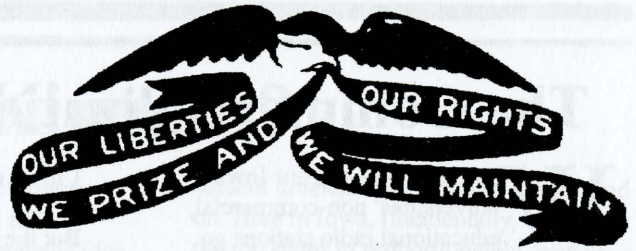


# THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



December 2010

*A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT*

## Move to the Center and Lose

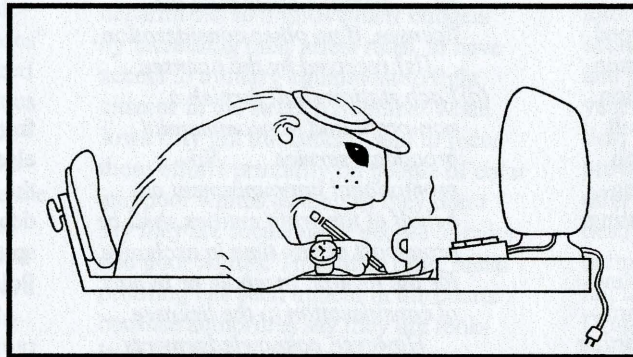
President Obama is the third Democratic President in a row to cause a disastrous electoral swing to the Republicans. Jimmy Carter's failure to manage the economy ushered in the disastrous Reagan revolution. Bill Clinton, in the course of getting himself re-elected, turned the country over to the Republicans at every single level of government, including ultimately the White House. It remains to be seen what harm the Republicans will do with their large new majority in the House, but it can't be good news for the people of America. It is essential that Democrats face up to the realities of what went wrong.

So far the Democratic response has been to make excuses for President Obama, which is not surprising, given the high hopes that he raised during his brilliant electoral campaign. Some argue now that he never had a chance given the Great Recession that hit as he entered the White House. Others argue that he should have moved to the center, since as every Democratic leader knows, the only way to win an election is to move to the center. Many progressives continue to believe that President Obama pursued an aggressive program of reform comparable to the New Deal but was thwarted by the filibuster, the Blue Dogs, and the blind partisan hatred of the Republican Party.

Finally, there is the argument that he was not thwarted at all, but a success with

a solid record of achievement. In this narrative, President Obama is unpopular with centrist voters only because of their ignorance and ingratitude, and unpopular with discouraged leftists only because they are perverse malcontents, never happy with any Democratic elected official under any circumstances.

Some of these arguments are more



plausible than others, but each of them is ultimately unpersuasive. President Obama was swept into office in the midst of a financial crisis that strengthened his political hand enormously, putting him in a position to argue that bold, sweeping action was necessary in order to deal with the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Furthermore, he was elected with a rare degree of political wind in his sails. Like Roosevelt in 1932, Johnson in 1964, and Reagan in 1980, he had a mandate to act decisively.

What has President Obama done with his historic opportunity to act, and his political mandate? His 2009 Nobel

Peace Prize speech outlines the principles upon which he has chosen to govern. In that talk, and elsewhere, he draws a very strong contrast between the obligations of a candidate for office, and the obligations of a person who holds the office of President. This distinction has governed not only his decisions about war and peace, but all of his major policy decisions.

President Obama has consistently governed, not with reference to the electoral coalition that put him into office, but with reference to small groups of expert advisors. On the war in Afghanistan, for instance, he deferred to the advice of military experts, in this case Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, who persuaded him that a "surge" would weaken the Taliban and force them to the negotiating table. Once President Obama decided that this was the right course, he pursued the policy relentlessly regardless of political unpopularity.

The Afghan War has been a model for Obama's decision-making on almost every major policy. Facing record unemployment, he chose as his policy advisors Tim Geithner and Lawrence Summers, who persuaded him that a modest Keynesian stimulus was the appropriate response, and that a larger response would be irresponsible. The President decided that they were right, and that Paul Krugman, Christina Romer, and

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# The Commercialization of Non-Commercial Radio

When, and why, did our Iowa universities' non-commercial, educational radio stations go commercial?

Listen online, become a member, or learn about underwriting opportunities at our Web site, [IowaPublicRadio.org](http://IowaPublicRadio.org).

