

Obama Is Stuck in the Mud, and So Are We

It's up to Us to Boost Him and Ourselves Up into Clean Air

by Doug Dowd

Obama's presidential victory last year was a much-welcomed surprise. It was seen by many as both a significant lessening of our long-standing racism and a much-needed reversal of the policies of his recent predecessors. However, before long, and increasingly with each passing month, it has become apparent that without pressures from the likes of "us" on both the White House and Congress, Obama functions with the skills of the smooth politician. Without such skills, he would not have been elected to the Senate, let alone to the White House.

Obama's smooth politics are the opposite of what is needed. They have paved the way for the further deepening of corruption in recent decades. Now what we need is a politics "of, by, and for the people." It can only be brought about by those who refuse to put up with politics of "the powers that be" since the 1970s. Our nation has only rarely come even close to standards of decency and democracy. As will be discussed below, some steps in that direction took hold in the 1930s through the 1960s. However, and gaining force since the Reagan years, we have slid back down into the mud of an always more reckless and callous capitalism.

Will Obama take our country up and out of that? He has the potentiality for doing that, but the first months of his presidency have been marked mostly by a continuation of the status quo rather than toward a decent, safe, and

sane society. Given our bought and paid for Congress, Obama cannot and will not by himself do what is desirable and needed; he must have pressure and backing from “us the people.” Up to now, however, all too many of us we have confined ourselves to sitting on the sidelines and grunting.

Howard Zinn has stated the problem succinctly: “Obama was and is a politician. Our job is not to give him a blank check or simply be cheerleaders....Obama is not yet free of our powerful heritage of nationalism and capitalism; nor can [he begin to] free himself from that heritage without pressure and strong support from us.” (*Progressive Magazine*, May 2009)

That was in May. In August Prof. Paul Krugman (Nobel prize in economics, *New York Times* columnist) and a supporter of Obama expressed his increasing worries:

On the issue of health care itself, the inspiring figure progressives thought they had elected comes across, far too often, as a dry technocrat....He seem unable to settle on a simple, pithy formula; his speeches and op-eds still read as though they were written by a committee....It’s hard to avoid the sense that Mr. Obama has wasted months trying to appease people who can’t be appeased and take every concession as a sign that he can be rolled. (“Obama’s Trust Problem,” *NYT*, 2009-08-21)

Just a few days later when the time had come to appoint the head of the Federal Reserve System — the key executive in the financial crisis — he *re-appointed* Bernanke. This was a serious commitment to maintaining the status quo of the financially powerful:

1. Bernanke's ongoing appointment was given him by Bush II.
2. Bernanke was a student and fan of his fool predecessor Greenspan, the right-winger who facilitated the financial crisis.
3. Just before the financial bust began, Bernanke was allowing the Fed to give "hundreds of billions to banks and businesses, slashing interest rates, and having the Fed almost single-handedly finance the mortgage market that went bust." (Edward L. Andrews, "Bernanke's Next Tasks Will be Undoing his First," *NYT*, 2009-08-26).

It's up to us to turn Obama around; now. The "us" to whom this is directed refers to a mixed group made up of moderate centrists, diverse liberals, and quarrelsome radicals. We often look upon each other with scorn; even as enemies. But we are all reasonably decent and most of us are more concerned and thus better informed than the average. Beginning now and for the indefinite future, we must ignore our differences and live up to our common humanity. Otherwise, we cannot prevent our society from lurching into waters even more poisoned than now. (If you wish to see where the writer fits into the "mixed group" see Note 1.)

Much of what we must do first is to undo the main elements of the disgusting and worrisome present examined directly below. After that I will propose ways in which today's ugly realities can and should be dealt with by us and Obama. Now to the ongoing wrongs and dangers besetting what we like to think of, but is not "our" country.

America the Not-So-Beautiful

History cannot repeat itself in all details, but it does produce similarities. Relevant here are those between Britain, the main power of the late 19th century, and the USA, dominant in the 20th century. There are similarities between them, but more relevant are the differences. Britain's power derived from its having led the world in industrialization and, connectedly, in foreign trade and imperialism. From the 1850s on, it had always rising exports and imports, the latter paid for mostly by exports and the interest on the loans provided to its customers. Britain was history's greatest lender.

Toward the end of the 19th century, its successes began to backfire. Britain's "customers" increasingly became its competitors for both markets and territories. World War I became inevitable, and all the rich countries but the USA emerged from it with failing economies, discontent and disillusionment, and either revolutionary or counter-revolutionary movements. Those rough movements were less so for Britain, and quite the opposite for the USA. Except for its own dead and wounded and their families, World War I was manna from heaven for the USA. (See Note 2 for references.)

Until the 1930s depression, the USA was sailing along, at least for some. Then the depression hit — disaster for most. Beginning about 1934, reformist politics at least partially offset the depression and also moved us toward socio-economic decency and well-being. As will be seen, that required and received a substantial participation by the "us" of those years; it

was provided through the 1960s. Since then, most political activity has come from the always more right-leaning GOP.

