The Imaginary and Its Worlds
Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar, Johannes Voelz

Published by Dartmouth College Press

Bieger, Laura, et al.
The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/26905.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/26905

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=985313
Barack Obama’s 2008 mandate was crushed by the midterm elections of 2010, in which his party lost control of the House of Representatives and of state legislatures and governorships all over the country. This reversal did not prevent his re-election in 2012, but he did not win decisively or broadly enough for a renewed mandate to be assumed. Obama’s margin of victory was smaller than in 2008—down from 7 to 2 percent of the popular vote. His share of white voters fell from 43 percent to 39 percent, and he owes his victory to turnout by African American, Latino, and Asian American voters, whose supermajority voting for him may have finally defeated the Republican’s long-time “Southern Strategy” based on appeals to white racial resentment. For Obama to regain his 2008 place as the leader of a transformative coalition, winning the presidential election would need to be followed by a readoption of the progressive positions that during his first term he regularly compromised away.

In 2008, Democrats had won a larger percentage of House of Representatives votes in the thirty-six non-southern states than at any previous time in recent history and held a solid majority in both chambers of Congress to go with their new control of the executive branch. In 2010, the national vote was almost the reverse, and the Republicans picked up sixty-three seats in the House of Representatives (out of 435). One analyst pointed out, “That’s similar to 1994, and you have to go back to 1946 and 1928 to find years when Republicans did better” (Barone). Outside of Washington, D.C., Republicans gained about 675 seats in statehouses, also their best showing since 1928, took nineteen state legislative houses from the Democrats, and added five new governorships (to hold twenty-nine of fifty) (“Election 2010”). Obama ruefully quipped that while he had learned from the election results, “I’m not recommend-
ing for every future president that they take a shellacking like I did last night” (“Obama on Midterm Shellacking”).

But how did the most celebrated presidential victory in nearly thirty years lose all of its power in only half a term?

_American Political Romanticism_

The November 2008 election was driven by an upwelling of classic American political romanticism. By that I mean most simply the feeling that a vision of a better world can actually be embodied in the American nation. In such a moment, the United States becomes for a majority of its various publics the vehicle of an elevated state of social being. The Democrats’ two successful post-1980 presidential candidates called this “hope.” Bill Clinton found some power in a pun on the name of his hometown, Hope, Arkansas, in his references to “a place called hope.” Obama got closer to the real spirit of this with his slogan “Yes We Can.” In these moments of romantic break with a given recent degraded political history, a transformed shared or collective world becomes possible: Yes we can enter this elevated social world together. There’s a clear source for this feeling in the African American Christianity that has been so important to Obama himself. Although the term romanticism often suggests something unrealistic, in fact it is close to Benedict Anderson’s notion of the imagined community, here with an emphasis on a freedom of collaborative construction.

This romanticism helped Obama win nearly two-thirds of voters under the age of thirty. This romanticism helped Obama produce the most important demographic shift in the election, which was that young white voters without a college education—the blue-collar workers who in the 1980s, in 1994, and again in 2000 voted as “Reagan Democrats” and Bush Republicans—broke with their parents and went for Obama rather than the Republican John McCain. The central desire of this political romanticism is that one’s individual experiences and views will be seen in the political world as legitimate. One’s views may not prevail, but they will be openly acknowledged as part of and shared and mainstream public life. Their possessor will be held to be a full and undamaged member of a common world, one at least transiently represented by national politics.

U.S. political romanticism, then, has several features. The first is the belief that a far better world can be incarnated by the nation. Second, this romanticism is not very specific about actual policies. Much research has shown that highly popular politicians stay vague enough to serve as screens on which a range of desires can be projected. They are like movie
stars. They are like first loves. Freud once said, “Love is the overestimation of the object.” This is true in politics as well, where the mass political leader tries not to exclude possibilities that are being projected onto him or her. This is easier to do in a campaign than in office, but politicians like Franklin Delano Roosevelt managed to do it by continuing to articulate higher inclusive hopes. The serious point here is that American political romanticism focuses less on good policy than on the affects, both individual and collective, that make good policy possible.

The third feature of political romanticism is the desire to reimagine the country as an undamaged national group. Marx famously described the person as “an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society” (83–84), and this is indeed close to the popular intuition behind the desire for political renewal that was widespread in the United States during the 2008 campaign. The restored national group also requires a new leader or leaders, and also, most important, a new relation to leadership on the part of the public. I come back to this later on.

The fourth feature concerns the positive individual affect that would emerge from renewed political life. The group psychological conditions for this renewal were analyzed as a political problem with particular depth and clarity by C. Fred Alford in the 1990s. He described them as occurring when “members reclaim lost and alienated parts of themselves that they have previously devoted to the group” (Alford 71). Loss and alienation are not distinctive features of American political life, but there is special pain connected to the contrast between elevated expectations in a country that claims to be the best of all possible democracies and that country’s actual practice. The bitterness of American political discourse is distinctive, and much has been written on this and related symptoms such as low voter turnout, without, in my view, truly grasping the widespread animus toward national politics or its sources in the systemic failings of the American system. What this meant in the 2008 campaign was an imagined end of suffering—an end of personal suffering from experiencing the government as a negative, oppressive, offensive, or violent force. This hoped for end of suffering from a terrible public world was arguably the central feature of anti-Bush Americans’ response to the Bush II era. It wasn’t just that he was too right wing; it was that he had defiled the country. George W. Bush created a flat contradiction between most people’s sense of belonging in or to the country and the operating principles of the government of the United States. This contradiction meant that much of the country suffered Bush rather than merely endured him.

