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Making the Rich Happy

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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Nicely in time for the end-of-year job ratings, President Obama has crawled from the political graveyard, where only a month ago wreaths were being heaped around his sepulcher. The Commentariat now gravely applauds his recent victories in the US Congress: repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell inhibitions on gays in the military; Senate ratification of the new START treaty on nuclear weapons with the Russians; passage of a \$4.3bn bill – previously blocked by Republicans - providing health benefits for emergency rescue workers in the 9/11 attacks of 2001.

Something missing from my list? You noticed? Yes indeed: first and absolutely foremost, the successful deal with Republicans on taxes, better described as a \$4 trillion gift to America's rich people, by extending the Bush tax cuts. With the all-important tax surrender under their belts the Republicans don't seem too upset in having allowing Obama's his mini-swath of victories. There aren't too many votes in insisting that 1500 nukes aren't enough for Uncle Sam, particularly since Obama did his usual trick a year ago of surrendering before the battle began, pledging vast new outlays to the nuclear-industrial-complex. Would it have been that smart to deny benefits to 9/11 responders or say that gays in the military have to stay in the closet. Presumably they'll fight all the more fiercely now they can stand Out and Proud. On things that really matter, once they reassemble after the break, the Republicans will probably stay awake, though with a President who surrenders with the alacrity of Obama, excessive vigilance probably isn't necessary.

You give \$4 trillion to the rich and they express their thanks in measured terms. Their hired opinion formers laud the spirit of admirable compromise enabling responsible members of Congress to come together in bipartisanship to keep the hogwallow open for business.

True, there are the nay-sayers, the left-leaning tribunes of the people who say, accurately enough, that the great “compromise” was, in the economist Michael Hudson’s words, “all for the rich... not to promote stability and recovery... creating new public debt to hand out to the bankers which future tax payers will spend generations paying off”.

It was a deal of refined cynicism, containing the poison pill of what has been billed as a generous gesture to working people - a \$120 billion reduction in Social Security contributions by labor – reducing the rate of contributions to the Social Security pension fund from 6.2 per cent of wages to 4.2 per cent. But in fact this is a tripwire, setting up an onslaught on Social Security a year down the road as underfunded and going swiftly bankrupt and ready to be auctioned off to Wall Street.

The prime constant factor in American politics across the past six decades has been a counter-attack by the rich against the social reforms of the 1930s.

Twenty years ago the supreme prize of the Social Security trust funds – the government pensions that changed the face of America in the mid-1930s - seemed far beyond Wall Street’s grasp. No Republican president could possibly prevail in such an enterprise. It would have to be an inside job by a Democrat. Clinton [tried it](#), but the Lewinsky sex scandal narrowly aborted his bid.

If Obama can be identified with one historic mission on behalf of capital it is this – and though success is by no means guaranteed, it is closer than it has ever been.

This brings us to the upcoming 112th Congress, reflecting Republican gains in November, which will spend the evening of February 2 listening to Obama’s “bipartisan” agenda laid out in his State of the Union address.

The Politico website – reflecting informed political opinion in Washington DC - recently predicted that in this next address, “the teleprompter in chief is expected to announce cuts in Social Security.” As Robert Kuttner of Politico speculates: Obama’s rationale will be “to pre-empt an even more draconian set of budget cuts likely to be proposed by the incoming House Budget Committee chairman, Rep. Paul Ryan (R,Wisconsin), as a condition of extending the debt ceiling. This is expected to hit in April.”

But surely for progressives, infuriated by the tax giveaway to the rich, and whose support Obama will be counting on for re-election in 2012, cuts in Social Security will be the last straw? Don’t bet on it. As political beasts of burden, progressives have backs that can sustain a virtually infinite number of straws.

Against the tax betrayal these middle-class progressives will tout the end of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Identity politics will trump class politics, as has been the case for middle-class progressives for the past quarter-century.

Nor will they make much of another major failure by Obama: a calculated “inability” to get the ‘Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act’, through Congress. This would have enabled millions of undocumented immigrants who came to the US before they turned 16 to become conditional permanent residents and then citizens if they graduated from high school, completed military service or college, and kept their noses clean.

Republicans blocked the bill in the Senate, though it would have passed if Democrats had shown unity. But the White House was markedly disinclined to expend any political capital on this, just as it has failed to live up to any of its commitments to the blacks or to labor, whose money and organizers were the determining factor in getting Obama elected in 2008.

