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Harold Meyerson's Misguided Lament
By Lawrence J. Haas

Although Washington is poised to enact what he calls “a genuinely epochal expansion of health care,” *Washington Post* columnist Harold Meyerson laments the absence of a vibrant progressive movement that could fuel the enactment of a broad-scale public agenda to rival FDR’s New Deal or LBJ’s Great Society.

“[W]ithout left pressure from below,” Meyerson writes with resignation in today’s *Post*, “the Obama presidency will end up looking more like Carter’s or Clinton’s than Roosevelt’s or Johnson’s.”

A year into all-Democratic government, with an inspiring president and strong majorities in Congress, the left is frustrated and demoralized. As Democrats struggle to unify their liberal and conservative wings on health care and as other major legislation languishes, progressives complain of lost opportunities.

Unwittingly, though, it is Meyerson who provides the appropriate response to leftist complaints – and the reason why progressives should celebrate the pending health care measure instead of bemoaning its shortcomings and chasing their pipe dream of a far greater federal role in health care and other sectors.

At the end of his fourth paragraph, he writes with anguish about today’s political environment: “The ‘30s or the ‘60s it ain’t.” That’s right; “it ain’t” those earlier periods. And therein lies the issue.

Elected officials do not act in a vacuum. Their achievements and setbacks reflect the times in which they work. We live in 2010, a year with little resemblance to the heydays of federal activism.

So, today’s progressives should push their agenda as hard as they can, seeking to build support among average Americans, among opinion leaders and among policymakers in the White House and Congress. But they should do so with their eyes open, with no illusions about the obstacles in their path.

Here are the most obvious ones:

Economic: Yes, it’s been a frightful ride of late. The deep recession and financial crisis raised fears of another Great Depression. But unemployment has risen to 10 percent, not the 25 percent of the 1930s. And recovery, however uncertain, has begun.

America is not the wasteland of FDR’s day. So, we should not be surprised by the absence of, in Meyerson’s words, “mass organizations of the unemployed; farmers’ groups that blocked

foreclosures, sometimes at gunpoint; general strikes that shut down entire cities, and militant new unions that seized factories.”

Governmental: FDR greatly expanded a government that, when he took office, was quite small, measuring just 8 percent of gross domestic product. Obama inherited one that measured 21 percent of GDP and is expected to average at least 23 percent over the next decade – which is about as big as government has gotten since the end of World War II. Americans, whose traditional “rugged individualism” dates back to colonial days, display little obvious inclination to expand it further.

LBJ, meanwhile, inherited a booming economy and a budget deficit that measured less than 1 percent of GDP. The economy generated the revenues to support a growing government, and a small deficit gave LBJ the additional leeway to expand it. Obama inherited a very shaky economy, sinking revenues and a deficit that has hit record levels and will remain dangerously high for the foreseeable future.

Attitudinal: LBJ presided during a period of great optimism, an enthusiasm about what government could achieve. When asked in the mid-1960s whether government does the right thing most or all the time, about three-quarters of Americans said yes. The Great Society came to a receptive populace.

Obama and today’s Congress have no such luxury. Asked the same question last fall, just 23 percent said yes. Elected officials who seek to expand government’s role in addressing unmet needs face a highly dubious public.

Political: Yes, Obama and the Democrats rule Washington. But they have less power than you might think.

Obama has fewer political levers than FDR and LBJ had to force recalcitrant Democratic lawmakers to support his agenda. Meanwhile, the dramatically expanded use of filibusters by the Senate’s minority party in recent years forces the majority to gather 60 votes to shut off debate and pass almost any legislation. With just 60 members in their caucus, Senate Democrats have not a vote to spare.

So, today’s progressives should understand the context in which they work, the opinion they must mold, the pressures on elected officials whose votes they seek. If “the ‘30s or the ‘60s it ain’t,” they should adjust their aspirations accordingly.

In essence, they should remember the words of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”