

## 6.1 Gary Dorrien (2012) *The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective*

### Detailed Review

#### This Resource's Key Interpretations and Insights Related to the Purposes of This Website

(1) If you want to have a **fully informed and fair perspective on the first three years of Obama's presidency**, it's important to be familiar with what makes this author and his book so unique. **It's Dorrien's rare ability to read, organize and fairly represent all the most important positions related to a subject that makes his books, articles and teaching so compelling.**

(2) Dorrien has a very good argument for why (even though he often agrees with many of his fellow progressives' criticisms of Obama's actions during his first three years in office) **no one should see those actions either as betrayals of his promises or (more importantly) reasons for not actively supporting him for a second term.**

(3) Ugly character assaults and gross misrepresentations of policies have always been part of American politics. However, as Dorrien points out, polls reveal that **startling, unprecedented percentages, not only of Republicans but of the general population, believe the outrageously false characterizations of President Obama and his policies spewed out incessantly by the far-right.** They're so ridiculous they'd be laughable, if they weren't such a threat to the health of our democracy.

(4) Dorrien has good insights into Obama's locations on the philosophical, religious and political spectrums. **This allows him to explain (from the perspective of his own position, quite a bit to the left of Obama) why this center-left president is such a unique, and often misunderstood, politician.**

#### Additional Important Interpretations and Insights

(5) For Dorrien **it's the far-right take over of the Republican Party and its politically motivated obstructionist stance since Obama's election that is basically responsible for the asymmetric polarization in Congress.**

Before dealing with these five key points, it's important to say a few things about what I see as the underlying purpose of this book. By design, it was published early in 2012 (using much material from his articles and books written over the preceding four years), because he hoped it might have some impact on the 2012 election. **He is especially trying to reenergize support for Obama among progressives**, which isn't easy since so many have been quite disappointed in the first term of his presidency. He thinks (as do many others, including myself) that **our nation stands at a decisive crossroads, facing a crucial decision about "what kind of country" we should be (203)**, which is the title and content of his concluding chapter (see box for all chapter titles).

#### Chapters

1. Shortcut to Redemption
2. Becoming Obama
3. To the White House
4. Saving Capitalism from Itself
5. Timidly Bold Obamacare
6. Moral Empire and Liberal War
7. Banks and Budgets
8. What Kind of Country

Dorrien puts the 2008 election in the context of realignment theory in political science, which says American politics has a decisive realignment every thirty or forty years after a breakthrough election (e.g. FDR's New Deal election in 1932 and Ronald Reagan's 1980 election **that paved the way to "the capitalist blowout of the past generation."** (204) **Barack Obama's election in 2008 holds the promise of being transformational in the sense of ending the thirty-year Reagan-initiated era.** However, an unforeseen financial collapse and

partisan political roadblocks have slowed it down greatly and threaten not just to stop it but reverse it. Dorrien claims there's still time to ensure that the transformation continues and strengthens, but it's probably short.

(203-04) This is the primary meaning and the urgency behind

As I put it, to fail to do this will be to reward extremism, move the right even more to the far-right and result in greater inequality.

Dorrien's title, *The Obama Question*.

### Useful Link

Soon I will be reviewing a video series of a college-level course that comprehensively covers realignment theory and the entire segment of American history that contains it. It's one of the best resources I've discovered that deals with all the twists and turns and changing meanings of "conservative" and "liberal" in our nation's political history. It is Joseph Kobyłka (2006) *Cycles of American Political Thought* (Audio or Video with Course Guidebook). Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company.

I believe that you can't fully understand the extreme asymmetric polarization that has immobilized our political system unless you have at least the basics of this history that my review of this resource gives you.