I feel like a once-proud parent who discovers that her former star student has become a pregnant, alcoholic, drug dealer and college dropout.

*Support comes from Adamantine Spine Moving, a locally owned, socially responsible mover, offering full service, green moves down the block or across the country. Adamantine Spine Moving. Funny name, serious about doing good. On the Web at [SpineMoving.com](http://SpineMoving.com).*

"Proud parent?"

WSUI's programming has been a significant part of my life since growing up in Iowa City in the 1940s.

As an FCC commissioner, I helped promote the growth of educational, non-commercial public radio and television.

There's a photo on my office wall of me with President Lyndon Johnson the day he signed the law establishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, along with one of the pens he used.

I have hosted two seasons of "New Tech Times" for PBS stations, and provided NPR with commentaries, reporting from the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, and on the road from early RAGBRAI rides.

*Support comes from Iowa City Tire and Dodge Street Tire, where Mike Brown and Brian Sekafetz have been providing full auto service and repair for over 25 years. Featuring nitrogen for tires to help fuel economy and steel wheel weights instead of lead. Two locations on Kirkwood Avenue and Dodge Street.*

I have great admiration for, and a good many friends among, those who do the programming and get it on the air for public radio and television. My beef is certainly not with them.

I'm no enemy of public broadcasting.

But the licenses for Iowa Public Radio's stations were originally issued by the FCC to our State's universities in accord with Commission regulations still applicable today:

(a) *A noncommercial educational FM broadcast station will be licensed only to a nonprofit educational organization . . . for the advancement of an educational program. . . .*

(b) *Each station may transmit programs directed to specific schools . . . for use in connection with the regular courses . . . and may transmit educational, cultural, and entertainment programs to the public.*

(c) *[An educational] broadcast station may broadcast programs produced by . . . persons other than the licensee, if no other consideration . . . [is] received by the licensee. . . .*

(d) *Each station shall furnish a non-profit and noncommercial broadcast service. . . . No promotional announcement on behalf of for profit entities shall be broadcast at any time in exchange for the receipt, in whole or in part, of consideration to the licensee . . .*

*However, acknowledgements of contributions can be made. The scheduling of any announcements and acknowledgements may not interrupt regular programming. (emphasis in original; 47 CFR Sec. 73.503).*

*Support comes from Fin and Feather, locally owned and family operated, dedicated to helping others enjoy the great outdoors, offering a wide variety of gear for outdoor activities, including fishing, camping, hiking, winter sports and more. More information at [FinFeather.com](http://FinFeather.com).*

Whether the Regents have violated the letter of the law by turning over the universities' stations to "Iowa Public Radio," and financing from for-profit corporate advertising, I'll leave to others.

Seemingly, Congress and the FCC have neither noticed nor cared. But the Regents decision has clearly done violence to the spirit of the law creating America's non-commercial radio alternative.

Law aside, the universities are spending big bucks on technology, personnel and press releases to improve their image, encouraging "faculty engagement" with Iowans, and lobbying for a level of financial support from the Legislature more befitting "State" universities. Their failure to enlist in these endeavors the statewide radio network they already own is a bewildering oversight of monumental consequence. (For more see, <http://FromDC2Iowa.com/2008/11/public-radios-self-inflicted-wounds.html>.)

*Support comes from Quality Care, the nature care company; complete lawn and landscape maintenance for home, business and institutions, with over a century of combined gardening experience. Since 1980, quality work done with care.*

Of course, the money has to come from somewhere. But as I've written elsewhere, "Once 'revenue is needed' is the Polestar for a university's financial decisions its moral compass begins to spin as if it was located on the North Pole."

For our universities to sustain their radio stations financially by abandoning the stations' very reason for being is like the Viet Nam War rationale: "We had to burn down the village to save it."

Nothing offers more benefit-cost return on a higher education dollar than using educational radio stations for educational purposes. Properly used, the stations can multiply those Legislative and university dollars many fold. That funding, plus some simple acknowledgments of donors (without "enhanced" advertising), can provide all that's needed. ✂

— *Nicholas Johnson teaches at the University of Iowa College of Law and maintains [www.nicholasjohnson.org](http://www.nicholasjohnson.org).*

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# Where's the Kingpin?

If you read these four books, in any order, it will change you.

