

Time to Bell the Obama Cat

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The story goes that some mice became very upset about the cat in the house and convened an emergency meeting. They finally came up with the idea of tying a bell around the cat's neck, so the dangerous feline could no longer catch victims unawares. The plan gained a lot of enthusiastic praise, until one mouse piped up with a question that preceded a long silence: "Who's going to bell the cat?"

In recent days, the big cat in the White House has provoked denunciations from groups that have rarely crossed him. They're upset about his decision to push for cuts in Social Security benefits. "Progressive outrage has reached a boiling point," the online juggernaut MoveOn declared a few days ago.

Obama's move to cut Social Security is certainly outrageous, and it's encouraging that a wide range of progressive groups are steamed at Obama as never before. But this kind of outrage should have reached a "boiling point" a long time ago. The administration's undermining of civil liberties, scant action on climate change, huge escalation of war in Afghanistan, expansion of drone warfare, austerity policies serving Wall Street and shafting Main Street, vast deference to corporate power. . . The list is long and chilling.

So is the evasive record of many groups that are now denouncing Obama's plan to cut Social Security. Mostly, their leaders griped in private and made nice with the Obama White House in public.

Yet imagine if those groups had polarized with President Obama in 2009 on even a couple of key issues. Such progressive independence would have shown the public that there is indeed a left in this country — that the left has principles and stands up for them — and that Obama, far from being on the left, is in the center. Such principled clarity would have undermined the right-wing attacks on Obama as a radical, socialist, etc. — and from the beginning could have gotten some victories out of Obama, instead of waiting more than four years to take him on.

Whether or not Obama's vicious assault on Social Security is successful, it has already jolted an unprecedented number of longtime supporters. It should be the last straw, suffused with illumination.

That past is prologue. We need to ask: Do such groups now have it in them to stop pretending that each of the Obama administration's various awful policies is some kind of anomaly?

From this spring onward, a wide range of progressive groups should be prepared to work together to effectively renounce Obama's leadership.

We need to invigorate political options other than accepting the likes of President Obama — or embracing self-marginalization.

For progressives, there's not a lot to be gained by venting against Obama without working to implement a plausible strategy for ousting corporate war Democrats from state power. Nor is there a useful path for third parties like the Green Party in races for Congress and other partisan contests; those campaigns rarely end up with more than a tiny percentage of the vote, and the impacts are very small.

This spring, there's a lot of work beckoning for progressives who mean business about gaining electoral power for social movements; who have no intention of eliding the grim realities of the Obama presidency; who are more than fed up with false pretenses that Obama is some kind of ally of progressives; who recognize that Obama has served his last major useful purpose for progressives by blocking a Romney-Ryan regime from entering the White House; who are willing to be here now, in this historical moment, to organize against and polarize with the Obama administration in basic terms; and who, looking ahead, grasp the tragic folly of leaving the electoral field to battles between right-wing Republicans and Democrats willing to go along with the kind of destructive mess that President Obama has been serving up.

A vital next step is staring us in the face: get to work now to develop and launch grassroots progressive campaigns for next year's primaries that can defeat members of Congress who talk the talk but fail to walk the walk of challenging Obama's austerity agenda.

Who are those congressional incumbents who call themselves "progressive" but refuse to take a clear stand against slashing Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid benefits? I have a little list. Well, actually it's not so little.

As of today, after many weeks of progressive lobbying and pleading and petitioning nationwide, 47 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus have refused to sign the letter, initiated by Congressmen Alan Grayson and Mark Takano, pledging to "vote against any and every cut to Medicare, Medicaid, or Social Security benefits — including raising the retirement age or cutting the cost of living adjustments that our constituents earned and need."

After all this time, refusal to sign the Grayson-Takano letter is a big tipoff that those 47 House members are keeping their options open. (To see that list of 47, [click here](#).) They want wiggle room for budget votes on Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security benefits. Most of them represent a left-leaning district, and some could be toppled by grassroots progressive campaigns.

By itself, lobbying accomplishes little. Right now, it's time to threaten members of Congress with defeat unless they vote against all efforts to cut Social Security and Medicare benefits. [Click here](#) if you want to send that message directly to your representative and senators.

The best way to sway members of Congress is to endanger their seats if they aren't willing to do the right thing. In the real world, politics isn't about playing cat and mouse. It's about power.

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