The opening for this new transformational moment--**a democratic move toward social justice and equality**--came because of **the obscene growth of inequality once the Reagan policies began to be enacted**. Dorrien says, **"the common good has been getting hammered for thirty years."** (203) **Our traditionally strong middle-class has been eviscerated.** (204) He believes this situation can't be redeemed with "any moral decency" without overturning the legacy of Ronald Reagan, "the gold standard president of the Republican Party." He has hope that the Occupy Wall Street movement will be the restart of an actual American political Left, which has been missing for decades. (228)

Such a movement is needed (1) to challenge the popularity of the reduction of the American Dream to a hope of attaining individual wealth. **This has led many Americans to be ideologically opposed to policies that would rectify disparities of wealth at any level.** Also, (2) there's **a perception held by many that nothing can be done politically by nations to counter the inequalities caused by the unrestrained capitalism unleashed by globalization.** (207) For Dorrien (as shown in the quote, right), contrary to apologists like globalist Thomas Friedman and other academics called "neoliberals," **politics does still matter.** (205-6)

### Quote

For Dorrien both of these commonly held beliefs are "nonstarters for any moral perspective that maintains a connection to biblical teaching about wealth, poverty, and the good society." (207)

However, it's politics of certain kinds--those grounded in something deeper than power for power's sake--that are worthy of our passionate commitment to work for a healthier nation (see quote, left).

### Quote

"Politics is always about power and only sometimes about social justice. It has a relation to redemption--the healing of life and the world (Hebrew *tikkun*)--only through its connection to social justice." (2)

Dorrien frames the choice in 2012 to be between **the vision of society that stands for the unrestricted freedom to acquire wealth** and **the vision that a just society is one that uses democratic tools to restrain unjust use of social, political, and economic power.** For him, 2012 is the year when, as a nation, we must address **the crucial question of "whether capitalism or democracy should have the upper hand."** (225) For him, concern for the common good, not only individual freedom is essential for democracy.

As Obama said in Chicago's Grant Park the night of his election, the strength of our nation comes from "the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope." (70)

*(Now for the four key points)*

(1) If you want to have **a fully informed and fair perspective on the first three years of Obama's presidency**, it's important to be familiar with what makes this author and his book so unique. **It's Dorrien's rare ability to read, organize and fairly represent all the most important positions related to a subject that makes his books, articles and teaching so compelling.**

First, he has an amazing ability to cover **all** the most important background for a subject about which he is going to write. When this involves many individuals and their ideas and actions (as certainly is the case with the subject of this book), he has **the rare gift of seeing and understanding them in their full biographical and historical context**. Second, while his own positions on subjects are clear, **he primarily focuses on representing the the persons and ideas he is presenting fairly, especially those with whom he disagrees the most**. He has a reputation of being able to do both these difficult things well.

I've had firsthand experience of these very unusual abilities in a summer school class I audited at the Illiff School of Theology in Denver. He was lecturing on one of the books in his massive trilogy on the history of American liberal theology. I've never met anyone else who could at the drop of a hat command so many facts from memory about so many people's ideas and lives.

With respect to this book, he (1) **uses all the best known mainstream publications** about Obama to construct his narrative, as shown by his many detailed references to them in the footnotes. He also (2) critiques **all the primary publications that have such gross misrepresentations of Obama and his positions and actions (sometimes it's outright intentional and hateful disinformation)**. I don't know of any other progressive source that's dealt with these distasteful (to everyone but the far-right) books so comprehensively. *(For lists of both kinds of books Dorrien refers to scroll down to p. 9.)*

There's no way I can begin to do justice to Dorrien's comprehensive descriptions of Obama's path to the presidential power (Chapters 2 and 3) and the main challenges and accomplishments during the first three years of his presidency (Chapters 2 through 7--his dealing with the deep financial crisis he inherited, his choice to prioritize health care, his foreign policy and war strategies, and his efforts to better regulate the financial sector, respectively [see list of chapters on p. 1, above]). While, as you will see, I disagree with some of Dorrien's evaluations of Obama's actions, I recommend that you read this book for its accurate and fair summary of all the major books on Obama to date.

(2) Dorrien has a very good argument for why (even though he often agrees with many of his fellow progressives' criticisms of Obama's actions during his first three years in office) **no one should see those actions either as betrayals of his promises or (more importantly) reasons for not actively supporting him for a second term**.

