

The Passive Presidency

By Mel Lavine

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With re-election on his mind, President Obama has adopted a style he hopes will win him the votes of independents. Until the 2010 shellacking of Democrats he was gung-ho for the middle and working classes and the poor, curbing Wall Street's greed, protecting the consumer, creating jobs, you name it. Now he is in retreat as the passive president.

Most recently he took a cue from Bill Clinton's scrapbook. You may remember that our 42nd president promoted uniforms for schoolchildren when he needed to change the subject. Obama's new deal is preventing bullying in schools. Toward this end he sponsored a White House meeting in the full glare of the cameras. Meantime a new Democratic senator from West Virginia, Joe Manchin III, scolded the president for not leading the party in its budget battles with Republicans. After all, Obama promised to change Washington, but that was then.

When Obama campaigned for president in 2008, he promised to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, if he was elected. But last week he issued an executive order affirming the legitimacy of a system of indefinite detention. The president's decision, according to the New York Times, "applies to 47 prisoners who cannot be tried because the evidence against them was classified or improperly obtained (usually through torture) but who cannot be freed because they are considered a serious terrorist threat."

The administration, said the newspaper, has "chosen to accept the concept of indefinite detention without trial, which represents a stain on American justice."

Obama, who once denounced prisoner abuse, gave tacit approval to the mistreatment of Pfc. Bradley Manning, in prison nine months on charges of handing government files to WikiLeaks. Although Manning has not yet come to trial, the military reportedly has been treating him abusively in ways that recall how terror suspects were treated during the benighted presidency of George W. Bush.

As for the economy, we hear from Robert Reich, Clinton's secretary of labor, in Sunday's San Francisco Chronicle, that – yes – jobs are growing but too slowly "to make a real dent in unemployment."

The reason is that millions of the jobless are no longer counted because they they're out of the mix. "If the share of Americans who are either employed or seeking work was the same today as it was before the Great Recession," Reich says, "the current unemployment rate would be 11.5 percent instead of 8.9 percent."

But the real story – "most of the jobs we've gained pay less than the jobs we've lost."

"The biggest losses during the Great Recession were jobs paying \$19.05 to \$31.40 an hour. By contrast the biggest gains over the past year have been jobs paying \$9.03 to \$12.91 an hour."

As Reich says, the news isn't the small growth in jobs. It's the smaller paychecks.

On the other hand, I see in The Nation that Bank of America, which was rescued by a taxpayer-financed loan of \$45 billion in 2008, paid "\$0.00 in taxes the next year. Up next other giants like Citigroup, Boeing, ExxonMobil, Wells Fargo and General Electric, which benefited from government largess but contribute not a cent to the public coffers."

In the meantime, executives staggered off with bonuses in multiples of millions.

I hate to say this but waiting for President Obama to come to our rescue reminds me of a play, "Waiting for Godot."

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