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Without a movement, progressives can't aid Obama's agenda

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Every Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson -- Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama -- has raised the hope that he would bring with him a new era of progressive reform. The legislative torrents of the New Deal and the Great Society -- a few brief years in the 1930s and the '60s that fundamentally reshaped the nation's economy and society -- are the templates that fire the liberal imagination.

Two great liberal historians -- the Arthur Schlesingers, senior and junior -- posited a cyclical theory of American political history, in which periods of progressive advance alternate with times of conservative reaction once every generation. And even when liberals have discounted this theory as too mechanistic, their hearts, if not their heads, have responded to the election of every Democratic president since LBJ -- each of whom entered office with a substantial Democratic majority in Congress -- with the hope that this time would be different, that a new burst of progressivism was at hand.

And each time, they have been disappointed. While Carter and Clinton could both point to progressive legislation enacted during their terms, many of their most significant achievements -- the deregulation of transportation, the consolidation and deregulation of finance, the abolition of welfare, the enactment of trade agreements with low-wage nations -- actually eroded the economic security that Franklin Roosevelt, Johnson and their congressional contemporaries had worked so hard to create.

Unlike Carter and Clinton, however, Obama took office at a moment when the intellectual force of laissez-faire economics was plainly spent. His reform agenda was nothing if not ambitious: [health care](#) for all, financial re-regulation, [climate-change legislation](#) and a [Keynesian stimulus](#) to revive a wounded economy. But as the [first anniversary](#) of his inauguration approaches, it's clear that despite the impending enactment of a genuinely epochal expansion of health care, a progressive era has not burst forth. Major legislation languishes or is watered down. Right-wing pseudo-populism stalks the land. The liberal base is demobilized. The '30s or the '60s it ain't.

The reasons for the stillbirth of the new progressive era are many and much discussed. There's the death of liberal and moderate Republicanism, the reluctance of some administration officials and congressional Democrats to challenge the banks, the ever-larger role of money in politics (see reluctance to challenge banks, above), the weakness of labor, the dysfunctionality of the Senate -- the list is long and familiar. But if there's a common feature to the political landscapes in which Carter, Clinton and now Obama were compelled to work, it's the absence of a vibrant left movement.

The America over which FDR presided was home to 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. Both communists and democratic socialists were enough of a presence in America to help shape these movements, generating so much street heat in so many congressional districts that Democrats were compelled to look leftward as they crafted their response to the Depression. During Lyndon Johnson's presidency, the civil rights movement, among whose leaders were such avowed democratic socialists as Martin Luther King Jr. and James Farmer, provided a new generation of street heat that both compelled and abetted the president and Congress to enact fundamental reforms.

In America, major liberal reforms require not just liberal governments, but autonomous, vibrant mass movements, usually led by activists who stand at or beyond liberalism's left fringe. No such movements were around during Carter and Clinton's presidencies. For his part, Obama won election with something new under the political sun: a list of 13 million people who had supported his campaign. But he has consistently declined to activate his activists to help him win legislative battles by pressuring, for instance, those Democratic members of Congress who have weakened or blocked his major bills. To be sure, loosing the activists would have brought problems of its own: Unlike Roosevelt or Johnson, who benefited from autonomous movements, Obama would be answerable for every loopy tactic his followers employed. But in the absence of both a free-standing movement and a legion of loyalists, Congress isn't feeling much pressure from the left to move Obama's agenda.

The construction of social movements is always a bit of a mystery. The right has had great success over the past year in building a movement that isn't really for anything but that has channeled anew the fears and loathings of millions of Americans. If Glenn Beck can help do that for the right, can't, say, Rachel Maddow and Keith Olbermann help build a movement against the banks or for jobs programs? It might well be too little too late, but without left pressure from below, the Obama presidency will end up looking more like Carter's or Clinton's than Roosevelt's or Johnson's.