One of the main reasons Dorrien wrote this book is that he's worried that progressives, who have been demoralized or angry at the President's refusal to **fight** for progressive causes, will refuse to support him in 2012. He knows many who have pledged just that, including some involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. (11-12) Specifically, he points to those he personally knows very well who vowed not to work for Obama again after their great disappointment that he didn't push for the public option in the health care bill. (119)

He highlights two prominent progressives who have publicly charged Obama with "betraying" his supporters--Cornel West and Rabbi Michael Lerner. He says, while they're "treasured friends" with whom he agrees on most political issues, **he disagrees with them on "the importance of not giving up on Obama."** For him, disappointed progressives, while correct about many specific criticisms, have exaggerated betrayal charges. He says Obama has almost totally governed in "the very manner of liberal-leaning moderation" that he ran on during his campaign, and the few instances where this was not so can justly be blamed on extreme Republican obstructionism. (12-13)

Progressives  
exaggerate betrayal  
charges.

He also urges disgruntled progressives to be politically realistic rather than ideologically rigid. First, he pointedly reminds progressives that **their failure to support Al Gore in 2000 because of their frustration with Clinton/Gore administration policies certainly played a role in the election of G. W. Bush's presidency, which was so disastrous for their causes**. And secondly, he proclaims that Obama is **the most progressive president since FDR and electing "a more compelling human being" to the presidency is probably impossible in America at this time**. (12-13)

Dorrien also appeals to the idealism of progressives by pointing out that they (and many others) have not recognized **Obama's many surprising progressive accomplishments, in spite of the fierce opposition he's been confronted with on everything he's tried to do**. (14-15) *(To see what Dorrien views as Obama's extensive accomplishments scroll down to p. 10.) (The Obama campaign has made an good 17-minute film covering many of these accomplishments. [Click here.](#))*

Dorrien urges progressives and others to help reelect him in 2012. To end this section, his summation in the last paragraph of the book is worth quoting in its entirety (see quote, below).

## Quote

“Obama **still** has an essentially progressive vision of the presidency that he wants to have. He is **still** the most compelling human being to reach the White House in decades. And he is **still** a figure of singular promise in American politics. To fulfill that promise he has to overcome his own cautious, accommodating temperament, and progressives have to believe it is still possible.” (my emphases) (229)

(3) Ugly character assaults and gross misrepresentations of policies have always been part of American politics. However, as Dorrien points out, polls reveal that **startling, unprecedented percentages, not only of Republicans but of the general population, believe the outrageously false characterizations about President Obama and his policies spewed out incessantly by the far-right.** They’re so ridiculous they’d be laughable, if they weren’t such a threat to the health of our democracy.

## Useful Link

I’m often disappointed in the mainstream (lame-stream?) media’s failure to confront gross distortions of facts that are having a significant effect on the public. This is being appropriately skewered on the new HBO series, *The Newsroom*, which I will be reviewing soon.

Another standout exception was the *Newsweek* 9/6/10 cover story by Jonathan Alter: “‘[The Illustrated Man: Obama’s enemies have painted him as an alien threat. Can he fight the flight from facts?](#)’ (Click the title for link.) The article was advertised on the cover with this provocative phrase in large print: “**THE MAKING OF A TERRORIST-CODDLING, WARMONGERING, WALL STREET-LOVING, SOCIALISTIC, GODLESS, MUSLIM PRESIDENT\* [\* who isn’t actually any of these things].**” To Alter’s credit, **you can’t say it much more directly than that!**

(Please note: I’m going to use just the names of the authors of the books Dorrien critiques in what follows. *For the titles see the bottom of p. 9, below.*)

Not only did Obama gradually have serious problems with his progressive base, Dorrien spells out early in the book that **his election “set off a howling alarm of anxiety and fear” from those who couldn’t imagine him as their president.** Polls showed that a third of Americans believed he **supported Islamic radicalism** and over half thought he was **a socialist.** One fourth believed he was not a Christian but **a Muslim.** Half of Republicans believed Donald Trump’s charge that he wasn’t a legitimate president because he **wasn’t born in the U.S.**, and another fifth said they weren’t sure. Dorrien expressed amazement that these **“stunningly preposterous beliefs”** were so prevalent. (4) All these misrepresentations are as short on facts as they are toxic to the chances for Obama’s reelection. (9)

Obama recognized the power of his story to propel his unprecedented ascent to prominence. He was so different that he had to tell his story. In Chapter 2 where Dorrien deals with Obama’s life before becoming president, he points out the parts of Obama’s story that became the origins of some of these misrepresentations. (19) In Obama’s first book, *Dreams from My Father*, there were some errors, slanted interpretations of events (usual in autobiographies) and use of literary devices (e.g., composite characters and especially “Homeric tropes about finding a father and a way home”).