World War I was a blessing for the USA. But (again, setting aside war casualties) this “war-to-end-all-wars” was small change, peanuts, *bupkis* — compared with what accompanied and followed World War II. And I mean both economically and politically. Unemployment ended, wages and benefits went up and discrimination against women and blacks for decent jobs went down, and the policies of the New Deal were strengthened.

However, by the 1950s, the same U.S. policies that had brought about recovery to the bombed out and totally disrupted economies of Europe and Japan began to create problems for the USA. By the 1960s the “foreigners” were becoming always stronger competitors of the USA in world markets; by the 1980s more than that. The USA had not only become bewitched by consumerism and its frenetic borrowing but as a nation had become history’s biggest importer and borrower. Meanwhile, Germany and Japan had become leaders in production and innovation. (Now China is moving to the throne, but that’s another story.)

Thus it was that looming over the horizon from the late 1960s was an accelerating loss of good jobs, wages and benefits and always weaker unions. (Item: GM’s 300,000 workers of the 1960s were down to under 70,000 by 2007, and GM was nearing bankruptcy.) But the US descent from industry meant more than that. As we became the biggest borrower ever, our economy and politics ceased to be dominated by industry, as the society came to be dominated by finance, and finance by speculation. (See Note 2.)

When Obama became President, he inherited a nation caught up in a financial and associated economic crisis at home and, as will also be discussed later, a basketful of serious problems abroad. If he belongs to any of the political classifications noted above, it be would that of the “centrists,” with a leaning toward liberal. That said, it seems that before proceeding further, it is relevant here to take a short look at the presidency of Roosevelt (FDR) and his politics during the 1930s depression. (See Note 2.)

In 1932 FDR went from being Governor of New York to the White House. When won the presidency in 1932, he was a conservative-leaning centrist. But from 1935 until his death in 1945 he became an increasingly strong liberal. His transformation was brought about by an increasingly politicized public, led by workers for fighting for new and against corrupted unions. Before long, state legislatures, Congress, and the White House were being pushed to meet voters’ demands that the government meet the needs of the people rather than those of business. Obama can and must be similarly transformed — by “us.”

In the closing section, more will be said concerning the FDR years and us. Now we note only that as was true for FDR in the early 1930s, Obama is confronted with a flattened economy, a nation dominated by speculation and big business, worsening unemployment, weak trade unions, and an always more unequal distribution of income. Then as now, when FDR took office, the U.S. economy’s title should have been *Profit Makers, Inc.*, with a compliant Congress bowing obsequiously to their wishes (and their money).

In the early 1930s health care was not yet a political issue in the USA. Neither was militarism. Since the 1970s, both they and the other serious political concerns have increasingly been dominated by a number of quite different, but mutually supporting, groups. These disparate but functionally united coteries find that working together suits their aims. They are the militarists, racists and — most vitally — big business, with its own “groups” from finance, health care, industry and agriculture, and the military-industrial complex. In the years when they increasingly tightened up their teamwork, all too many *of us* have relaxed, become paralyzed, and/or wasted our energies denouncing each other.

A socio-political application of Occam’s Razor would indicate that it is quite unlikely that there has been a conspiracy of the rightists: Simple cooperation explains everything. More elaborate explanations are unnecessary. The rightists agree that the USA must continue to move in the post-1970s directions.

But we are not of the right. It is *we* who need to, in effect, “conspire”; despite that we may have differing long-term aims. Today our ongoing political efforts must both increase and work in harmony. We are in a crisis: We must become a much better society, or we will continue on the disgusting and dangerous path of Bush, et al. We must convince Obama that if he wants to go down in history as a great president and be re-elected he must listen to us — not them.

A cautionary note: The mention of racism requires a special and ominous warning, one not immediately obvious in the joyous aftermath of the

presidential outcome. Although Obama's election in itself signified a diminution of U.S. racism, it also fed and revived the energies of impassioned racists. Not only have racist groups increasingly and roughly interfered in public meetings and rallies, but already, and more than once, some in the audiences been found carrying guns. And there are some macho states where guns can be worn legally in public. Overall, there is an increasing undercurrent of neofascist thuggery afoot in the land. (The ruling elites decree what is normal and acceptable — that is, what are the ruling ideas of the time. If this tiny minority agrees to publicly endorse the teabagging brownshirts, we may be in for real trouble. All of us and, of course, "us" especially.)

This essay, to repeat, is directed to those whose politics range from moderate to liberal to left. Many of us are spending too much time being disgruntled with Obama's "dealing with the enemy" and too little time in taking political steps to facilitate what is needed at home and abroad. Obama is first and foremost an astute politician, a decent centrist who, *as a politician* is going to function in ways that insure his political success (as that is normally defined). We must become seriously and continuously involved in political efforts sufficiently to convince him that he can have no such success unless he works to meet the needs of the people. We must become, once more, the majority that issued out of the 1930s. We can win. Polls continually show majority support for a safer and more decent economy and society and peace.

