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Populism, Chavez & Obama

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Distinctly Catholic

In the movie *Game Change* the character playing Sen. John McCain is encouraged to go on the attack against then-candidate Sen. Barack Obama, specifically with ads highlighting inflammatory remarks made by Obama's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. McCain recounts what happened in the 2000 South Carolina Republican primary, when he was accused of fathering a black child out of wedlock: McCain and his wife had adopted a girl from Bangladesh. McCain recalls having to explain the situation when she got older and googled her own name. He concludes the discussion by saying, "There is a dark side to American populism, and some people get elected by tapping into that. I am not one of those people."

Hugo Chavez died yesterday and he embodied the dark side of populism, which in Venezuela did not have the racist overtones of conservative populism in the U.S. but has its own ugliness. Chavez was not just a populist but a thug, standing in a long line of caudillos of both left and right who created a narrative in which the caudillo embodies the aspirations of his people and, so, is justified in rooting out enemies not of him, but because they are his enemies, enemies of the people too! To this end, the media is turned into a propaganda arm of the caudillo and his government, historical thugs like Che Guevara are made popular heroes, political parties are suppressed or co-opted, civil society is subsumed into the party of the caudillo, and sooner or later, human rights and personal liberties vanish. Often, there is great applause from the populace whom the caudillo is sure gets just enough crumbs from his table to keep their loyalty, but not enough that they might get an education and begin to ask questions.

We normally translate the Spanish word "caudillo" as "leader," but the essence of the word is perhaps more accurately by the German translation, "fuhrer."

Chavez could have been ignored except for the fact that Venezuela has gobs of oil. And he used this asset

with great effect, propping up the corrupt regime in Cuba, enticing Joe Kennedy Jr. to sing Chavez's praises, and aiding other populist gangsters posing as statesmen in Latin America. That he charmed Sean Penn and a few other Hollywood stars tells you all you need to know about Hollywood's intellectual and moral authority. Let us hope that his repressive regime follows him into the grave.

Populism need not be dark. In fact, in the U.S., and on the left, I would like to see a bit more of it. During the debate over the fiscal cliff at the end of last year, President Obama rightly noted that over the past several decades, middle class incomes have stagnated or fallen, while all the increased wealth generated by our often over-heated economy had gone disproportionately to the top one or ten percent of Americans. Growing income inequality is not only an affront to basic notions of justice, it is dangerous to the long-term stability of any political culture. Indeed, it should be obvious to all except the most delusional Randians and other libertarians that the New Deal programs saved capitalism from itself, that programs like Social Security and unemployment insurance were needed to offset the lack of self-correction within markets, and that, after all, "Social Security" is a phrase with a meaning, the security of society, at its heart and as its mission. Obama was tapping into that deep-seated populist narrative effectively during the fiscal cliff negotiations.

But, then what? During the more recent debate over sequestration, the president did not weave in the narrative of income inequality to his discussion. Instead, he seemed to rely on poll-tested language "we need a balanced approach" as if anyone would argue for an alternative because it is unbalanced! Really, you would think the president's speech writers would have taken a course in rhetoric in college. President Obama sounded more like a Hollywood actor as he painted the dark images of what would happen if the budget cuts went into effect, a rhetorical device that can work when the dangers described are imminent and painful but, in this instance, he sounded like Chicken Little because the danger posed by sequestration is not imminent and painful for most people.

More importantly, the debate over sequestration was ACT II in the Obama v. Boehner fiscal drama. The debate over the Continuing Resolution comes on later this month, and the debt ceiling will need to be raised this summer. Had Obama kept to the populist script he articulated so well during the fiscal cliff negotiations, each round of these budget battles would reinforce what people have already experienced: The rich have gotten fabulously rich and the middle and working class have been left to fend for themselves. Instead of defending government programs because they help the middle and working classes fend for themselves, President Obama seemed to defend them per se, as if they were self-evidently needed, instead of tying the existence of such programs to this broader populist and progressive narrative.

This older populist economic narrative will be especially important as the country debates entitlement reform. The long-term budget challenges are all driven by rising health care costs and increased entitlement spending in the face of the aging baby boomers. There are a variety of policy proposals that would shore up these vital programs that exemplify a populist narrative: Why are these programs funded only from payroll taxes? Why not also fund them with a tax on investment income? Why is there a limit on the amount of income subject to FICA tax? All these changes should be enacted before we think about raising the retirement age.

As I have noted before, there is much to admire about President Obama and much that I question, but the thing that most disturbs me about him is that he reserves his passion for issues like gun control and same-sex marriage, when the central, historic concern of the Democratic Party and progressive politics in American history has been to use the power of government to balance the accumulated power and influence of the moneyed interests. Obama and his aides are said to want to win back the House of Representatives in 2014, but he is not going to take back Bart Stupak's old seat by promoting same-sex marriage, nor will he win back certain southern districts by advocating gun control. He is well advised to

return to the narrative that worked during the fiscal cliff negotiations, the narrative of FDR and Harry Truman and LBJ about government working with the markets, and at times against the moneyed interest, to secure the security of our society, promote the flourishing of the middle and working class, and limit the amount of income inequality which threatens us all.

Populism can be dangerous. It can invite and encourage and enable demagogues like Chavez. But, I wish President Obama had a pill he could take each morning that would give him a bit more economic populism to start his day.

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