In 2009 a journalist claimed that Obama’s neighborhood friend, Bill Ayers, helped him with the book. Conspiracy theorists jumped on this and Obama’s other contacts with what they called “anti-American radicals” to blow them out of all proportion **as proof of Obama’s radicalism** (Dorrien specifically lists Jerome Corsi, Aaron Klein, and Jack Cashill in a footnote). (21) In another instance, a sentence describing what Obama’s father said about British colonialism in Kenya was hyperbolically extended **to prove Obama’s vengeful anticolonialism** (see below). (29) And again, Obama’s discovery of some of the most famous black authors black fueled **claims that he is a Black Power radical.** (31) His treatment of the influence of Frank Marshall Davis became one of the most important sources for conspiracy charges, **purportedly indoctrinating him into communism.** Some even said **that Davis was his real father** (especially Cashill). (32) Dorrien also discusses the important weight that “Joyce” carried as a composite figure in Obama’s story of how he found his black identity. (33-4) The fact that Obama has benefited from affirmative action is another thing that the far-right targeted to

claim he was **unfit to be president**. (44) A prominent black conservative, Shelby Steele, claimed that Obama couldn't win in 2008 because he tried to deal with race in contradictory ways and didn't know who he was. (58)

Unfit to be president??

In a long section of his last chapter, "Imagining the Hateful Obama," Dorrien exposes in much more detail a few of the authors who stoke "the politics of fear and loathing" for what they are. (207) He says, this "paranoid" literature still feeds an almost insatiable demand for it. It takes him a long paragraph just to list the most popular authors, with Jerome Corsi (a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard) as the king among them. Brad O'Leary **claims Obama wants to destroy the economy and keep Christianity out of the public sphere, etc.** Orly Taitz, the queen of the birthers, says there's **a conspiracy to cover up Obama's entering Harvard as a foreign student.** Aaron Fox plays up **Obama's supposed radical connections.** Jack Cashill claims Obama is **not smart enough to author his first book.** Dorrien also lists several others in the genre. (208)

Corsi became infamous for his Swift Boat smearing of John Kerry in 2004. Just before the 2008 election in *The Obama Nation* he claimed that **an Obama presidency would be an "abomination" because he's corrupt, a liar and an anti-American socialist.** He was highly critical of Obama for taking literary license in telling his story (Dorrien deals with a number of the specific examples). Corsi had long chapters where he charged Obama with radicalism **based on guilt by association techniques.** Dorrien points out that Corsi did encourage far-right bloggers not to claim Obama was a fraud by claiming to be a Christian while he was really a Muslim. However, coming late to the birther movement, he wrote a book about it that ironically rapidly rose to be #1 on Amazon just before Obama released his birth certificate in 2011.

The most extreme and popular conspiracy argument came from a very different angle. Dinesh D'Souza (popular with conservatives and formerly in the Reagan administration) claimed that **the key to understanding Obama is his seething African anticolonial rage dedicated to avenging his father's defeat by destroying the U.S.** He warned the far-right critics not to rely on claims that Obama is an anti-American socialist, because it is slightly off. Surprisingly, he actually was able to first publish his anticolonial charge in a *Forbes* magazine cover story in 2010, and the book version published the same year skyrocketed to #4 on the best-seller list in its first week. (212-13)

Obama's African anticolonial rage???