This suffering crossed political lines. One example of this phenom-
nenon comes from my own family. My parents are classic working-class children of New Deal Democrats who were the first in their respective families to go to college—and my father, assisted by massive educational momentum in California in the 1950s, went on to medical school. The political companion to their economic mobility, as for so many whites of their “silent generation,” was a shift toward Eisenhower Republicanism. My father voted for Reagan many times, and then for Bush in 2000. But in November 2003, about six months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, while he and I were having lunch, we got on to politics, and he suddenly exclaimed, “I hate Bush.”

I was surprised and asked: “Why, Dad? You voted for him, and he cut your taxes, like you wanted him to.” My father replied, “Because he kills people, for no reason.”

Things were never the same after that. My father was done with Bush, and also with the Republican Party. He voted for the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, in 2004, and he voted for Obama in 2008. In the process he generated a continuous discourse of what I would call political suffering—a state in which, even when one is not being persecuted or economically destroyed, one is in a state of alienation in which a part of one’s own identity—national identity—is contradicted and offended by collective politics, embodied in the leader.

Obama’s initial political power came from his apparent ability to offer an alternative to the political rules of the Bush era and thus to alleviate cross-spectrum political suffering. Obama’s power was not only to address the offended progressives who had wandered for years in the Bushian wilderness, but also to promise to end the suffering of many conservatives as well. This meant that Obama’s popularity did not rest on his ability to look and act “center-right.” It rested on his ability to address the country’s half-unexpressed wounded romanticism. Obama was not speaking to a fantasy of a utopian America but was addressing a felt desire to build a world in which personal desire could be realized, not rejected, in a shared polis that would be called the United States. In his best moments, Obama built not a coalition of the center-right with progressive rhetoric to fool people, but a coalition of political sufferers who imagined a non-agonizing common world constituted by political life.

Obama’s Promise

How is it that Obama could do something enormous like this? In fact he couldn’t, but we can identify the means by which he occasionally
seemed to reconcile people’s lives with their political system so that they could imagine life in common. The means were simple: he could tell the truth in public about ordinary—though politically charged—individual experience.

This is what Obama did in his great campaign speeches, particularly the one in Philadelphia in March 2008 that made him the front-runner. This was the speech in which he broke with his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and there were crucial moments in which Obama showed his now dominant capacity for inhibiting inclusive honesty by patronizing Wright and falsifying civil rights history. And yet the core of the speech was to tell the truth in public about people’s real thoughts and feelings about race.

Like other predominantly black churches across the country, [Reverend Wright’s] Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity’s services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes-bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love. (Obama, “More Perfect Union”)

This passage modeled the possibility of finding the truth of individual experience in the shared political world. Obama’s portrait of the black
community was not subtle, but he described its range and greatness in a way unknown in mainstream politics and then embraced all of that range. Obama’s description of his white grandmother included his love for her, her love for him, her racial anxiety about black people, and his divided response to her anxiety, which included understanding, feeling rejected, and rejecting her. If this man won, he would not lead the country to redemption, but he would lead many millions of voters out of the “pharaoh’s land” where all regular people need to hide their real beliefs from the political world, a hiding that makes them suffer.

Obama in this moment offered an instance of a leader who speaks as a fully aware member of his or her group. He displayed himself as a “good leader,” one who is willing and able to “help citizens reclaim lost parts of themselves alienated in the group and so foster individual and group development” (Alford 155).4 The ability to bring lost, repressed, denied, or rejected parts of oneself into the open leads to a crucial moment in group psychology in which the individual is able to bring previously rejected aspects of herself into the group and not just the partial self that includes only those features acceptable to the group’s most aggressive, most dominant members. The pandemic bullying, shunning, exclusion, and denunciation typical of American political culture keeps most individuals from participating in group self-governance for the obvious reason that participation poses a threat to the self, and particularly to the most heterodox and thus creative parts of the self.5 A group consisting of largely self-concealed individuals is a group whose members will look to leaders to perform all of the governance that they feel too threatened and too weak to perform themselves. This “regressed” group cannot be democratic. When Obama spoke in public to the generally hidden parts of brown, black, yellow, red, and white selves, he at least for a moment welcomed normally unauthorized or unspeakable parts of each listener back into the national community. This is the psychological precondition for democratic activity—a “good enough equality” in which the leader makes it clear that no member of the group will be allowed to exclude or subordinate another specifically on the basis of his or her divergence from a group norm.