What follows will focus first on the ongoing major obstacles to meeting those ends; but which up to now have been being dealt by Obama

inadequately, if at all: (1) the economic crisis, (2) the health care scandal; and (3) our wars. They will be summary discussions, on the assumption that astute readers can fill in the gaps. What follows will be more critical than positive, but the closing section will argue that if we get together to work toward a better world seriously and continually we can achieve one. It's up to us.

What We Face Today

1. The Economic Crisis

First of all, let's acknowledge that yes, it is a crisis. This is not just a downturn, a glitch, a bump in the road. It's a crisis — which is to say something is seriously wrong. The roots were planted when, beginning in the 1980s — one by one — the reforms from the 1930s on were abolished. The finale occurred under Clinton, when *all* the remaining rules against dangerous finance were abolished.

It is worrisome to have to note that Obama's Economic Advisor Lawrence Summers is one of the perps. He was Clinton's Treasury Secretary. Nor does it help to note that although the main response to the collapse of 2008 was designed by Bush's Treasury Secretary Paulson (who had earlier headed up one of the major financial giants). Nor is it reassuring that after the election the pattern of gifts to the financial schemers and crooks was continued and made even more generous by Obama's Treasury Secretary. That would be Timothy Franz Geithner, pronounced "GATE-ner," as in "open the gates." Geithner was a pal of Wall Street when he was head of the NY Federal

Reserve Bank. And he got his start in business at Kissinger & Associates.
(Yes, *that* Kissinger.)

Although the collapse did certainly require rescue attempts for the financial world; but the efforts need not have been so friendly and ultimately so profitable as they were (and continue to be) for the giants of Wall Street. It is highly unlikely that either Summers or Geithner will take steps that would offend their old pals. Brings back memories. During the 1929 crash Hoover was President; Bush was in 2008. In both cases, the response from the White House was made to suit the strategies of the financiers who had created the problem. FDR did it in 1932–1933, Obama in 2008–2009. But! After two or three years of catering to the financial giants, FDR — pushed by an always stronger popular movement — began to meet the demands of Mr. and Mrs. America instead of the Messrs. Moneybags. We must do the same for Obama.

As I write in the early Fall of 2009, we read in the news that “recovery is on the way.” Anyone who is old enough to have been reading the news between 1929 and 1934 will remember years of hearing that “prosperity is just around the corner.” In fact, and even though many needed and desirable changes were made from 1935 on, the unemployment rate after 1929 never went below 10 percent until 1942, a year after Pearl Harbor.

Item: The official unemployment rate then and now does not count those millions who earlier had good jobs, but are now working part-time or at a lousy job or have given up looking.. Counting those today — as is

reasonable, logical, and as is done in Western Europe — would make the rate 17–18 percent.

I hasten to add that today's economic crisis has been *globalized* in greater degree than those of the past. Unemployment, with is worse elsewhere than here (with China the main exception) is only one issue. There are other problems associated with the economic crisis, those concerning for example, health care, housing, education, and social security.

Headline “Millions Face Shrinking Social Security Payments” (*IHT*, 2009-08-24)

Article Hed “Among 38 countries, the USA is ranked down at eighteenth in secondary education.” (Article by Albert Hunt, same paper, same day)

2. The Health Care Scandal

Such matters go from bad to worse, especially in the USA, because we have always been delinquent in health care, education, housing and care for the poor and the old, even in our “good times.” Now, long-standing inadequacies have become tragedies. Here we will pay close attention only to health care. The USA has long been disgustingly inadequate as regards both its availability and its high costs. The reason for those inadequacies is the always greater “commodification” of health care, as the health industry's successes in corrupting Congress multiply.

(2) *The health care scandal.* “Scandal” because of the endless dirty deals between the industry and Congress concerning health care legislation, the disgracefully high costs to us and high profits for the industry and, not least, the criminally harmful consequences for most of the people of this country. Criminally? Consider this: In a long article in [***truthdig.com***](http://truthdig.com) Chris Hedges begins with this quote from *Harper’s Index, Sept. 2009*: “The premiums paid to private health insurance companies have gone up over 80% and the profits of their top 10 have more than quadrupled.”

And, he goes on:

The U.S. spends twice as much as other industrialized nations on health care — \$7,129 per capita — although almost 50 million Americans remain without coverage and millions more are inadequately covered, with 14,000 a day losing their coverage. Private insurance bureaucracy and paperwork consume 31% of every health care dollar....The 5 largest private health care insurers spent more than \$6 million in the first three months of 2009; Pfizer alone, the world’s biggest itself spent more than \$9 million in the last quarter of 2008. Thirty members of Congress with key committee memberships, have major investments in health care companies totaling between \$11 and \$27 million. Obama’s director of health care — who will not even discuss single-payer as an option — has served on the boards of several health care corporations.