Dorrien roundly condemns D'Souza. He says, to claim Obama is an advocate of racial revenge is ludicrous. It **"descends to a level of race-baiting that would have embarrassed Lee Atwater or George Wallace."** (215) To argue that Obama is obsessed with anticolonialism just because he was sometimes critical of colonialism is perverse. Unfortunately, many on the far-right enthusiastically embraced this position. To his great discredit, even Newt Gingrich accepted D'Souza's position, calling it profound and utterly convincing, and making it foundational for his candidacy for the presidency. Dorrien calls Gingrich's frequent use of it "naked race-baiting." (216)

There are many suggestions as to why so many Americans naively believe these blatant disinformation attacks. However, I think the failure of Republican leaders to strongly condemn them means they bear significant responsibility. **I also believe that racism plays a major role,** although Obama understandably doesn't want to call attention to this.

(4) Dorrien has good insights into Obama's locations on the philosophical, religious and political spectrums. **This allows him to explain (from the perspective of his own position, quite a bit to the left of Obama) why this center-left President is such a unique, and often misunderstood, politician.**

Immediately in his first chapter, Dorrien frames his interpretation of Obama by stating that he is a figure of great **"irony and complexity."** (2) Most interpreters certainly see the complexity, as do I. But I think it's Dorrien's own, more fully left perspective that leads him to use "irony" as a major category to understand Obama.

Personally, because I'm coming from a more center-left perspective closer to Obama's, I see things a little differently.

Obama has said many times that Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian theologian who was perhaps the most famous public intellectual of the 20th century, has greatly influenced his thought and action. Dorrien understands this well. He captures the most general level of this influence when he says that Obama is **"imbued with a Niebuhrian blend of American idealism and realism."** (125) He spells out the specific implications of this influence in the field of Obama's foreign policy in his sixth chapter, "Moral Empire and Liberal War." Obama is very close to Niebuhr's Christian realism in the way he affirms both the long history of the greatness of America and its sins. Niebuhr had renewed classical just war theory, and Obama used it in a slightly different form in his

Obama is imbued with a Niebuhrian blend of American idealism and realism.

acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize. This was the realism side of **his centrist synergistic combination of values in tension**, his positions on justifiable moral reasons for both going to war and how it should be conducted.

### Useful Link

Soon I will be reviewing an excellent resource for understanding Reinhold Niebuhr's influence on Obama. It's David Brooks and E.J. Dionne (2009) "Obama's Theologian: David Brooks and E.J. Dionne on Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Present," an 83-minute video of a dialogue mediated by Krista Tippett at the Berkley Center, Georgetown University on August 13, 2009.

For the idealism side he used Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi as his moral compass and ground for hope of peace.

"I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him. (148)

Obama quoted King's Nobel Prize speech (left) to show its importance for his views. This quote is relevant to Obama's stance toward the entire range of political topics. It's an important balance to his pragmatic, realist side.

In his last chapter Dorrien identifies another key aspect of Obama's intellectual identity. Since he believes that communitarianism is an essential ingredient of Obama's worldview, he devotes an entire section of this chapter to a book written in the middle of the Reagan administration that disputed Reagan's claim that it was "morning in America." This book is *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985) by Robert Bellah and three other members of his team of sociologists. They were worried that **extreme forms of individualism were endangering democracy**. Dorrien thinks Reagan's victory "symbolized" this trend and Reagan himself "mythologized" it.

The Bellah group argued that trends toward this antisocial individualism **had been countered in the past by two strong cultural influences--biblical religion and civic republicanism**. Both focused on issues of how healthy societies dealt with wealth and poverty. The Bible stands over against the unjust use of power and wealth which leads to oppressive inequality. Republicanism (starting with Aristotle) asserted that without **"equality of opportunity and condition"** societies would fail. (216-17)

Bellah criticized both of the prominent American Christian religious groups--the Christian Right and mainline churches--for not standing over against this threat to democracy. The former **let itself be co-opted into it**, and the latter **tried to stem its decline by withdrawing from social justice concerns "preaching an innocuous gospel that threatened nobody."** (218)

While the Bellah group accepted Reinhold Niebuhr's realism about the inability of any society to embody perfectly any ideal form of society centered on the common good, citizens should nevertheless always devote themselves to work for expanding the limits of the possible. One of our first duties whenever the far-right tries to reduce the Common Good to a radically individualized form of the American dream (as is happening again today among the extremists who have taken control of the Republican party) is **to fight it at every turn**. (219-20)

I've taken the time to flesh out Dorrien's take on this famous communitarian position, because it's close to Dorrien's own. He says that Bellah's communitarian position is "well to the left of Obama's," which is **only "a progressive-leaning" type**.