Nell Irvin Painter, in *The History of White People* (W.W. Norton, 2010), describes the attempt to “scientifically” establish the superiority of the white race in the 19th century. She points out that, prior to white American’s dependence on Black Africans for slave labor, there was not much need to discriminate among groups of people based on the color of their skin. Whoever happened to be dominant was considered superior, and whoever had the misfortune to be captured in war or sold to traders in human beings were slaves. Race was not much of an issue until white Europeans struggled to dominate Native Americans and keep control over Black African slaves. The gradual emergence of educated non-whites and freed Negroes was accompanied by a perceived need to define a color line. The emerging “sciences” of anthropology and sociology produced concepts of specific racial characteristics and theories such as Phrenology that attempted to prove white superiority. The theories were widely believed, despite the fact that most of the “scientists” turned out to be charlatans, proving mostly that people believe what they want to believe. White superiority became the underpinning of a system of racial dominance.

In *1877: America’s Year of Living Violently* (The New Press, 2010), Michael Bellesiles expands on the development of the myth of white superiority during the tumultuous ending of the Reconstruction era. Lynching, withdrawal of franchise for African Americans and poor whites, and the development of myriad “Jim Crow” laws provided a way for defeated White Southerners to maintain hegemony. It was a time of struggles between labor and capital, native-born Americans vs. immigrants and Northern industrialism vs. Southern agrarianism—a time of upheaval not unlike our own. Bellesiles explores the curious politics that allowed Americans to claim the rights of all people to be equal under the law while

overlooking the fact that such rights belonged only to white (and mostly richer) males. The widely accepted idea of white (male) superiority was used to support a system of racial dominance in both the North and the South. Somehow, poor whites and Blacks, who might have been able to join forces in these class struggles, were kept apart and at odds by the color line. Women? Overlooked.

Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press, 2009), shows how the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s dismantled the old system of white superiority and replaced it with political correctness. It’s not PC to talk about skin color. In fact, she argues that it has become impossible to argue racial bias even when it’s obvious. She traces the history of President Reagan’s War On Drugs and the subsequent developments that allowed police departments to improve their budgets by increasing their arrest rates, to have access to military equipment to fight citizens in the street (remember when Iowa City got the tanks?), and to focus these efforts primarily on people of color and poor whites as long as they don’t say they are focusing on people of color and poor whites. Time after time, racial profiling has been upheld in the courts because authorities say they are looking at behaviors rather than skin color. One third of Black men are imprisoned, mostly for drugs or drug-related offenses, even though it’s a fact that whites use drugs at a higher rate than non-whites and Black arrest rates are inflated largely because police mostly search for drug crimes in Black neighborhoods.

There has also been a sea-change in consequences to the individual felon. Gone are the days when former prisoners could say they “had paid their debt to society.” Now, the stigma never ends. More people are imprisoned because they plead to a felony without competent counsel and to avoid some greater penalty, only to find that they are permanently disenfranchised, barred from public housing, denied some forms of

student financial aid—the list goes on and on. Here in Iowa, (incidentally, one of the top states in proportionately over-incarcerating minorities) former felons can only have their right to vote restored by the Governor after payment of all fines and court costs. That’s difficult to accomplish when you don’t have a job because you can’t pass a criminal records check. (Does it sound sort of like a poll tax?)

And so we come down to congratulating ourselves on the fact that a person of color can become President, while we collectively overlook the fact that our society is systematically diminishing the rights of minorities and poor people to live free in America; to have access to education, healthcare and housing; and to enjoy the opportunities we like to believe America provides.

The War on Drugs claims to be destroying the culture of drug use, going after the so-called drug Kingpins, prosecuting those who sell drugs to minors, and making us all safer. After 30-odd years, people (more whites than minorities) are still using, drug crime is more prevalent than ever, we make very little effort to treat the uninsured folks who are destroyed by drug abuse, and now our cultural drug dependence is contributing to anarchy in Mexico. The War on Drugs has been about as successful as the DARE program.

This brings me to *Orange Is The New Black* (Random House, 2010), by Piper Kerman. She’s an educated, upper middle class white woman who became an inadvertent victim of the War on Drugs and spent time in a federal prison. And who did she meet there? Not the drug Kingpin. She met an elderly minority woman who became a felon because a relative (who apparently remained un-apprehended) was caught selling drugs out of her apartment. She met women, mostly minorities, whose drug habits caused them to commit credit card fraud and other financial crimes. She met women who worried about what was hap-

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# What is to be Done?