Reviving the Basis of Participation

The correct question for Obama after the midterm defeat was not, How can you now become more center-right, or even more bipartisan, or engage in a still more complete compromising of your party’s core

Obama Unwound · 197
positions? Obama’s familiar calculation in 2012 appeared to be that the election would be decided by the swing voters, who could go for either main candidate, and that these people would be especially impressed by the candidate who seemed most like a swing voter himself. This would mean, in practice, that the candidate would display “nonideological” maturity grounded in ambivalence. Obama was seeking the votes of people who admire compromise as such. The political math was fundamentally flawed for the cultural and group-psychological reasons I have discussed. The correct—and victory-oriented—question for Obama after the midterms was, How can you take the romantic hope for a positive shared world and link it to collective deliberation?

There is a theoretical question here, which is, What is romantic deliberation? We know a decent amount about this, as already noted: it occurs when lost parts of selves are able to come forward, no desires are excluded in advance, and egalitarian relations among peers are more powerful than the relation to the leader. With his grassroots Internet campaign in 2008, and, most important, with his major moments of personal truth telling, Obama made it seem that the dull procedures of political life could lead to a common world in which most people could provisionally feel at home. Obama’s only hope for reelection depended on distinguishing between romantic-inclusive group formation based on modeling full disclosure and his doomed substitute for that compromise.

After taking office, Obama steadily sacrificed disclosure to expediency in the specific sense of conforming policy to the wishes of exactly those established powers that had made the majority of the electorate feel unsafe in the first place. His compromise banking policy opened a split between Wall Street and Main Street that has been more polarized than anything I’ve seen in my lifetime. The bank bailout helped destroy the earlier sense of incipient common life by making politics seem—once again—like a way to favor a tiny elite over everyone else. Obama thus reverted to the political history with which he was expected to produce a break. The bailout involved his team in the kinds of concealments (of who got the bailout money) and exaggerations (of the recovery) that he had denounced during the 2008 campaign. If one widely discussed account is correct, Obama’s banking policy was in part the result of his being bullied and excluded by several of his own top economic officials (Suskind).

Obama made similar concessions in foreign policy, military strategy, civil liberties, and other areas where a pivotal issue for democratic theory and experience is the high proportion of the public that is excluded from knowledge and authority. A seemingly minor episode, his reference in
a national press conference to the arrest of the prominent literary and cultural scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his own Cambridge home, was a turning point in Obama’s general approach to controversial issues, and his mistake occurred not when he said that the police had behaved “stupidly,” but when he retreated from that candid statement into a staged sit-down between the disputants in which they were supposed to work out a compromise, one that put compromise ahead of dealing with the anger and accusations at the heart of the episode. Equality, disclosure, and accountability are all essential to the intragroup functionality that makes self-rule possible. Obama’s retreat from these betrayed the political romanticism—the democratic imagination—that had made so many otherwise skeptical people flock to him in the first place.

From Disappointment to Anger

After the November 2010 election, the intensity of the disappointment in Obama went from bad to worse. Observers have been particularly baffled by his apparent love of the premature compromise, the ready capitulation, even the apparent sacrifice of core principles. Jane Hamsher, founder of the political blog Fire Dog Lake, focused on two features of the Obama administration’s negotiating strategy: its hostility to the left wing, in contrast to the Republicans’ cultivation of their Tea Party right wing, and Obama’s weakness as a negotiator. In a piece about his acceptance of Republican demands to extend tax cuts for the wealthy and his failure at the G20 meetings in 2010, Hamsher wrote: “The need for credit, the desire to be seen as a ‘winner’ and the anger at lack of perceived support from those he thinks should be on his side are things that are consistently being exploited by everyone who negotiates with Obama. Moreover, his willingness to call anything a ‘win’—no matter how badly he gets cleaned out—sends a signal that stagecraft rather than substance will always be his focus.” She noted Obama’s tendency toward sudden reversals, too, which can also be exploited by adversaries. At the G20 meetings, held not long after the election, he criticized the Chinese for currency manipulation, wrote Hamsher, “and then patronizingly told the Chinese they needed to be ‘a responsible partner.’” She went on: “Okay, so he wants to get tough with the Chinese. No doubt they are watching his actions closely. So what does he do? After ‘getting tough’ and making bold public statements at the G20 insisting he would not budge on the Bush tax cuts, in front of every major world power, he returns home—and does just that” (Hamsher, “Barack Obama”).

Obama Unwound

199
Obama’s reversals became so confusing that allies and opponents alike had a hard time understanding what he really believed himself. In a *New York Times* column observing that Obama was on the verge of a destructive, unnecessary capitulation to Republican desires to cut Medicare, Paul Krugman concluded by saying: “Of course, it’s possible that the reason the president is offering to undermine Medicare is that he genuinely believes that this would be a good idea. And that possibility, I have to say, is what really scares me” (Krugman, “Messing with Medicare”). The fear rests in part on simply not being able to establish the core beliefs of the man who is the national Democratic Party leader and U.S. president.