Early in his book Dorrien does provide a compact, helpful description of Obama as a **pragmatist and left-leaning centrist who still operates out of a progressive vision**. (15) For me, this is a completely positive description. However, as Dorrien's interpretation develops it becomes clear that "left-leaning centrist" is a negative phrase for him. It appears that the tension between that negative for Dorrien and what is positive--Obama's progressive vision--is what creates the "irony" (quoted above) in Obama's ideas and actions.

Dorrien does use the insights in James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political*

*Tradition* to show just how important communitarianism is to so many aspects of Obama's views of politics and religion. He sees that this is a large part of his basic commitment to the idea that **freedom, equality and community all need to be present in healthy societies**. Kloppenberg, a Harvard intellectual historian, spells out in detail how it was the form of communitarianism developed in the debates in American universities during the '80's and early '90's when Obama was in graduate school that influenced him the most. (220-21) (My review of this key book is the next one in Section 6. See 6.2.)

Kloppenbergs also address why Obama's commitment to **deliberative democracy** as it developed in early American history **explains why Obama is so deeply committed to idea that common solutions need to be found through the mediation of competing ideological positions** (see the Kloppenberg quote, right). This is so puzzling to many people because **they mistake it as weak, middle-of-the-road strategy, which leads to not having the courage to fight for one's principles and, thus, end up compromising them away**. Dorrien is critical of this kind of charge when it's seen as a basic flaw in Obama's

character as a leader. Yet he often uses it himself when talking about particular policy struggles.

"Obama understands that the power of our principles of liberty and equality depends not on the fervor with which they are proclaimed but on the deliberative process from which they are developed. That process requires us to debate, test, and revise the meaning of our ideals in practice rather than genuflecting reverentially before them." (221)

It's Kloppenberg's positive assessment of this part of Obama's method of governing as essential to our democracy that makes me value it more than what I see as Dorrien's negative evaluation of it.

I basically find myself greatly admiring Dorrien's ability to eloquently describe Obama's skillful and principled actions promoting the political and religious values he holds dear. However, **it's precisely those times when he charges that Obama didn't fight hard enough for a particular political cause that I find myself disagreeing with him.**

It's true that there are instances where Dorrien takes the position that Obama accomplished the most he realistically could under the circumstances of constant Republican obstructionism (e.g., the debt ceiling debate [195]). Naturally, every interpreter of Obama's words and actions during his time as president will have to make a judgment call on each one as to whether Obama could have done more for what he/she believes in.

I agree with Kloppenberg's willingness to give Obama the benefit of the doubt in most instances. I think this is because Kloppenberg, more of a center-left person politically, as I am, is more realistic about the possible limits of presidential power.

Early in the book Dorrien signaled his progressive credentials (in my terms fully Left, not center-left) by saying that he had hoped for much more fully progressive actions from Obama, e.g., pulling out of Afghanistan, creating a public bank, pushing hard for a public option in the health care bill, getting a second stimulus package passed, ending the Bush tax cuts. **He wanted Obama to fight for at least a couple of these things, even if he failed.**

**Dorrien, along with many other progressives, would like Obama to be much more like FDR and LBJ when it comes to fiercely using the all the possible levers of dominating power to overwhelm opponents while governing.** That's certainly a long-standing philosophy of political leadership that many assume is the only legitimate one. **But Kloppenberg shows that Obama belongs to the lesser known and used deliberative democracy tradition.**

For Obama, as I understand him, this different tradition of deliberative democracy is about how one **governs**, what kind of power one uses and promotes, once elected. It's during **campaigns** that he **fight**s forcefully for his political philosophy and policies in order **to win** the office, so that he's in a position to govern and the public will know what he will be promoting in the deliberative process. It's there that he skillfully employs some aspects of Chicago-style hard ball politics with great effect. You can't govern, if you don't win. It's precisely this unusual combination that is new and puzzling to many people.

