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Old, True and Radical

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By E. J. Dionne Jr.
Thursday, January 22, 2009; A17

President Obama intends to use conservative values for progressive ends. He will cast extreme individualism as an infantile approach to politics that must be supplanted by a more adult sense of personal and collective responsibility. He will honor government's role in our democracy and not degrade it. He wants America to lead the world, but as much by example as by force.

And in trying to do all these things, he will confuse a lot of people.

One of the wondrous aspects of Obama's inaugural address is the extent to which those on the left and those on the right both claimed our new president as their own.

Many conservatives were eager to argue that Obama is destined to disappoint his friends on the left because the president who now wields power will be far more careful than the candidate who deployed rhetoric so ecstatically.

Their evidence included Obama's stout defense of old-fashioned values -- "honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism."

"These things are old," Obama declared. "These things are true." It was one of the most powerfully conservative sentiments ever to pass any president's lips.

But note the nature of that list: "Tolerance and curiosity," in particular, are values notoriously associated with the adventurous, with those who seek out the new and the novel. "Hard work" and "fair play" have long been invoked by egalitarians on behalf of the salt of the earth.

And Obama told us, straight out, the ends toward which he was conscripting the old virtues: "They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history."

That emphasis on progress pervaded what was in many ways a radical speech. Obama clearly broke with the conservative past, more recently associated with George W. Bush and more distantly with Ronald Reagan.

As he has done so often, Obama pronounced debates about the size of government irrelevant. What matters is "whether it works." Quietly but purposefully, he was overturning the Reagan revolution.

He announced the repeal of the Bush-Cheney approach to domestic security with these words: "We reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." And while celebrating America's power, he broke with the past again by saying "that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please."

Finally, American presidents rarely ask explicitly whether "the market is a force for good or ill." Obama acknowledged its "power to generate wealth and expand freedom" but warned that without regulation, the market could "spin out of control." He also counseled against rampant inequality, insisting that "the nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous."

What makes Obama a radical, albeit of the careful and deliberate variety, is his effort to reverse the two kinds of extreme individualism that have permeated the American political soul for perhaps four decades.

He sets his face against the expressive individualism of the 1960s that defined "do your own thing" as the highest form of freedom. On the contrary, Obama speaks of responsibilities, of doing things for others, even of that classic bourgeois obligation, "a parent's willingness to nurture a child."

But he also rejects the economic individualism that took root in the 1980s. He specifically listed "the greed and irresponsibility on the part of some" as a cause for our economic distress. He discounted "the pleasures of riches and fame." He spoke of Americans not as consumers but as citizens. His references to freedom were glowing, but he emphasized our "duties" to preserve it far more than the rights it conveys.

This communitarian vision fits poorly with "the stale political arguments" between liberals and conservatives that Obama condemned, because they are really arguments between these two varieties of individualism. Their quarrel has been fierce not only because of how the two sides differ but also because they share so many assumptions. Family feuds and civil wars can be especially brutal.

For now, each side in the old debate can enlist aspects of Obama's rhetoric in their polemics against the other. But in associating our recent past with "childish things," in insisting that greatness is "never a given" and always "must be earned," Obama is challenging the very basis of their conflict.

It is a worthy fight. It will also be a hard fight to win because rights are so much easier to talk about than duties, and freedom's gifts are always more prized than its obligations.

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