The health care system of the USA inadequacies for almost all of our people (except the rich or lucky, war vets, those in Congress and other governmental favorites) or those (like university profs or workers in strong unions, for a while). The average person is condemned to unnecessarily difficult and/or shortened lives. We live and die within a healthcare system

dominated by the bottomless greed of our private hospital system, monopolistic drugs producers and health insurance companies and, finally and most disgustingly, the easy cooperation of all too many doctors.

Compared with that of *all* other rich countries (see above) and some poorer ones, our reality can be seen as more criminal than the theft of a purse or a bank, or the beating up of someone. The bases for those condemnations have been made clear in many studies over the years (see Note 3); now it is time overdue for that knowledge to be absorbed and acted upon by us, to see to it that our government begin to catch up with the rest of the world.

It's fair to say that Obama would agree with that, to believe that he would be pleased to see the USA have the health care system of, say, France, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Iceland... It is most likely, however, that when Congress passes health care legislation some time this year, our system will be improved minimally at best on the edges, while becoming considerably *worse* in its needed functions and their availability. Just as when Clinton gave it a try and failed in the 1990s.

As matters now stand, there are three probabilities: First, an illusion will have been artfully created that progress toward a better system has been made. Second, our health care will worsen and become more costly, rather than less. Third, as happened when the health care companies knocked the Clintons for a loop in the 1990s, the possibility of progress — if ever — will be postponed indefinitely by a de facto majority in Congress which got into or stayed in Congress with direct and/or indirect bribes and/or threats.

The U.S. health care system, to put it bluntly, has been criminalized — in a gentlemanly way, of course.

That past and present corruption has two overlapping processes: lobbyists and campaign financing. (See Phillips, Note 2.) Corruption comes from many sources. In recent years three sources have taken the lead: (1) Wall Street, (2) the military-industrial complex, and (3) the healthcare industry. All three, in their different ways, have been and remain seriously harmful.

Here we turn to health care, or, more to the point, to the lack of it. I begin with an excerpt from a fine essay by Doctor A. Relman (Harvard Professor of Medicine): “Health care is about twice as expensive per capita as in other developed countries (nearly 17% of GDP in 2008), and its costs are rising faster... Nearly 50 million are uninsured and the number is rising.” (*NYRB*, 7-2-2009)

Robert Reich (Clinton’s Secretary of Labor), explains why:

When you’ve got so many lobbyists and PR professionals and lawyers swarming over the Hill for these corporations they also can come together against the public, and the public’s voice can easily be downed out... Even Democrats are reluctant to take on the big power players... The problem is not just the pharmaceuticals and the American Medical Association, Blue Cross/Blue Shield and so on; the whole system is now dominated by for-profit corporations. (See Moyers, Note 3.)

In addition, it is sad but not surprising to learn that “the US ranks high on the list of infant mortality, right up there with the poorest countries. The

American healthcare system, despite its highest expenditures, is badly in need of an overhaul.” (*IHT*, Editorial, 10-22-2008)

Then there are the bitter crimes of prescription drugs: Every year *Fortune* magazine proudly lists the profits of the 500 biggest U.S. companies. In recent years they have shown that “Big Pharma” (the nine biggest drug companies) have taken in profits *four times* those of the rest of the 500 giant companies — and that their CEOs have averaged incomes of at least \$20 million a year, not counting stock options.

That’s health “care” in the USA. Elsewhere things are different — very different. I have taught off and on in Italy since 1966. I have been ill now and then, hospitalized more than once, and have had many prescriptions to fill. In Italy I am only a “resident” not a citizen. I have had a family doctor and others when needed, but have never had to pay them, or hospitals, for exams, or drugs. It’s about time for a “catch-up,” Uncle Sam.

So, what is the outlook for us? Can or will Obama bring about improved health care for us? As things go now, the answer is *no*. He has made some nice speeches, and appears to understand that he’s up against a congressional brick wall of all the GOP and too many of the Demos — even for the skimpy “public option.” As each day passes it becomes clearer that we won’t get even that. In late August, as he faced that ugly reality, he provided a decent Op-Ed essay in the *New York Times*. Left to themselves, speeches and essays are not going to mean much. It’s up to us. We must get to work, soon, to convince the members of Congress that they will have a tough time in the 2010 elections unless they wash their hands.

If and as we become more involved politically, Obama will realize that what he has been trying to achieve has been both inadequate and too murky; a half-speed step forward when full speed ahead is needed. And that he's going to go down with health care. What he cannot do by himself, we must do, but we must change the bought and paid for Congress in order to change him. They have to find out that we are the boss, not Wall Street. And we have a lot of work to do for that to happen.

There are already great numbers among us and out there who want what they know we need: a single payer health care system (whatever it might be called); a system, whose payer is "our" government and the progressive income taxes that began between 1936 and 1965 and have been reversed from the 1970s on... We must act politically just as though we were as deserving as the people of Western Europe (until recently). Many surveys have shown that at least two-thirds of those polled are in favor of the single-payer system, if not necessarily by that name.

