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Bending the Trajectory Left

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By Eugene Robinson
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Sometimes, it turns out, politicians can be taken at their word. More than a year ago, while campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination, Barack Obama told the Reno Gazette-Journal that "Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not, and in a way that Bill Clinton did not." Reagan, he said, "put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it." The implication was that Obama, if elected, would be no less ambitious.

But well before then, and without reference to the Gipper, Obama was aiming higher than most of us could have imagined. In an interview two years ago, I remember being struck by his certainty that this was a moment that required audacity -- one of his favorite words -- and that he, uniquely, could supply it. Obama is determined to shift our whole political spectrum to the left, redraw the boundaries of our politics and expand the realm of the possible. He senses that the nation is already moving in his direction, well ahead of its political leadership.

So far, Republicans seem oblivious to what's happening. After Obama gave his prime-time speech to Congress last week, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal began his response with a patronizing, cringe-worthy riff in which he congratulated the president on being the first African American to hold the office -- as if we hadn't noticed. Jindal went on to lay out a program that would have sounded innovative if the year were 1978: lower taxes, smaller government, wave the flag, etc. Two days later, former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee told the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, "I'm still convinced America wants to like us" -- as if he were having a private Sally Field moment.

Obama's speech to Congress was merely to set the stage. The week's main event -- and the most important act thus far of his already eventful presidency -- was the \$3.6 trillion budget he proposed Thursday. The sums of money involved are so huge that commentators used up a year's worth of adjectives: unprecedented, staggering, breathtaking. Ultimately, though, the numbers will mean less to history than the way Obama's budget reorders the nation's priorities and changes the relationship between Americans and their government.

In halting some of the largess that the Reagan, Bush and Bush administrations gave to the wealthiest Americans, Obama reintroduces the principle of progressive taxation -- the idea that the rich, who can afford it, should pay a greater percentage of their income in taxes so that the government can do more to improve the lives of those who are not rich. This is what John McCain was warning against, I think, when he attacked Obama during the campaign as a "[redistributionist](#)." It is also why the Rush Limbaugh wing of the Republican Party immediately began sputtering about rampant socialism.

Does anyone else recall that one early supporter of this radical redistributionist idea was Teddy Roosevelt, McCain's supposed hero? I wonder whether the Rough Rider's assessment of today's

Republicans -- staunch defenders of those who make more than \$250,000 a year and who tell everyone else to buzz off -- would be printable in a family newspaper.

Obama [proposes](#) the kind of budgetary support that Kathleen Sebelius, [nominated yesterday](#) as health and human services secretary, must surely love: a \$634 billion "down payment" over the next 10 years on health-care reform, with the aim of moving toward universal coverage. The important thing here isn't the big number but the fact that he is expanding the government's responsibility for citizens' health beyond the old, the young and the poor. Conservative commentators, of course, are outraged that Obama would go so far as to offer a government-supported plan that Americans are likely to *prefer* to the hodgepodge of private insurance coverage they now have to navigate. Has the president no shame?

By including education among his top three priorities, Obama expands on a commitment to make improving the schools a federal matter, not just a local issue. This bit of intrusive social engineering was actually initiated by George W. Bush, of all people. On energy policy, by contrast, Obama reverses Bush administration policy, which was all about oil. But the bigger headline on the energy front is his acceptance of our nation's responsibility to play its part in slowing or reversing global climate change.

There's a reason Obama's approval ratings remain so high. He senses that Americans yearn for greater fairness and accountability, especially after the excesses that threaten to wreck our economy and destroy so many dreams. He knows that American individualism is tempered by the need to feel community in the nation and the world.

He also knows that windows of opportunity for fundamental change remain open just briefly before slamming shut. His [declaration](#) Saturday that "I didn't come here to do the same thing we've been doing or to take small steps forward" may be the understatement of the year.

The writer will answer questions at 1 p.m. today at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. His e-mail address is eugenerobinson@washpost.com.

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