A prime instance of what I value in Obama's approach to governing and Dorrien's negative evaluation of it from his quite different model is his Chapter 5 "Timidly Bold Obamacare." Obama's struggle to achieve national health care when so many others have failed is the place where he sees the most irony in what Obama has been able to accomplish. (101) The section on the backstory for this effort is one everyone interested in the Affordable Care Act should read. It tells the fascinating history of the previous attempts and why they failed. (102-09)

Dorrien explains that Obama had some bottom line commitments that had to be included in the bill, though he wanted Congress to take the responsibility for how it all would be crafted. From the start he made known that he would not be fighting for the non-essentials. He didn't want the perfect to be the enemy of the good, unlike some of his "bleeding heart liberal" friends who valued such fighting for unachievable details even if it meant losing the opportunity to pass a bill that would be a partial victory to be built upon later. He signaled this from the beginning by taking the single payer option off the table and cutting deals with the health insurance industries, drug companies and hospitals, actions that infuriated his liberal base. (110-11)

Dorrien has the best short explanation I've seen of what the single payer option is, especially **countering the criticism that it's "socialized medicine."** That Obama also didn't fight for a public option was a "huge mistake" according to Dorrien, because he could have prevailed and it would have been a major step toward universal coverage. Obama's staff publicly defended his decision, charging that the critical progressives were mistaken about the danger of the whole bill on this issue failing and losing perspective on what really matter, in a bill that could pass. (118)

I must say that initially this was troubling to me too, because I'd worked hard for a public option on my local level. I, too, thought it was essential to a bill worth having after all the other concessions. However, eventually, unlike Dorrien, I came to accept Obama's judgment that it could not be accomplished in the political climate at the time.

Where the "irony" comes in for Dorrien is that, as Obama had claimed after the passage of the bill, "This isn't radical reform. But it is major reform." Even though he judged that it could have been much more, Dorrien said that **in the end it "was a colossal achievement."** It had been a **bold**, risky move, even if timidly pursued at key moments--thus the "irony." (120-21)

(5) For Dorrien **it's the far-right take over of the Republican Party and its politically motivated obstructionist stance since Obama's election that is basically responsible for the asymmetric polarization in Congress.**

Dorrien's way of describing the current Republican Party is that it's "**further-Right-than-ever,**" having sold out to the extreme anti-government Tea Party movement and Grover Torquiest's no tax increases pledge. Their goal is to reverse what was gained in FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society, (167) gains accepted by mid-20th century Republican leaders as an accepted tradition deserving to be preserved by real conservatives. Dorrien says about those who think government should have no responsibility for welfare of society, "**People who hate government have no business running it.**" (16)

Dorrien thinks Republican leaders decided that **obstructionism** was the best policy to defeat Obama in 2012 in order to take the country down an even more extremist path than in the last thirty years. They've use fear of the very real issue of mounting national debt as a smokescreen for **their real goal of preserving the gross unfairness of our current tax system.** (9) Tea Party Republicanism reduces the complexity of what is needed to recover from recession to making the absurd claim that it was high taxes that caused it and, therefore, just lowing taxes will fix it. (194) As a result, Dorrien thinks Republicans have "**ceased to be a normal party**" that can be a part of governing a healthy democracy. (186)

**Will the American people see this and vote in 2012 to start reconstructing healthy politics in our nation?** At the end of his chapter on banks and budgets Dorrien points to what he thinks will tip the balance. He agrees with *Time* columnist Joe Klein, who says that Republicans are shooting themselves in the foot by being tied to policies that destroy Medicare. **85% of Americans support Medicare and a substantial majority believes that the moral way to protect it is to tax the wealthy.** (197)

I hope he's right.