Up to now Obama has learned to go along with rotten policies — class war on the citizenry — policies that, if he were just another working husband and father, he, too, would reject, "We the people" must help him to realize that decent policies are not only good for the nation but also for his career. As will be seen below, that's what happened with FDR (and he ended up very much at home with it). All of that said, now we turn to the third, most dangerous disasters.

3. Our Wars

It will take much political work from us to bring out the best of Obama for domestic policies; much more at as regards our wars. As we work to build a political movement for the meeting of basic needs, we must also bring back to life a strong antiwar movement. Long ago, Tom Paine said, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” That needs saying again for our times (while making it “men’s and women’s” souls). Obama welcomes efforts for meeting domestic needs, but, and especially as regards Afghanistan, he would probably be against a strong antiwar movement: all the more reason for us to recreate one now, before it’s too late.

Why is that today we have no meaningful antiwar movement to deal with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? A sad part of the answer is that the GIs of the Korean and Vietnam wars were almost entirely drafted; today’s are all volunteers. U.S. war makers learned that it would be smart to get rid of the draft. Many — perhaps most — who have volunteered since the 1980s have done so because of the job-outsourcing years of globalization and rising unemployment. Bad news for them, good news for the Israel lobby and our ingrained militarists (See below and the references in Note 4.)

The USA’s interest in the Middle East perked up as World War II was ending, and as emerged as the strongest nation in all of history, both economically and militarily: Europe’s long standing imperialists were flat on their backs, there was all that oil, with our soon-to-be designated enemy the USSR next door to the playing field.

Meanwhile, also next door, the struggle between Jews, Palestinians, and the UK over who would control the relevant area was exploding. At first, the

USA stood on the sidelines. It soon became clear that the UK's inability to hold on was our opportunity. We jumped in to meet the pressures from the oil industry and the U.S. Jewish community. Not long after World War II, the first steps were taken toward what has become the USA's unbending economic-military alliance with Israel. That in turn, it will be seen below, has heated up our long-standing harsh relationship with Iran. (Before analyzing our ongoing wars in the region, with its negative critique of the US-Israel, a question: Is Dowd another Jew hater? See Note 5.)

Now we go on to seek an answer to a question about our many post-1945 wars. Why all those wars? The official answer goes something like this: "To save democracy. To assist the people of the warring areas to protect themselves from old or new enemies. To protect the USA and others from terrorists." Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran (with comments on Israel) will now be analyzed in that order

Iraq The USA went to war against Iraq twice, once in 1991, again in 2003. Just why we attacked Iraq in either case is, at best murky, to be kind: "weapons of mass destruction" and/or that Iraq was assisting Osama bin Laden's terrorists. Before 2004 both charges were shown as baseless, but they were mumbled away by the Bush gang, and the citizenry lost interest. After all, freedom and democracy for all is the job of the USA and we had to get rid of that monster Saddam Hussein (whom we had earlier supported in the Iran/Iraq war, but wotthell?) The two wars against Iraq meant at least 4,000 dead GIs. Iraqis? Apart from all else, official estimates are that as early as 2003 up to a million Iraqi civilians — at least half of them children — had died from war-induced shortages of food, water, and medical supplies.

(But killing half a million children? Asked about that in a broadcast interview, the U.S. Secretary of State dismissed the issue: “We think it’s worth it.”) Now, six years later, how much worse is that number; along with other unspeakable disasters? And who cares? Is it still “worth it”?

It shouldn’t be necessary to belabor the issue of Iraq, and I won’t, except to note that the war led at least 2 million Iraqis to flee their country. U.S. troops, they say, are leaving day by day. If and when the war continues or, because of increasing chaos, worsens, what then? We never should have got in; will we ever really get out? If we do, what will we leave behind? And whose fault was it? Saddam Hussein’s? Bush’s? Obama’s? Mr. and Mrs. America’s? (See Everest for Iraq in the references of Notes 4.)

Afghanistan The war now going on in the unconquerable loosely knit country is terribly frightful in itself, but with each passing month it becomes more so. It is now almost forgotten when and how the USA first became entangled in Afghanistan, and our initial — *supportive* — relationship with the Taliban. Because it was arrogant, self-harming, and relevant, it needs discussion. As will be seen in what follows, the USA has the responsibility for the spreading and deepening war against the Taliban now well underway: Why? The answer is found in how the Taliban got its start.. That takes us back 30 years, to July 1979.

Jimmy Carter, a more or less decent guy, was President. His National Security Adviser was Zbigniew Brzezinski, too clever for his own good; or ours. He calls himself “Zbig.” In July of 1979, Zbig persuaded Carter to sign the first of several directives allowing the CIA to provide weaponry to a

small group calling itself “the Taliban.” How do we know? Because he later told the story in a boastful interview given to the French *Le Nouvel Observateur* (1998-01-15), Why help them? Because, Zbig said, our provision of the weaponry would “draw the Russians into the Afghan trap. We didn’t push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.” He was right.. Three months later, on the very day the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan, Zbig wrote again to Carter: “Now we can give the USSR its Vietnam War.”