*You say you got a real solution  
Well you know...  
We'd all love to see the plan...  
(Lennon/McCartney)*

Well, wasn't that just a bunch o' fun on November 2? I worked hard, very hard, to prevent the right-wing crazies from coming to power, and I am sure that many of you did, too.

To generalize my experience with canvassing: the lower-income folks in the shabby apartment buildings of my precinct who even bothered to answer the door were less receptive to my standard Democratic message, even if listed as registered Democrats, than were the higher-income Democrats in their gorgeous old houses. The "poor" Democrats acted as if they'd heard that one before, and, oh, and by the way, there's also a bridge in Brooklyn... What does that say about the Democratic Party?

Many on the Left are saying that the Dems need a clearer message. It is true that the Dems, from the Obama White House on down, lack a narrative (The GOP has one that clearly resonates with a lot of Americans, as facile as it may be). Messaging and a clear and compelling narrative are essential to rebuilding the party.

But the Democrats have been so inept and bought off by corporate interests that they can not and will not be the left economic populists that they need to be, unless a movement arises, a "Tea Party" of the left, so to speak. We Prairie Progressive types must talk about the Common Good, for no one else is, and push the Democratic Party poo-bahs to really represent the People. But when every Senator is a millionaire, we have our work cut out for us.

When I was a young man, I wanted this country to be like social democratic Sweden, so I joined the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Some thirty years later, I would just be satisfied if the US was even at least more like Canada, with its single payer healthcare, stronger unions, and same-sex marriage all across

the country, unthreatened by voters who fear change (unlike here in Iowa).

But this is why this country needs groups like DSA, which would be a socialist "leaven" to any progressive group which catches on with the public and would be a sort of left-wing "Tea Party," a socialist "caucus" on the left of the Democratic Party which would help activists and concerned citizens to see the systemic injustices of our society and also the interconnectedness of our concerns, be they war and peace, the environment, human rights, labor rights, etc.

There are signs of hope:

A Democratic candidate for the Iowa legislature whose district is a fairly conservative western suburb of Des Moines reported getting a good response at the doors of voters, even Republicans, when he talked to them about the maldistribution of wealth in this country. Did he win? No. There were probably other factors in the minds of the Republican voters in that district which prevented them from voting for him.

But the fact that even conservative suburbanites are willing to listen to such a message of economic equality could mean that there is a sentiment about inequality out there, amorphous, that some political movement on the left should address (Whether the Democratic Party by itself is capable of representing those sentiments, is, of course, a good question. Hence the need for pressure...from us).

Remember the recent poll that said that about forty percent of those Americans polled thought that the health care "reform" should have gone FARTHER, presumably meaning they wanted a public option or even a single-payer system.

Remember the recent poll which indicated that when Americans were asked about various models of economic equality and inequality, a large percentage of them preferred the more equitable distribution of wealth (as in Sweden) as an ideal system, under which they would like to live.

Remember also the Pew poll from May which showed that, overall, 29

percent of respondents said they have a positive reaction to the word "socialism," while 37 percent reported that they had a negative reaction to the word "capitalism." Meanwhile, respondents younger than 30 were tied on their feelings about "socialism" and "capitalism," with identically positive reactions -- 43 percent -- to both words.

Is the American "working class" storming the barricades, attacking corporate power en masse? No. But perhaps these are glimmers of hope for the possibility of a renewed American Left. ✂

*— Kim Jones is a Des Moines  
political activist*

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pening to their children while they were imprisoned. And she met a cruel system that is arbitrary and makes no attempt to rehabilitate its victims. She met the New Jim Crow.

We all know someone who is poor or Black. We have to face the fact that Martin Luther King's dream of children being judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin is far from realized, no matter who is in the White House. The father of the child I mentor is now incarcerated in federal prison. In a few years, it could be the child himself. I know Black parents who lie awake nights hoping their college-age children are not being arrested. Jim Crow is alive and well, and it's time to drive a stake through his heart for good. ✂

*— Carol Thompson is a former  
Johnson County Supervisor  
who lives in Coralville*