By mid-summer of 2011 Obama appeared to lack the political muscle and the stable beliefs required to negotiate a lifting of the debt ceiling with congressional Republicans. He had given up so many core Democratic positions in the pursuit of an apparent non-deal that he had alienated a large percentage of his base, at a moment when the Republicans had consolidated theirs. Commentary on Obamanomics from the center and left went from exasperated to apoplectic. Leading finance blogger Yves Smith was among the mildest in remarking, “The fact that Obama is regularly being compared to Herbert Hoover and now Nixon should give him pause” (Smith). Krugman wrote multiple columns arguing that Obama’s economic policies were creating a “Lesser Depression,” and argued in July 2011 that the structure of Obama’s negotiations ensured decline either way: “If either of the current debt negotiations fails, we could be about to replay 1931, the global banking collapse that made the Great Depression great. But, if the negotiations succeed, we will be set to replay the great mistake of 1937: the premature turn to fiscal contraction that derailed economic recovery and ensured that the Depression would last until World War II finally provided the boost the economy needed” (Krugman, “The Lesser Depression”).

And yet in the summer of 2011, likening Obama to Hoover was relatively tame. In an interview, the economics professor Michael Hudson called the debt negotiations a “good-cop-bad-cop charade.” The Republicans were calling for more tax cuts, tax loopholes, tax holidays, and no prosecutions for tax fraud, Hudson observed, and continued:

Mr. Obama can turn around and pretend to be the good cop. “Hey, boys, let me at least do something. I’m willing to cut back Social Security. I’m willing to take over what was George Bush’s program. I share your worries about the budget deficit. We have to balance it, and I’ve already appointed a Deficit Reduction Commission to prepare public opinion for my cutbacks in the
most popular programs. But you have to let me get a little bit of revenue somewhere.”

In the end the Republicans will make some small token concessions, but they’ll get their basic program. Mr. Obama will have sold out his constituency.

The problem is, how can Mr. Obama move to the right of where George Bush stood? The only way he can do this is for the Republicans to move even further to the right. So the Republicans are accommodating him by pushing the crazy wing of their party forward, the Tea Party. Michelle Bachman, Eric Cantor and their colleagues are coming with such an extremist, right-wing attitude that it gives Mr. Obama room to move way to the right as he triangulates, depicting himself as the less crazy alternative: “Look. I’m better than these guys are.” (Hudson)

Hudson argued that Obama was not being forced into a compromise that sold out his party’s core value of government-insured decent retirement income and health coverage, but rather that he wanted to sell out his party. He went on to suggest that Obama agreed with Wall Street that the country needed a depression “in order to cut living standards and labor by 30 percent” (Hudson). Around the same time another pundit remarked: “I guess the Democratic Party just disappeared last week. Do they care? Will anyone miss them?” (Elliott).

Lest it seem that these are just the comments of angry—albeit well-established—intellectuals, polling data suggested a similar collapse in Obama’s stature among ordinary voters. His job approval rating hovered between 40 and 45 percent—“higher than you’d expect,” given massive dissatisfaction with the economy (McMorris-Santoro). But more negative evidence emerged from an in-depth study in July 2011 that asked, among other things, whether a series of statements fit Obama well or not very well. Obama’s rating was slightly positive only on “Offers a hopeful vision for the future.” His scores on the others were as follows, with the number indicating the spread on “well” over “not very well.”

Strong leader: –5
On your side: –8
Trust to make the right choices for the country: –11

Perhaps the most remarkable finding here is that only a minority of voters (44 percent) thought that Obama was “on their side” (Greenberg and Seifert). It’s possible that some people disagreed with Obama’s policies but still gave him credit for wanting to help them. But in fact, all
of Obama’s rhetoric of good intentions and acting responsibly to reach compromise had failed to convince a majority that the president was on their side, as opposed to the side of Wall Street or somebody else. The lack of trust was remarkable in relation to someone whose public persona—the deep voice, the crisp, assured delivery, and the candor about at least some important emotional realities—had been so carefully constructed to inspire exactly that.

It’s the Economy, as Usual

In trying to explain Obama’s weak position with the public, most sympathetic commentators focused on his economic positions. His military policies, which extended and even intensified those of the Bush administration, had alienated much of his base (Greenwald), but the “Lesser Depression” in Krugman’s term, had remained a top issue with the population as a whole. Here I categorize a range of responses into three types for the sake of simplicity:

1. Obama is a right-wing capitalist and tolerates or even seeks a controlled economic depression (Hudson).
2. Obama is a “New Economy” capitalist, seeking investment in infrastructure and research, but is intimidated by right-wing capitalists and feels they must be accommodated (Krugman, “The Lesser Depression”)
3. Obama is (1) or (2) at different times, and is more fundamentally driven by a prior political outlook or framework.