In giving that otherwise unattainable strength to the Taliban we had also opened the door for today’s nightmare: the USA’s *second*. Vietnam. But it’s much worse than that. Whatever great Vietnam’s costs and tragedies to us, they were like tripping on a sidewalk crack compared where we are now heading. Not very long after we picked ourselves up from Vietnam, we aimed toward Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq turned out to be a bloody mess .That was bad enough and is still not over; but we are hanging on the edge of a high cliff in Afghanistan. How so? Back to “Zbig”:

Up to a point, he had been right. The USSR took a beating from the Taliban for three years. backed out in disgrace, and soon after, the Taliban declined in numbers and strength. Then they got the shrewd idea to have the poor peasants of Afghanistan to grow the poppies which now provide about 90 percent of the world’s opium, their sales controlled by an always stronger Taliban not only in Afghanistan, but now edging also in Pakistan..There the Taliban has a group functioning as *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). It serves as an umbrella and sanctuary for 13 constituent Taliban factions. (*The Economist*, 2009-08-27).

September is just beginning as I write. In the last days of August more U.S. soldiers were killed, when their armored car was blown up by a homemade bomb, dozens of Afghans killed by a bomb in the center of the country's main city and, the U.S. backed leader Hamid Karzai, running for re-election evidently outdid Ahmadinejad in Iran How? He is accused of substantial frauds to gain a slim majority (if that). "Seven Days That Shook Afghanistan," (Dexter Filkins, *NYT*, 8-30-2009). The article ends with a quote from General McChrystal, our man in charge: "If this goes on, the United States will need to bring more troops and more resources here — and for what?" Good question. But just two days later he moved back into the gang: Headline, *IHT*, 2009-09-01: "Afghan war can be won, despite peril, general says." Welcome back, Vietnam. (And see Rashid.)

The dangers neither begin nor end with Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama must also deal with a long-standing problem with critically different origins; namely, the long-standing tensions arising from antagonistic U.S. relationships with Iran itself, much intensified by our close relationships with Israel and how that affects the tensions between Iran and Israel. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran/Israel/USA are overlapping "hotspots." Obama must deal with all of those problems, and they overlap.. Now and then there has been a sensible statement from him; nevertheless, U.S. policies for all three have continued from the Bush and earlier years, with no reason for us to expect their safe resolution unless Obama changes course. That's up to us.

If *we* continue to be no more than disgruntled observers instead of building a movement, what lies ahead is (1) the continued occupation of Iraq (despite dribbling reductions), (2) deteriorating involvement in Afghanistan

extending into Pakistan, and (3) the likelihood of always more dangerous conflicts with Iran, accentuated by pressures from Israel. “We” must put our pressures on Obama and Congress to exit both Iraq and Afghanistan before it is too late, but it is also essential to do what we can to prevent a war with Iran. That takes us to:

Iran, the USA, and Israel From the 1950s to the present, the USA’s relationships with Iran and Israel have been both independent of each other and interwoven. In what follows it will be seen that however questionable the “independent” relationships, they have become ever more interwoven and dangerous. The beginnings took hold soon after World War II, as the USA began its attempts to make the Middle East part of its “sphere of influence, for both the region’s oil and its strategic location. First Iran, then Israel, then their ongoing and always more inflamed relationships.

Iran. Before Colonel Raza Khan’s coup of 1926, Iran was Persia. Khan changed much more than the name. Himself a rightist dictator, he was a fan of Hitler;. when Germany invaded the USSR in 1941, Khan supported it. That led to a joint UK-USSR invasion of Iran, and both stayed there until 1946. Then, under popular pressure in 1951 the new shah (Khan’s son) allowed a free election. It was easily won by Mohammed Mossadegh. He proposed that Iran be a democracy and that it nationalize its rich oil resources. Truman was in the White House. He granted the CIA the funds and consent to overthrow Mossadegh. He was overthrown, and the USA put Khan’s son back in power.

That history is little known in the USA but well-known in Iran. The same may be said of what was done in 1979-1980: the USA-sponsored government of the young shah was overthrown in 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the uproar, U.S. diplomats in Tehran were taken prisoner, paraded in public, etc. Carter lost the 1980 election and. Reagan won. However, as the hostages were being held, there was also a war going on between Iran and Iraq and a civil war in Nicaragua (then with an elected left government).

This next is hard to believe, but it is the raw truth: during the 1980 U.S. election campaign, Reagan's people made a deal with the Khomeini people: the USA would "provide" heavy weaponry to Iran (then at war with our ally Iraq; but who's counting?) Then, *after* the 1980 U.S. election, with Carter out and Ronnie in, Iran would free the hostages. It was a done deal.. Meanwhile, and connected with all that, a rightist bunch called "Contras" (friends of the USA), was trying to overthrow the elected-but-leftist Nicaraguan government. The Contras needed arms. Any weapons deal by the USA had been explicitly forbidden by Congress. As noted earlier, "who's counting?" Congress was.