Dec 1, 1955

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus

Dec 8, 1980

John Lennon killed in New York City

Dec 15, 1791

US Bill of Rights ratified

Dec 29, 1890

Wounded Knee massacre in South Dakota

Jan 12, 2000

Britain lifted ban on gays in military

Jan 16, 1991

US and allies began air war on Iraq

Feb 1, 1960

Sit-ins began at segregated lunch counters in Greensboro, NC

Feb 7, 1965

US started saturation bombing of North Vietnam

Feb 21, 1965

Malcolm X assassinated

Feb 25, 1870

Hiram Revels became first black US Senator

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Congressman David Obey were wrong to argue that an economic crisis comparable to the Great Depression requires a Keynesian stimulus of comparable size. President Obama was also persuaded by the same advisors that the entire resources of the Federal Government should be mobilized to protect the interests of investors in multi-national banks and insurance companies.

Geithner, Summers, and Obama confused the health of bank investors with the health of the entire global economy, arguing that if investors suffer for their irresponsible investments then the entire world economy would collapse. For the millions of Americans facing the loss of their homes through foreclosure, on the other hand, there was to be no bailout. Bank investors were to receive a bailout through Troubled Asset Relief Program

(TARP); mortgage lenders were given a green light to foreclose through the cruelly named Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP). In both cases, President Obama genuinely believes that the interests of investors must come before the interests of American working people, who are being taxed to fund TARP while facing foreclosure under HAMP.

On health care, Obama took his advice from White House budget director Peter Orszag, a technocratic corporate elitist who firmly believes that national health insurance is a terrible idea, and compulsory private health insurance a good idea. Obama's policy choices reveal his pro-public option rhetoric for what it was, the words of a candidate speaking to a constituency rather than a President who must make hard choices based on expert advice, even if those choices are unpopular.

The list of policies could go on--environmental protection, civil liberties, gay and lesbian rights, social security cuts, the attacks on public school teachers--but whatever the policy, what we have is a President who governs as a highly technocratic corporate elitist, in strong contrast to the exuberant tribune of the left that was the candidate. It is no wonder that the left was repeatedly described as discouraged during the election. The left, though, is not the cause of Obama's failure. All of his major policies are centrist policies when compared to the achievements of Democrats under the New Deal and Great society. However, contradicting the universal conventional wisdom of Democratic Party electoral politicians, centrist voters do not like centrist policies designed by centrist policy wonks. They swung to the Republicans precisely because of the administration's centrist policies.

Far from suffering a series of stinging legislative defeats, President Obama has succeeded in getting everything he wanted through congress (with the exception of cap and trade energy legislation). With the expert help of Majority Leader

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Harry Reid, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, he pushed through TARP, HAMP, the Geithner economic stimulus, Obama's health care plan, and funding for the unpopular Afghan War. These policies have two things in common. In terms of public policy, they are either failures or failures waiting to happen. Furthermore, they are recognized as failures by large numbers of voters, including discouraged Democrats on the left, financially suffering working class voters in the center, or gleeful Republican partisans on the right.

In every single case, the policies that progressives on the left were urging on President Obama were not only more popular with the voters than the President's, but more likely to succeed in achieving the goals of an electoral majority. If he had taken Paul Krugman's advice on the stimulus, we would not

be stuck with a 10% unemployment rate going into an election. If he had taken Senator Russ Feingold's advice on TARP, federal funds would be used to head off foreclosures instead of maintaining the incomes of bank and insurance investors. If he had taken the advice of the 100 members of the Progressive Congressional Caucus, we would not be mired in a brutal, unwinnable, and politically unsustainable war in Afghanistan.

If he had listened to the advocates of a robust public option for health care, Democrats wouldn't be going down to defeat all over the nation for voting for a unpopular mandate for private corporate health insurance. President Obama has taken the discredited private health care system documented in Michael Moore's "Sicko." and made it compulsory. It is no wonder that centrist voters have no confidence in Obama's health care plan, and turned to the Republicans.

So, what is to be done? Will Democrats continue to make excuses? Or will Democrats begin to rebuild the party from the bottom up with a campaign for Healthcare for All, Troops Out of Afghanistan, and Save Social Security? The Iowa caucuses are a little more than a year away, and provide us with an excellent opportunity to Keep Hope Alive. ✂

— Jeff Cox

## **THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE**

Box 1945

Iowa City, IA 52244



**“The essential characteristic of a nation is that all its individuals must have many things in common, and must have forgotten many things as well.”**

— Ernest Renan, 19th century  
*French historian*