respect to the economy and a few other issues, progressives have considerable differences that have been until now largely submerged under the big tent that Barack Obama put together in 2008 and maintained in 2012. Writing in the Washington Post last week in opposition to the President’s proposal for “chained CPI,” which is bureaucratic-speak for giving the elderly poor less to live on while doing little to rein in corporate tax loopholes and other aspects of the safety net for the rich, Katrina vanden Heuvel noted that Social Security payments are already too austere, [averaging $1,262 per month](http://www.ssa.gov/pressoffice/basicfact.htm) and replacing only about 33 to 40 percent of annual earnings. The bottom [40 percent](http://growth.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/LindHillHiltonsmithFreedman_ExpandedSocialSecurity_04_03_13.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) of recipients get 84 percent of their what they live on a year from Social Security.

“Yes”, vanden Heuvel writes, “we need to reform Social Security, but the reform should increase, not cut the income support that millions rely on,” citing a “blueprint for sensible reform” by the New America Foundation that calls for adding a supplement to Social Security that would guarantee all retirees about 60 percent of their average wage in retirement (similar to that of most other developed nations).”

Joel Kotkin, a fellow in urban design at Chapman University – whose work I became aware of through the New York Times blog of Thomas Edsall, one of the most thoughtful and penetrating commentators on ideas and movements -- writes: “The class issue so cleverly exploited by the President in the election could prove the potential Achilles heel of today’s gentry progressivism. The Obama-Bernanke-Geithner economy has done little to reverse the relative decline of the middle and working class, whose share of national income has fallen to record lows. If you don’t work for venture-backed tech firms, coddled, money-for-nearly-free Wall Street or for the government, your income and standard of living has probably declined since the middle of the last decade.”

In the same speech to gay activists in which Deepak Bhargava lauded the growing solidarity between the LGBT and immigrants rights movement, he also warned: “If we succeed in liberating mass numbers of gay, lesbian and transgender people and vast millions of immigrants from the bonds of discrimination and legal subjugation, but millions of us remain without a job, without decent wages, without a secure retirement, without a decent education, without the right to form a union to fight for dignity on the job – will we say our work is done? No we will not. These fights for LGBT equality and immigrant rights must lead us to economic justice.” And yet, increasingly, in a departure from the days when many Democrats forced “social issues” to the sidelines in order to enhance their electoral prospects, it now seems that LGBT rights and women’s issues are sometimes the only common faith that progressives share.

Writing recently in The Nation not about Barack Obama, but about another successful and ambitious Democrat, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, Eric Alterman notes that “the acronym that one hears applied to Cuomo’s political philosophy is SPEC (‘socially progressive economic conservative.’) Another pundit terms him a ‘progractionary,’ defined as a ‘hard progressive on social issues like gay marriage…but [championing] an austerity message on spending and taxes that fits in well with House Republicans. “Pragmatically speaking,” Alterman writes, “these positions make sense. Liberals are winning the culture wars, and demographic trends portend only increasingly easier victories when it comes to issues that appeal to young voters, women, college graduates and people of color. It’s an irony of American politics that it has become safer for many politicians to advocate gay marriage, a generous immigration policy and a woman’s right to choose – as divisive as these issues may remain at Thanksgiving dinner – than to try to address traditional bread-and-butter issues of economic equity.”

In education reform, as I have argued in my two other lectures and won’t go into here, I think there are serious splits among progressives that are likely to re-emerge in a post-Obama era. A shorthand for thinking about this is the tension between a social justice tendency, where leadership comes from below – the community organizing tradition from which Barack Obama emerged – and a social entrepreneurship tendency, which is too often leading from above, well-meaning people “intervening” to do something “to” a community, not often enough “with.” In education reform and some other areas, it’s this latter tendency that seems to claim the President and many progressives. The force of President’s persona, and our shared satisfaction in winning, has kept these debates at a low boil. But I think they will erupt in time.