When that crime came to light this is what Ronnie said, quote: "I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intention still tell me that is true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not". (He was elected, then re-elected and would have won again, but the GOP, after FDR's four wins, had made two the limit.(See Wills in Note 4.)

Since the 1980s, the “revolution” that gave Iran its independence from Europe (and the USA) has devolved backwards. . Its present ruler Ahmadinejad is ruling with an fierce right hand. It is depressing to ponder just how much safer, and better for Iran and us it would be if the USA had not gotten rid of the fairly-elected Mossadegh in the 1950s. Dream on; now turn to another mess. It could I become the disaster to end all disasters.

Israel. What jumps into mind for most is “Jews.” “Holocaust,” “Palestine”; if not necessarily in that order. Therein lies a set of profound tragedies, most especially for those involved in past or resent, beginning with the “Irgun.” They were those who fought, and died to bring “their Israel” back into being; given their definitive push by the murder of at least six million Jews by the Germans and their cohorts in Poland, France, and Italy. For the Irgun it was “Never again, no matter what.” For the Arab world, and especially Palestinians, “Israel” has a quite different meaning; namely, that with World War II over, and Palestine finally freed from the stranglehold of Great Britain (et al.). they could bring to life their own country. .For the USA? As the Irgun began their struggle to kick out the UK, the USA was concentrating on other matters: Korea, the USSR, its new global dreams, capitalist expansion... Before long, however, the U.S. Jewish community had begun to strengthen what has become one of the most powerful lobbyist groups. Since the mid-1950s their resources, strength, and power have steadily increased. It has been said that, as regards U.S. policies and the Middle East, they “own” Congress and the White House.

That said, what’s the problem? Ask the Palestinians first. Since the 1950s they have been robbed of their lands, livelihood, health, freedom, and

dignity; to say nothing of those killed, wounded, and/or imprisoned (literally or figuratively). All of that has been accomplished to enable the world's Jews, if they wish, to have a safe "land of their own: Israel." And let the devil take the hindmost. Which the devil has done. Meaning? Meaning that Israel, in order to achieve safety and well-being for Jews, has put them in a position where it is just a matter of time before they — no matter how strong their military, no matter how many their nuclear weapons — will find itself in a territorial war without end. Unless — and until — one of the warring parties in the military tangle lying ahead panics and uses its atom bombs. Impossible, you say?

Well, the USA used them twice on Japan. Also, we now know that the USA and the USSR came within a hair's breadth of using them regarding Cuba in the 1960s. (My source? The then-Secretary of Defense McNamara.) Plus, Israel is one of 10 countries with nuclear bombs (a secret exposed by the incredibly courageous Mordecai Vanunu, now known by all, flatly denied by Israel, and blessed with official silence on the part of the USA).

Setting all other relevant matters aside (and there are plenty), the Muslim world, whatever its differences, is in agreement regarding Israel: *Its lands were stolen from the Palestinians.*

Now, as the Afghanistan war spreads into Pakistan (which has "the bomb"), as the Taliban increases its depth and spread, and as Obama insists that we must strength our forces in Afghanistan, the time is long overdue for the people of the USA (and elsewhere) to build a strong antiwar movement,

linked in means and aims with a powerful domestic movement. Impossible?
No.

It's Time for New Deal II.

We need a vigorous program, a second New Deal. But it has to be even stronger than FDR's. His program didn't end the U.S. Depression. World War II did. We can't do it again. *World War III will end us.*

FDR was transformed from a conservative blue-blood to a liberal reformer. Obama must be transformed from likeable politician to strong reformer. FDR and the popular movement of workers and just plain citizens accomplished a good part of what was needed. But since the 1970s it has been wiped out. Meanwhile, too many of us — most of us — have become bewitched consumers and only bothered and bewildered by our endless wars. Neither what we need at home nor peace abroad will ever be handed to us. Working for it must become our “daily bread.” That was what thousands of our parents and grandparents did in the 1930s and after. They constructed the basis for a decent society, urged on by FDR who, as his fourth term began, gave a ringing State of the Union Address to Congress. In it he asked for what he called “A Second Bill of Rights”:

The United States can and must build a basis of security and prosperity for all, regardless of gender, race, or creed. *All of us should have the right to:*

1. A useful and remunerative job

2. An income sufficient to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation
3. A decent home for every family
4. Adequate medical care and good health
5. Protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment
6. A full education

Only some of that was achieved. up through the 1960s. Then, as the 1970s took off, the disgustingly dangerous reversal began. It didn't just happen; it was the result of two overlapping developments: (1) the always tighter grip of consumerism and its mind-numbing mindless borrowing and (2) a well-coordinated reactionary movement, assisted by a well-paid research professionals. That was paid for by tax reductions for the rich and big business, with lots of support from long-standing racists, war lovers, anti-abortionists and certain religious groups. They provided — and continue to provide — mountains of cash for lobbyists and campaign finance, and easy access to much of the media.