The evidence for (2), Obama as a New Economy capitalist, is widespread. For his interest in the high-tech economy, one can point to his State of the Union message of January 2011, with its vision of America “winning the future” via innovation-oriented reinvestment in infrastructure and research (Obama, “Winning the Future”). For his intimidation by Wall Street and the circle of advocates for the finance industry whom he himself appointed as his leading economic advisers, one has the testimony of Sheila Bair, the head of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation from 2006 to 2011, who corroborated many other descriptions of Obama as believing that if he didn’t accept all the demands of the bankers, they would wreck the economy. Obama’s positions placed him squarely to the right of Bair, a Bob Dole Republican, who wanted tougher bank regulation and modifications for mortgage holders facing eviction during the subprime lending crisis, only to see Obama and his advisers
defeat her on these points (Nocera, Bair). The fact that Obama seemed not to see (or react to) the conflict between helping Wall Street, which had recovered nicely, and helping Main Street, which had not, provided further evidence that, whether out of fear or confusion, he sticks to a muddled capitalist center that, to be fair to him, has pervaded national Democratic policy thinking for two generations.

Obama’s support of the finance industry brings us back to thesis (1), which is more plausible than it at first appears. Obama does not want to destroy the economy or the middle class as such. Yet a hallmark of New Economy Democrats is their preference for Schumpeter over Keynes, that is, for “creative destruction” over the mass distribution of resources. A classic stimulus, in their view, props up ordinary activities and a large number of economic losers who will in effect “waste” capital on consumption that could be plowed into productive investment. Note, too, that when this investment does occur, it is often in other countries where production costs are lower. So although we might reject Hudson’s formulation in (1) to the effect that Obama consciously wants the American working and middle classes to take a 30 percent haircut while blaming Republicans for it, Hudson may be close to the likely outcome of an innovation-oriented Democratic theory of economic “trickle down,” which is to let big investors with their expertise make all the relevant decisions on the allocation of capital, resulting, if the recent past is any guide, in job loss, concentration of wealth at the top, and reduced living standards for the majority of society. A year after Hudson’s interview, the Federal Reserve reported that between 2007 and 2010 the median American family’s net worth had fallen by about 39 percent (Appelbaum).

Theses (1) and (2) also converge around the fact that it doesn’t matter in practice whether Obama is right or center, is in favor of concentrated wealth and weak social investment or merely held at bay by those who are. The result was the same: a failed economic recovery juxtaposed with a complete financial recovery for bank and corporate profits and salaries, the continued widening of record-setting levels of inequality, and historic lows in tax burdens.8 Obama’s economic policies did enormous damage to his political standing, since they offered little help for the bottom 90 percent or so of the population who form both the working and middle classes—and the Democratic Party’s entire natural constituency.

This brings us back to the question of Obama’s rapid political decline between 2008 and 2010. He is not an economist, but he had been an extremely successful politician. How could he have let his economic policies sabotage his political future?
Observers have proposed various explanations for his poor performance. A year into Obama’s presidency, one could find a growing consensus that his advisers were center-right and that Obama himself must be as well. Bush was far right, while Obama was a moderate conservative. He was, for instance, far more interested in using American military force to confront Islamic militants than he was in removing the causes of their grievances, such as the constant use of American military force in the Islamic world. At the same time, he embraced Islamic traditions in a speech in Cairo that could never have been given by George W. Bush. Obama may not have believed that markets were self-regulating, but he never made a statement about regulation that did not include a moment when he said, “I believe in the power of the free market,” by which he meant that markets and companies are the sole sources of real economic value (Obama, “Speech on Financial Reform”). Another example: Obama initially favored gay civil unions but not gay marriage. And another: earlier in his career he said he’d favor single-payer national health care like Canada’s, but his actual bill forced everyone without existing coverage to buy health care insurance with public money from the current private system. There are long lists of these mixed positions that could be used to show that Obama is not center-left or progressive but is center-right, so he was bound to disappoint everyone left of center. It would thus be perfectly logical for him to try to synthesize thesis (1) (trickle-down right-wing capitalist) with thesis (2) (New Economy public-investment capitalist) to continue the moderate-to-liberal Republican tradition of post-Clinton Democratic economics that he honored by appointing so many figures from the Clinton administration.

But if Obama is a center-right politician in a conservative country dominated by a combination of center-right and far-right views, he should have been doing better politically than he was. In reality, the country was not simply center-right as the financial crisis became a general economic crisis. For example, solid majorities of Americans actually wanted a “public option” in health care, but this was too radical for Washington. Similarly, the Democratic candidates who performed the most poorly in the 2010 election were the pro-corporate Blue Dogs. As one post-election report noted: “The Blue Dog caucus was cut in half, going from fifty-four to twenty-six. At the same time, the seventy-nine-member Progressive Caucus lost about four members.” As a result, an underappreciated effect of the 2010 election was that “progressives [made] up a notably higher percentage of Democratic House members in the 112th Congress” (Goodman). While conventional wisdom says that victory lies in the cen-
ter, in fact voters punished the center in 2010, in the form of Democrats who displayed the economic and other priorities of Republicans.

... ...

