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Obama as the End of Identity Politics as We've Known Them

(And I Feel Fine)

[Terry Michael](#) | June 10, 2008

We are nearing the end of American identity politics as we know it.

Bearing that gift to those who prize the individual over the tribal is a messenger who shared a Hyde Park neighborhood with Milton Friedman, though with a public record that suggests he is more statist than classical liberal.

But Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), can't be categorized that simply. He is, rather, an intellectual and ideological work in progress. Not stuck in cable-babble caricatured time, he may be traveling the circuitous path many "liberal-tarians"—or [libertarian Democrats like me](#)—treaded as we grew and found our way back to the self-reliant values that informed our pluralistic democracy. We lost those values in the Industrial and Progressive eras, when advocates of centralized planning prized society's perfection over individual liberty. While Obama's positions don't exactly channel the Cato Institute, his departure from usual Democratic Party left-liberalism is reflected in the left's suspicion of him for not having all the 162-point plans of Sen. Hillary Clinton, or spewing the syrupy populism of trial lawyer to the underclass, Sen. John Edwards.

To me, this suggests the beginnings of a journey away from the Great Society mind-set of the Democratic Party. I was a 1960s teenage political junkie who wanted to complete the New Deal, with wealth redistribution and "social justice" managed from Washington. I morphed into a 1980s [DLC centrist](#), embracing mushy "progressive" politics as a halfway house from statist liberalism. Now in my own sixties, I have rediscovered the founder of my party, Thomas Jefferson, in an information era in which we are desktop-empowered to seek our own way and make our own choices, much like the agrarian age inventors of our political system.

I can't claim to know exactly where Obama is on this ideological continuum. He may not even know. But in his personal evolution, he has moved from the white world of boy Barry in Hawaii and Indonesia, to left-liberal enclaves at Ivy League colleges engaging with young conservatives, to a kind of noblesse oblige organizer bearing the white man's burden (half, in his case) on the streets of Chicago. He went from a young state legislator too aloof, in too much of a hurry for his colleagues in Springfield, to a failed U.S. House candidacy against former Black Panther Bobby Rush, hobbled by an inability to translate the language of the Harvard Law Review to the vernacular of the street. From that latter experience, he drew lessons allowing him to grow as a politician, hearing and incorporating some of the style of the black preacher—including the one who was to later cause him so much grief. He returned to Springfield after that failed congressional bid a different man.

He seems to be a grounded but still searching, an intellectually curious 46-year-old, with a breadth and depth of life experience that will help him make informed choices in a pluralistic democracy that demands its leaders split a lot of differences.

Compromise is a word doctrinaire libertarians find more appalling than appealing. But there's a lot that is appealing in Barack Obama.

Look at his [health care plan](#). While it certainly won't satisfy free-market purists, it relies on private insurance coverage, encourages portability and choice, promotes competition, and allows purchase of prescription drugs from other countries. It wasn't by accident he proposed fewer government mandates for purchasing coverage—and was pummeled for it in every debate by the politician who, back in 1993, seemed to seek personal control of a big chunk of our economy. Though drugs and crime can be political minefields for an urban black candidate who has acknowledged marijuana and cocaine use, Obama has no hard line positions in favor of neo-prohibition and has made promising comments about pulling back from America's status as one of the world's most prolific jailers. Immediately, his election will restore America's reputation around the world as an opponent of interventionist elective wars.

But perhaps most important to libertarians, his election will put the Jesse Jacksons, the Al Sharptons, and the white identity politics liberals out of business. No longer will they be able to peddle victimology or mau-mau their way through the political landscape, demanding diversity training, minority contracts, or other tribal reparations from bigots they find behind every bush. The myth of unassimilable “minorities” dies when a majority white nation selects a leader “of color,” just as religious social distance was diminished when a majority Protestant country chose a Catholic a half-century before.

There is no perfect leader in the wings. I'll settle for one whose election will signal the end of the world of racial politics as we know it. And, with a nod to [R.E.M., I'll feel fine about it](#).

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