**Republicans  
have ceased to be  
a normal party.**



[Click here to go to a 28-minute audio of a 2012 interview with Dorrien about this book.](#)

## Lists of Books Used and/or Critiqued by Dorrien

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### Books by Mainstream Authors Dorrien Used in Constructing His Narrative (not counting Obama's speeches and a large number of articles and specialty books on issues )

Jonathan Alter, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One* (2010)  
 Christopher Andersen, *Barack and Michelle: Portrait of an American Marriage* (2009)  
 Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985)  
 Mary Frances Berry and Josh Gottheimer, *Power in Words: The Stories behind Barack Obama's Speeches, From the State House to the White House* (2010)  
 John Heinemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (2010)  
 James Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Political Tradition* (2011)  
 David Mendell, *From Promise to Power* (2007)  
 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (1952)  
 Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006)  
 Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (2004)  
 David Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win* (2010)  
 David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (2011)  
 Janny Scott, *A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother* (2011)  
 Andrew Ross Sorkin, *Too Big to Fail: The Inside Story of How Wall Street and Washington Fought to Save the Financial System--and Themselves* (2010)  
 Richard Wolffe, *Renegade: The Making of a President* (2010)  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Revival: The Struggle for Survival Inside the Obama White House* (2011)  
 Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President* (2010)  
 Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010)

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### Books Dorrien Judged to Be Serious Misrepresentations

Jack Cashill, *Deconstructing Obama: The Life, Loves, and Letters of the First Postmodern President* (2011)  
 Jerome Corsi, *The Late Great USA: The Coming Merger with Mexico and Canada* (2007)  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality* (2008)  
 \_\_\_\_\_, *Where's the Birth Certificate?: The Case that Barack Obama Is Not Eligible to be President* (2011)  
 Dinesh D'Souza, *The Roots of Obama's Rage* (2010)  
 Pamela Geller with Robert Spencer, *The Post-American Presidency: The Obama Administration's War on America* (2010)  
 Aaron Klein, *The Manchurian President: Barack Obama's Ties to Communists, Socialists, and Other Anti-American Extremists* (2010)  
 Brad O'Leary, *The Audacity of Deceit: Barack Obama's War on American Values* (2008)  
 Michelle Malkin, *Culture of Corruption: Obama and His Team of Tax Cheats, Crooks, and Cronies* (2009)  
 Shelby Steele, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win* (2007)  
 Dinesh D'Souza, *The Roots of Obama's Rage* (2010)  
 Webster Griffin Tarpley, *Obama: The Postmodern Coup* (2008)

## Lists of What Dorrien Says Are President Obama's Many Accomplishments

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### Too many Americans don't give Obama credit for these historic achievements:

- ★ Abolished use of torture and CIA secret prisons
- ★ Restored liberal internationalist foreign policy
- ★ Made historic outreach to Muslim world
- ★ Stabilized economy sliding toward a full-scale depression
- ★ Expanded earned income tax credit
- ★ Made historic investments in job training, education, infrastructure, clean energy, housing and scientific research
- ★ Saved automobile industry and related industries
- ★ Expanded the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
- ★ Stopped health insurance companies excluding people with preexisting conditions and dropping them when they get sick
- ★ Made great gains toward historic universal health care
- ★ Got a financial reform bill with new consumer protection agency
- ★ Put most derivative trading on an open exchange under regulatory umbrella
- ★ Gradually pulled troops out of Iraq as he had promised
- ★ Helped to inspire, and adeptly respond to, the historic wave of democratic revolutions in the Arab world
- ★ Relieved the world of Osama bin Laden and helped end the murderous regime of Muammar Qaddafi
- ★ Ended the Pentagon's Don't Ask, Don't Tell mistreatment of gays and lesbians in the military
- ★ Terminated the Justice Department's legal challenges to the Defense of Marriage Act
- ★ Blocked Republicans from eliminating federal funding for Planned Parenthood
- ★ Suspended deportation proceedings against illegal immigrants lacking a criminal record
- ★ Supported family unity in immigration policy, including LGBT persons
- ★ **Represented the United States with consummate dignity** (14-15)

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### What would have been seven separate landmark bills, if they hadn't been all bunched together in the 2009 Stimulus Act:

- **The largest infrastructure bill since Eisenhower**
- **The biggest antipoverty and job training bill since Johnson**
- **The largest clean energy bill ever**
- **The biggest middle class tax cut since Reagan**
- **Large investments in scientific research**
- **The biggest education bill since Johnson**
- **Huge investments in housing** (3)