And indeed Obama was repeatedly warned by commentators that things were not going as planned. High-profile mainstream economists like Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman wrote detailed critiques coupled with suggestions for alternative courses of action. Progressive activists warned that when Obama let Rahm Emanuel, his chief of staff at the time, marginalize the president’s Left, he was weakening his base, eliminating valuable political thinking, and even helping to create the Tea Party as the only populist alternative (Hamsher, “Rahm”). In addition, in the summer of 2010 a leading Democratic polling firm released a policy “alert” tied to a detailed study showing that Obama’s “go forward” campaign framework would fail, and that he needed to shift to an explicitly pro-middle class anti-Wall Street campaign (Carville and Greenberg). In short, a wide range of commentators predicted that Obama’s right-of-center economic muddle would cost the Democrats the 2010 election. He stuck to it anyway, and proved his critics to be correct.

We need to continue with this question of why Obama would hold economic beliefs that damaged him politically. To do this, we will need to look at thesis (3).

Centrism and Compromise

The guiding impulse is deeper than Obama’s policy convictions. It has appeared repeatedly throughout his career, surfaced in the press conference after the 2010 election, and was a staple of his negotiations with the relentless Republicans in the summer of 2011. Speaking in March 2011 to a “bi-partisan group of college students” active in politics, Obama said:

If you’re only talking to people who you agree with, then politics is always going to disappoint you. Politics will always disappoint you. You think about some of the issues we’ve worked on over the last couple of years. I think that the college Republicans here would say that I was a pretty liberal president. But if you read the Huffington Post, you’d think I was some right-wing tool of Wall Street. Both things can’t be true. What it has to do with is this sense that we have a position and we can’t compromise on it. And so one of the challenges of this generation is I think to understand that the nature of our democracy and the nature of our politics is to marry principle to a political

Obama Unwound * 205
process that means you don’t get 100% of what you want. You don’t get it if you’re in the majority. You don’t get it if you’re in the minority. And you can be honorable in politics understanding that you’re not going to get 100% of what you want. And that’s been our history.

(Think of Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation not emancipating slaves in allied states and regions.)

Here you got a wartime president who’s making a compromise around probably the greatest moral issue that the country ever faced, because he understood that right now my job is to win the war and to maintain the union. Well can you imagine how the Huffington Post would have reported on that. It would have been blistering. Think of it. “Lincoln sells out slavery [sic].” There’d be protests. They’d run a third party guy. And so I think as you guys talk to your friends about getting involved civically, don’t set up a situation where you’re guaranteed to be disappointed. That’s part of the process of growing up. And that doesn’t mean that you’re not principled. . . . It means that you’re pushing the boulder up the hill, and you get it a certain way, and other people are pushing, and sometimes it’s going to slip back—right? (Obama, “The President Speaks”)

The overt theme of this statement is compromise, and the subtheme is disappointment. Obama says that compromise is the nature of American democracy and the nature of American politics. Compromise is the essential element, and failure to compromise ensures disappointment. He also claims that compromise is the essential element of accurate political understanding: confusion about who he is stems from the fact that both the Republicans and the Huffington Post take uncompromising positions. Obama also insists that compromise is compatible with principle, and uses Lincoln, an American icon of steady principle, to mock the idea that the Emancipation “compromise” meant that Lincoln had sold out his antislavery principles. Obama aligns himself with Lincoln as another great compromiser, presenting compromise as the great principle and, indeed, the principal greatness of American politics. Obama is in effect telling these students that his core political value is not market economics or racial equality or tax fairness or democracy abroad but compromise itself.

Compromise also has a vexed relation to the theme of disappointment. Obama’s stated claim, simplified, is:

1. If you don’t compromise, politics will always disappoint you.
He implies that the inverse of this statement is true:

2. If you do compromise, politics will not disappoint you.

But in both logic and political life, (2) is false. Obama had to know that he had disappointed tens of millions of people. He had to know that he had disappointed them precisely through his compromises. Obama was justifying compromise as the central mode of political life, but not really as what he said it was, a way of avoiding disappointment, but as a form of politics that is always disappointing. His real message to the students was to learn to accept disappointment: it is “part of the process of growing up.” Obama’s deeper message was thus

3. Politics is disappointing.

And the less conscious message hiding in this unspoken statement was:

3a. My politics are disappointing.

And yet we’re not quite finished. Obama also implicitly offered an explanation for why he was so disappointing:

3b. My politics are disappointing because my core value is compromise.