Right now Obama’s job approval rating, as measured by Gallup, is running at about 46 per cent, as against the disapprovers who are around 48 per cent, having dropped back from an early autumn high of over 50 per cent. He’s now fairly set upon the right-wing course Clinton embarked on after 1994: wars abroad (Yugoslavia for Clinton, Afghanistan for Obama); a war-on-terror policy worthy of Bush-Cheney, as exemplified in the abandonment of pledges to shut down Guantanamo and the swift drafting of new and repressive espionage laws in the wake of WikiLeaks. Last Thursday Bill Quigley and Vince Warren had an ominous [piece](#) on this site, Obama’s liberty Problem:

“Advisors in the Obama administration have floated the idea of creating a special new legal system to indefinitely detain people by Executive Order.

“Why? To do something with the people wrongfully imprisoned in Guantanamo. Why not follow the law and try them? The government knows it will not be able to win prosecutions against them because they were tortured by the US.

“Guantanamo is coming up on its ninth anniversary – a horrifying stain on the character of the US commitment to justice. President Obama knows well that Guantanamo is the most powerful recruitment tool for those challenging the US. Unfortunately, this proposal for indefinite detention will prolong the corrosive effects of the illegal and immoral detentions at Guantanamo rightly condemned world-wide.

“The practical, logical, constitutional and human rights problems with the proposal are uncountable.”

Clinton, the self-proclaimed ‘Comeback Kid’, took the same turn with his 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act., which was Act One of the Patriot Act. Clinton launched his successful onslaught on welfare in his second term, also the attack on Social Security which Obama now aims to consummate.

As with Clinton, we have a opportunistic, neoliberal president without a shred of intellectual or moral principle. We have disconsolate liberals, and a press saying that Obama is showing admirable maturity in understanding what bipartisanship really means. Like Clinton, Obama is fortunate in having pwogs to his left only too happy to hail DADTell as the rationale for continuing to support this spineless slimeball. The landscape doesn’t change much, as evidenced by the fact that Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida

and George W's brother, looks as though he's ready to make a bid for the Republican nomination.

The Day of the Beast

I now yield the floor to co-editor Jeffrey St Clair, whose marvelous report on the hidden history of animal resistance is featured in our new subscriber only newsletter, released this weekend.

“Only a few centuries ago, in the spring of 1457, a gruesome murder took place in the French village of Savigny-sur-Étang. A 5-year-old boy had been killed and his body partially consumed. A local family was accused of this frightful crime by local residents who claimed to have witnessed the murder. The seven suspects, a mother and her six children, were soon tracked down by local authorities, who discovered them still stained by the boy's blood. They were arrested, indicted on charges of infanticide, and held in the local jail for trial.

“The defendants were indigent, and the court appointed a lawyer to represent them. A few weeks later a trial was convened in Savigny's seigneurial court. Before a crowded room, witnesses were called. Evidence was presented, and legal arguments hotly debated. The justices considered the facts and the law, and rendered a verdict and a sentence. The mother was pronounced guilty and ordered to be hanged to death by her legs from the limb of the gallows tree. Her six children, however, received a judicial pardon. The court accepted the defense lawyer's argument that the youngsters lacked the mental competence to have committed a crime in the eyes of the law. The orphaned children were sent into custodial care at the expense of the state.

“This is an interesting case to be sure, featuring important lessons about the legal rights of the poor and the historic roots of juvenile justice in Western jurisprudence, lessons that seem entirely lost on our current “tradition-obsessed” Supreme Court. But here's the kicker – the defendants in these proceedings were not members of our species. They were, it must be said, a family of pigs.”

Jeffrey reviews other extraordinary cases of animal trials running through the Middle Ages, and terminating abruptly amid the dawn of the Age of Reason when Rene Descartes and his confreres decreed that animals were mere machines, incapable of feeling pain, and could be exploited and tortured with a clear conscience. From there Jeffrey takes us to the equally extraordinary stories of animal resistance, planned with intellectual and moral discrimination.

[Subscribe](#) to CounterPunch and read Jeffrey's piece and also Larry Portis' important dispatch from France on why Sarkozy and his government have been successful in pressing their program of destroying French social protections developed after World War 2.

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And once you have discharged this enjoyable mandate I also urge you strongly to click over to our [Books](#) page for your Christmas gifts, most particularly our latest release, Jason Hribal's truly extraordinary *Fear of the Animal Planet* – introduced by Jeffrey St Clair and already hailed by Peter Linebaugh, Ingrid Newkirk (president and co-founder of PETA) and Susan Davis, the historian of Sea World, who writes that “Jason Hribal stacks up the evidence, and the conclusions are inescapable. Zoos, circuses and theme parks are the strategic hamlets of Americans’ long war against nature itself.”