To continue the stove metaphor, some issues are not only missing from the front burner, but hardly seem to be near the heat at all in the Obama era. The nation’s first black President, who from his past writings and speeches has a deep and eloquent grasp of racial realities, has generally chosen not to emphasize continuing racial disparities and even when addressing them, does so stealthily – as in the stimulus package, which did many good things, but which the administration was resistant to discussing in racial equity terms. I understand all the reasons – including the punditry’s criticisms on the few occasions when the President has addressed racial profiling in personal ways, as in the Henry Louis Gates and Trayvon Martin incidents – why he may be reluctant to do so. I don’t even, necessarily, question his political judgment in being reticent. But I do believe we will pay a price in the post-Obama era for our failure to lift continuing, indeed structural, racial issues up to a higher level of public discussion and urgency.

Finally, I think most progressives have given a pass to the President on civil liberties issues. With his stingy record of pardons, and an Attorney General whose principal response to state referenda victories decriminalizing marijuana in Colorado and Washington State – key turning points in ending the war on drugs – was to invoke federal pre-emption, the President, who often sends signals that he knows better, has not led on criminal justice issues. Progressives on the whole have given him a pass, and while there is a vibrant movement developing that is questioning mass incarceration, it is largely disconnected from the broader progressive conversation, and much of the political energy for reform comes from evangelicals motivated by a belief in redemption and fiscal conservatives who see over-imprisonment as an unsustainable cost.

Most troubling, though, is the insufficient discontinuity, to put it most politely, between the Obama administration’s war on terror policies – even though, to its credit, it has largely abandoned use of the term – and those of the Bush-Cheney era. Joan Walsh, writing in Salon, cited a study that African-Americans and white liberals who supported Obama became more likely to support policies once they learned the president did.

“More than once,” Walsh writes, “I’ve worried that might carry over to bad policies that Obama has flirted with embracing, that liberals have traditionally opposed: raising the age for Medicare and Social Security or cutting those programs’ benefits. Or hawkish national security policies that liberals shrieked about when carried out by President Bush, from rendition to warrantless spying. Or even worse, policies that Bush stopped short of, like targeted assassination of U.S. citizens loyal to al-Qaida (or “affiliates”) who were (broadly) deemed (likely) to threaten the U.S. with (possible) violence (some day).”

“The commander in chief,” Walsh continued, “has a singular role on national security, and progressive Obama die-hards look away from that. And they fetishize the president in their own way. They particularly fetishize his goodness. I can slide that way myself. Flash a photo of the first family before asking me a question about the kill list, and I’m sure I’m more likely to support it. Obama has an outsize positive place in our nation’s history, and that’s tough for many of us to resist.”

David Shipler, writing in The Nation, notes that Obama’s “supporters, who have watched him duplicate and codify some of the Bush administration’s most damaging civil liberties violations, are now reduced to wishful thinking that an authentic Obama will soon step forward and return the country to the constitutional footing that was abandoned after 9/11.”

We’ll see. I have nothing but admiration for the handful of human rights and civil liberties organizations who have been as unwavering in their critiques – and their lawsuits, and public education campaigns – of this administration’s national security policies as they were of the last one. But most progressives have sat this one out, to our shame.

**My path to the progressive infrastructure**

I promised to close with some more personal reflections and recollections on my own ideological leanings. I did not grow up in a family that was particularly political. My grandfather, a small-town pharmacist, was apparently a Main Street Republican, though I don’t recall ever hearing him express a political view. My father, still living at home at twenty-four, sat down at the dinner table on the night of the 1948 Presidential election and announced to his family that he had voted for Harry Truman, incurring my grandfather’s anger but establishing a streak of stubborn political independence that led him to vote over the years for both Eisenhower and Clinton. I don’t recall my father reading much history, but he was an avid consumer of newspapers, and we were given plenty of history books as children and adorned the walls of the bedroom my brother and I shared with a barbershop calendar of the Presidents and a four-color map of the United States. Under my father’s nightly tutelage, we memorized the order of the Presidents and knew every state capitol as well, knowledge that has served me well not only in crossword puzzles and Trivial Pursuit but in instilling a sense of the story of the country – albeit one without too much room for popular movement, though I picked that up later. My mother is a very smart woman who has never followed politics very closely, and her enthusiasms have ranged from Ross Perot to Barack Obama.