I am suggesting that this is the dominant psychological driver behind Obama’s policy positions. He always compromises. He often compromises too soon, when it seems strategically foolish for his side. This leads to what his supporters can regard as a bad compromise. The psychological value of the bad compromise is that it guarantees disappointment in one’s own supporters and, more important, in oneself. Obama’s administration has been a spectacular disappointment—to Obama’s supporters, to Obama’s opponents, and to Obama himself. An explanation of Obama’s unconscious preference for disappointment over hard-fought, unambiguous victory while governing (rather than while campaigning) is beyond my scope. The result for the Democratic Party was straightforward, and it was to cement its reputation as the party of disappointment. Obama’s reference to “running a third party guy” alluded to a growing sentiment in the country that the two-party system is unable to solve our obvious problems. Occupy Wall Street and similar movements elsewhere had become by September 2011 symptoms of the depth of the country’s disappointment in the Obama presidency and in the compromising that, with him presiding, constituted the political system as such. In economic policy, the practical effect of Obama’s incessant compromising has been to install at the summit of the Democratic Party exactly that hybrid that
Obama told the students is impossible, the liberal capitalist tool who subjects government agency and New Deal traditions to the private-sector agenda to which they were meant to serve as an alternative. Compromise and its inevitable disappointment blocked Obama’s ability to articulate the creative powers of the public sector.\textsuperscript{11} Obama failed to adapt to new conditions, and replaced development with disappointment as the primary deliverable of his enfeebled party.

Obama finally racked up such a purely disappointing performance—in the first presidential debate on October 3, 2012—that he was compelled, throughout the final weeks of his campaign, to push the progressive positions that had created his mass base in 2008.

\textit{A Less Disappointing Politics}

There have been enormous institutional pressures on Obama, and I don’t want to be mistaken as minimizing these. But he just as fundamentally undermined his own potential by abandoning his earlier apparent commitment to what I’ve called political romanticism. In that tradition, to repeat, the public disclosure of the refused truths of private experience allows individuals to return lost or alienated parts of themselves to politics with diminished fear of retribution. In contrast, Obama’s politics of compromise avoids candor and its attendant potential for the psychological safety of the general public. It ensures personal disappointment, translated as the triumph of the great powers that damaged the psychological well-being of the individual in the first place. Compromise and its resulting disappointment induce general individual withdrawal from participation in public life. “Growing up” in politics then means unending efforts to protect the self from disappointment, which leads to the regressed group formation of standard politics, which leads to constant disappointment.

I use a final example, however, to suggest a road to recovery. This comes from the language in a study I mentioned earlier—a series of opinion experiments that Democracy Corps ran with four thousand voters in July 2011 (Greenberg and Seifert). Participants were presented with two fixed Republican messages and then a variety of Democratic messages. They were then asked to rate Obama and the Democrats on various points. The outcomes were complicated, but one clear finding was that Obama would likely shift opinion most strongly in his direction through two sets of messages in particular. One of them invoked “Change,” and a second was called “Middle Class.” The most striking thing about the messages
used in the experiment is the directness of their texts, which I quote here in order of their effectiveness:

We have to start by changing Washington. It is dominated by big banks, big donors and corporate lobbyists. So politicians rush to bailout Wall Street. Big oil keeps its tax breaks and companies still get breaks for outsourcing jobs. The middle class won’t catch a break until we confront the power of money and the lobbyists. Expose their meetings, clean out tax loopholes, and limit donations. Getting the economy back for the middle class starts with changing Washington.

The biggest problem we face is the decline of the middle class. The middle class has been smashed and struggles to keep up with the rising costs of gasoline, college education and health care. We need to help small businesses, help people who work hard with education and training and protect critical middle class programs like Medicare for the elderly. We need to invest in innovation and new energy to create the middle class jobs of the future. (Greenberg and Seifert)\textsuperscript{12}

Obama’s innovation economy appears at the end of the second discursive option, and it was relatively attractive to voters, but less so when it was part of a sequence called “Progress-Compete,” in which the focus was on economic “reforms” and “winning in the global economy.”\textsuperscript{13} Both “reform” and “economic competition” have been associated with deindustrialization, the sending of blue- and white-collar jobs offshore, and stagnating or declining incomes for the great majority of American workers. The most successful sequence—as noted earlier—calls for innovation, but only in a framework that begins by stating the need for an attack on the banks and their lobbyists, a cleaning out of Washington, and “getting the economy back for the middle class” through adversarial confrontation with economic elites. Voters in this sequence shifted to Obama in part because they liked the second paragraph, which proposed education and training for people who work hard, \textit{after} the proverbial playing field has been leveled with some vigorous class warfare on the rich. In a country mythically opposed to socialism and solidarity in general, it is striking to see potential voters shift strongly in favor of a candidate who would tell the truth about the predatory role of the finance industry in both creating an economic crisis and blocking recovery for the majority of the population.\textsuperscript{14}

A variety of polling data suggests that a majority of Americans view
themselves and their children as excluded from whatever wealth the United States continues to generate. It appeared that Obama could survive in this climate only if he started to speak openly about this fear and the only way in which it could be realistically addressed—through openly egalitarian policies that put more resources back into the hands of the ordinary people who have never stopped working to create that wealth. If, however, he continued instead to compromise with the military, with Congress, and especially with Wall Street, and to disappoint everyone else, as in his catastrophic performance during the first presidential debate, he would have ensured that 2012 repeated the debacle of 2010, pushing recovery for both the United States and the world economy further out of reach. Having avoided that fate in the November 2012 elections, Obama has a chance to recover inclusion and equality as the guiding principles of his second term.