Now it's up to us to see to it that our country does not allow the 1970s to gain strength, pick up steam and make matters even worse: at home and abroad. If it does, it's not our country, it's *theirs*. It is our right and our responsibility to dig out the best in ourselves; only then will the best of

Obama come to life. If and as we do that, we can resume and go beyond FDR's attempts to move toward a USA finally deserving to be called "America the beautiful."

If we continue to sit back and moan, we will be allowing our selves to be pushed toward being an always more disgraceful and dangerous nation. That is what "good people" like ourselves did in Western Europe between the two world wars.

If we don't become and remain politically active, make the USA *our* country, it will continue to be *theirs*.

Notes and References

Abbreviations

IHT: International Herald Tribune

NYT: New York Times

NYRB, New York Review of Books

1. I was born in San Francisco in 1919. I began to become political in 1934 when, one day, there was a parade of striking longshoremen mourning the killing of fellow workers by police.. The strike became a general strike, unique in U.S. history. I joined the parade for kid reasons, but then became politically attentive and involved, deepened by several years in the Pacific war. By 1945 I was increasingly critical of capitalism; convinced that there

cannot be a genuinely politically democratic society unless it is also economically and socially democratic. There is no such society yet, nor will there ever be unless all who treasure democracy find ways to work together toward that goal as a life responsibility (and, I add, from decades of experience, worth its troubles.). We are more distant from that goal in the present than we were 40–50 years ago. I remain convinced that there cannot be a genuine democracy under capitalism; I also believe that such a democracy can only be achieved only by a majority movement. Such a movement cannot be created overnight. If we not find ways to work together politically, we're sunk.

2. *The economic crisis* For books shedding light on the history of what took us here and where we are, see the following: Up to World War I: Bowden, et al., *Economic History of Europe Since 1750*; for the USA in 1920s, Soule, *Prosperity Decade...* ; for the 1930s, B. Mitchell, *Depression Decade....*; for the interwar descent into fascism, see R.A. Brady, *Business as a System of Power*; for excellent overall U.S. histories, see Du Boff, *Accumulation and Power* and Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*; for understanding the background and nature of the financial crisis, see Henwood, *Wall Street: How it Works and for Whom* and Phillips *Arrogant Capital...* plus his *Wealth and Democracy...* Plus his *Bad Money: Reckless Finance and...* For an excellent and comprehensive set of analyses of how we got to where we are after the 1970s and where we need to go see Krugman's *Conscience of a Liberal*. Then ask "Why isn't Nobel Prize liberal economist Paul Krugman "Economic Advisor" instead of Summers — long-time millionaire pal of Wall Street?)

3. *Health Care References* Bill Moyers *PBS Journal* (2009-12-06) Robert Reich Interview: "Who runs government?"; Charles Gordon, *Dead on Arrival: Clinton Health Care Plan and Why It Failed*; Drs. Himmelstein and Woolhandler, "We Pay for National but Don't Get It," *Journal of Health Affairs* (2002-07-10); A. Relman, *Toward a 21st Century Health Care System*; P. Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*.

4. *Our wars* W. Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*; B. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*; Dowd, Ch. 8 of *Inequality and the Global Economic Crisis*; L. Everest, *Oil, Power, and Empire* (Iraq); Kinzer and Schlesinger, *All the Shah's Men... and the Roots of Middle East Terror*; Pitt and Ritter, *War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You To Know*; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia); G. Wills, *Reagan's America*; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars (1945-1990)*.

5. *Dowd and Jews* "Dowd" used to be "O'Dowd": My father was Irish-Catholic. His people came over during the 1840s Irish famine. My mother was Jewish. Her Russian-Jewish parents came over to escape the pogroms of the 1880s. My parents married soon after they met at a dance; dated for a while, were forbidden by parents to see each other and, shortly after, snuck out of town and married. My father was openly contemptuous of Jews. There was a divorce (fortunately) when I was very little; I lived with my mother from then on. She had not gone beyond grade school and we were always poor. (My university education was paid for by the GI Bill.) My first political involvement was when I was 16; with an anti-racist group, the Council for Civic Unity, created by rich Jewish merchants wise enough to

comprehend that the nasty treatment of blacks, Chinese, Japanese, and Jews in San Francisco was all of a piece.

My criticisms of Israel are not unique among Jews: until about 10 years ago, more than two-thirds of Israelis were in favor of a two-state solution. Since then, as Israel has become increasingly aggressive and expansive, the USA has been its main friend in the UN and given more financial aid to Israel than to any other country. Nor is it either irrelevant or a secret that Israel is yearning to bomb Iran. If and when it does, there will have to be a “follow-up” of bombs and infantry, and it almost certain that the USA would be involved. Then what?

