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The “New Politics”: Squaring the Circle by Sheldon Richman

How many times will people be fooled by a presidential contender’s claim that he is a “new kind of politician”?

Sen. Barack Obama has made this the centerpiece of his campaign. He strives to hold himself above the partisan fray and talks about “changing Washington.” As a result, some people look on Obama as a savior who needs to be given a chance to deliver us from the muck of gutter partisanship. His promise is nothing if not extravagant.

“We want a politics that reflects our core decency,” Obama says. A politics that reflects decency would seem as likely as a square circle, but let’s give the man his say. In the speech that launched his campaign last year, he staked out his niche, acknowledging that we have heard all this before:

I know there are those who don’t believe we can do all these things. I understand the skepticism. After all, every four years, candidates from both parties make similar promises, and I expect this year will be no different. All of us running for president will travel around the country offering ten-point plans and making grand speeches; all of us will trumpet those qualities we believe make us uniquely qualified to lead the country. But too many times, after the election is over, and the confetti is swept away, all those promises fade from memory, and the lobbyists and the special interests move in, and people turn away, disappointed as before, left to struggle on their own.

That is why this campaign can’t only be about me. It must be about us — it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams.

Nice words, but they have trouble withstanding scrutiny. Obama is right. There’s nothing new about the “new politics.” Someone is always running for president by campaigning against Washington. Mitt Romney did it. John McCain says he’s doing it. Many did it before them. So why does Obama get treated as though he’s the first?

More important, why does anyone believe he will deliver where others have failed?

There's little reason to expect this because, in substance, Obama's program is about as new as sliced bread. Does his platform break new ground in any way? No, it doesn't. He offers the same stale political answers to the perennial questions about poverty, medical care, energy, Social Security, education, and national security. In every case, his answer is: the government will fix it.

But what is government? It's compulsion. Underlying Obama's siren song of unity, bipartisanship, and cooperation is the reality of physical force. When government acts, someone gets coerced. How does Obama propose to give medical coverage to the uninsured? By forcing the taxpayers to subsidize it. How does he propose to replace fossil fuels? By forcing the taxpayers to pay companies to develop alternatives. How does he propose to fix Social Security? By forcing some people to pay more. How does he propose to improve education? By forcing the taxpayers to finance more programs. How does he propose to protect America? By forcing Americans to maintain a global empire, which is the source of so much hostility.

There's a term for Obama's program, which was coined by the French liberal Frédéric Bastiat: legal plunder.

Meanwhile, Obama shows no appreciation for what the free market — that is, free individuals cooperating to achieve diverse ends — can accomplish. Has he once blamed government interference with economic freedom for creating or aggravating a problem? If so, it's not made the news.

"I got into this race to change how business is done in Washington," he says. He is being either naive or disingenuous. If government is going to tax, borrow, and hand out \$3 trillion a year, there is no way to stop well-connected interests from gaming the system to get its hands on the money. There's a reason why other attempts at the "new politics" have failed. Obama is promising to square the circle.

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