NOTES


2. For an older but standard (and still relevant) comparison of voter turnout, see G. Bingham Powell, “American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective,” American Political Science Review, 80.1 (March 1986): 17–43.

3. For an intelligent skirting of the issue, see E. J. Dionne, Why Americans Hate Politics (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). In contrast, for tireless exposition of Americans’ hostility to their political leaders across the political spectrum, see Glenn Greenwald’s blog at Salon.com, for example, “Why Do Voters Hate Incumbents?” Salon.com, 19 May 2010 (accessed 2 June 2010).

4. Alford describes the normal collective state in terms of a “regressed group,” in which each member exists in a “schizoid compromise” with the following three features: “1. One part of the self sees itself as instrument of the other’s malevolent or careless will. The other may be group or leader; generally . . . the primary fear is of the group, displaced onto the leader. 2. Another part of the self imagines itself to be in an ideal relationship with the other, so that the other’s
power, beauty, and so forth becomes an extension of one’s own. 3. Still a third part of the self is isolated and withdrawn, a result of not being able to fully invest the self in any real relationship” (Alford 52). In my view, this describes standard, repetitive features of American political life, with its frequent loathing for some major portion of the national group, erratic love-hate relationships to leaders, and a continuous failure to create democratic self-management based on egalitarian respect for peers. For analyses of this issue’s permutations in classic American literature, see, for example, my essays “The Politics of Male Suffering: Masochism and Hegemony in the American Renaissance,” differences 1.3 (Winter 1989): 55–87; “Democracy and Male Homoeroticism,” Yale Journal of Criticism 6.2 (Fall 1993): 29–62; and, with Melissa Solomon, “‘Few of our seeds ever came up at all’: A Dialogue on Hawthorne, Delany, and the Work of Affect in Visionary Utopias,” in No More Separate Spheres, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 377–408, and “The Culture of Force,” South Atlantic Quarterly (Winter 2006): 241–263. Regression and group regression are complex concepts in themselves, with complicated ties to related concepts, particularly the intimate public sphere (Lauren Berlant), mixed feelings (Ann Cvetkovich), identification (e.g., Diana Fuss), subjection (Judith Butler), wound culture (Mark Seltzer), and cruel optimism (Berlant), among others. Consideration of these relationships is beyond my present scope.


6. On this last point I part company with Alford, who is most interested in overturning what he sees as a stigmatization of leadership as such in political theory, and in calling for the recognition of good leaders who encourage people to become aware of their projections onto leaders, a move that leads him to see constitutional liberalism as the most developed state of public life (Alford 74).

7. I make the case that this episode was a turning point for Obama’s relation to the public in “American Political Romanticism.”

8. See also Scarecrow, “President Barack Herbert Hoover Obama.”

9. For a set of charts on low U.S. taxation rates, see Philip Davis, “Tempting Tuesday: Murdochs Testify to Parliament,” Seeking Alpha, 18 July 2011. One summary reads: “Not surprisingly, Wall Street and the top of corporate America are doing extremely well as of June 2011. For example, in Q1 of 2011, America’s top corporations reported 31% profit growth and a 31% reduction in taxes, the latter due to profit outsourcing to low tax rate countries. Somewhere around 40% of the profits in the S&P 500 come from overseas and stay overseas, with about half of these 500 top corporations having their headquarters in tax havens. If the corporations don’t repatriate their profits, they pay no U.S. taxes. The year 2010 was a record year for compensation on Wall Street, while corporate CEO compensation rose by over 30%, most Americans struggled. In 2010 a dozen major companies, including GE, Verizon, Boeing, Wells Fargo, and Fed Ex paid U.S. tax rates between −0.7% and −9.2%. Production, employ-
ment, profits, and taxes have all been outsourced. Major U.S. corporations are currently lobbying to have another “tax-repatriation” window like that in 2004 where they can bring back corporate profits at a 5.25% tax rate versus the usual 35% U.S. corporate tax rate. Ordinary working citizens with the lowest incomes are taxed at 10%.” “An Investment Manager’s View on the Top 1%,” Who Rules America, July 2011, http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/investment_manager.html.


12. This is Split E in the study.

13. This is Split C in the study.

14. The other top sequence for Democrats was Split G, “No Blame Game—Crisis-Then-Change” (my modified title). It reads: “Half the country blames George Bush for the state of the economy and the other half blames Barack Obama. But that blame game will not help create new jobs. We face immense economic problems that will take years to solve. We need to start working together to reduce spending and the deficit and ask the richest to pay their fair share of taxes. We need to support education, innovation and new American industries. When Obama took office, the deficit was surging, homes and stocks lost value and we were losing 750,000 jobs a month. The auto industry went bankrupt. Not everything Obama did was popular, and it has taken 4 years to get back to a place where people can breathe, but barely. Now, the economic focus has to be on changing our economy—on getting new American jobs, raising working and middle class incomes, cutting wasteful spending and getting the deficit down, while asking the wealthiest to contribute.” This sequence embeds demands on the rich in a language of bipartisanship designed not to alienate moderates (Greenberg and Seifert).

WORKS CITED