 I revered John F. Kennedy, elected when I was six, who provided my first image of what a President might look like, and resented the dull Lyndon Johnson who replaced him. I had no idea at the time what a colorful figure Johnson actually was, and my esteem for him has risen over the years, but I formed a view as a boy that the Vietnam War was wrong, and as I neared high school I was mightily drawn to the protest candidacy of Eugene McCarthy. I saw Bobby Kennedy as an interloper coming in after McCarthy had done the hard work of toppling LBJ, and when in the end it was Hubert Humphrey – I had no idea of his proud liberal career, I just saw him as a lackey for Johnson – I shifted my allegiance to Richard Nixon, who said he’d end the war, even attending a rally for him in Hartford, CT and winning my high school’s freshman public speaking contest with a call for the country to unite behind Nixon once he’d been elected. Barely five years later, I was a leader of a Columbia student group working for his impeachment.

 You might judge from this short trip down Memory Lane that my political impulses are as erratic as my parents’, but in fact from mid-high school to the current moment I have been very predictably liberal … er, progressive. Though my race and gender, not to mention my nationality, has placed me at the pinnacle of the pyramid of privilege, despite a more modest class background (as, for instance, the first in my family to attend college), I have been drawn all my life to causes and movements of the discriminated-against, persecuted and marginalized.

 I am by conviction a person of the left, but by temperament a moderate. I have in recent years run big institutions, and tend to identify, though usually quietly, with Presidents and other chief executives – the forces they have to contend with, the competing and often irreconcilable demands they face. But I also believe that the first question to ask in any contested political or public matter is what the people most affected, folks at the bottom, want and believe – low-income families in a school district, undocumented workers, single mothers on public assistance, inmates in a prison – and take my cue from them. Yet I am uncomfortable at a rally or a parade, and cringe at the hyper-partisanship of the posts of most of my FaceBook friends, even as I often hit the like button. It’s complicated.

Most of all, as I have gotten older, I find myself returning to the second faith in which I was raised – not the Catholic Church, though it still guides much of my worldview forty-five years after my last communion and confession, but the American Civil Liberties Union, which I became involved with at eighteen, just as I was starting at Columbia University. I have liked much about the progressive movement of which I have been a part, and hope to continue to play a role in shaping and leading it. But what I like least about my own side – and this is of course true of the other side as well – is its tribalism. If all you need to know about what you think about an action or policy is who is for it and who is against it, so that the conduct of the war on terror – and yes, I realize there are some differences, not insignificant but not nearly enough – is enough to get you into the streets when George Bush is President and to quickly turn the page of the newspaper when it’s Barack Obama, something feels very wrong to me.

 I prefer what Woodrow Wilson called the “growlers and the kickers.” I’m drawn to those who hold their friends and allies to account, even when it’s uncomfortable to do so, those who hew to a clear set of principles, of rules that do not depending on which team is at bat. These are not just about civil liberties, though they are most often at risk; they’re also about the deployment of money in politics, the conduct of foreign policy, and how this society treats poor people. There is a progressive creed that knits together these things, and it often finds voice, for most of the last century, in the Democratic party, but it is not inherently a partisan one.

By the time of the 2012 elections, the unions, economic justice groups, organizing networks, civil rights, women’s and immigrant groups and others who had been pressing for more robust rhetoric and policies on economic inequality finally saw the President embrace their approach, most of the time, on the campaign trail. He was a champion, they mobilized for a ground game across the country and particularly in key states, and it worked. Chicago wonkery aside, the power of social movement determined the 2012 Presidential election. Whether it will determine the course of the next four years remains to be seen, but is largely up to us. We may have convinced the President, as our forebears did nearly eighty years ago. Now we have to go out and make him do it.