The Wrong Side of 'the Right Side of History'

President Obama espouses a facile faith in history bending toward perfection and morality—against evidence and reason.

Barack Obama has always evinced a fascination with history. He announced his candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, recalling Abraham Lincoln. He modeled his own cabinet after Lincoln's
“team of rivals.” He has compared his own accomplishments to his predecessors, and he invited historians to the White House for private conversations about where he might fit within the pantheon of American leaders.

If Obama’s interests run toward history, so does his rhetoric. “It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day,” he said the evening of his first election. Since then, the president has repeatedly deployed a series of phrases—especially “the right side of history” and “the wrong side of history”—that suggest a tortured, idealistic, and ultimately untenable vision of what history is and how it works.

Most recently, during his December 6 Oval Office address on terrorism, Obama said: “My fellow Americans, I am confident we will succeed in this mission because we are on the right side of history.” It’s a phrase Obama loves: He’s used it 15 times, in debates; at synagogues; in weekly radio addresses; at fundraisers. Obama is almost as fond of its converse, “the wrong side of history,” which he has used 13 times; staffers and press secretaries have invoked it a further 16. (These figures are all based on the archives of the American Presidency Project at the University of California Santa Barbara.)
Hope and the Historian

But the expressions are hardly original to Obama. Bill Clinton referred to “the right side of history” 21 times over his time in office, while his staffers added another 15. Clinton also mentioned the “wrong side of history” several times. Ronald Reagan, for his part, wryly resurrected Leon Trotsky’s relegation of the Mensheviks to the “dustbin” or “ash heap of history.” Speaking to the British Parliament in 1982, the Gipper said, “The march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other
tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people.” Reagan used both translations of Trotsky’s phrase several more times.

Obama’s own fresh contribution to the genre is his invocation of “the arc of history.” It’s his adaptation of an older phrase, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,” which was popularized by Martin Luther King Jr. But coined (evidently) a century earlier by Theodore Parker. Obama has mentioned “the arc of history” a dozen times since his election.

The problem with this kind of thinking is that it imputes an agency to history that doesn’t exist. Worse, it assumes that progress is unidirectional. But history is not a moral force in and of itself, and it has no set course. Presuming otherwise embraces the dangerous tendency that the great English historian Herbert Butterfield dissected in his 1931 essay, The Whig Interpretation of History. Butterfield was writing about the inclination among certain historians to see the Reformation as a unalloyedly positive force—a secularizing, liberalizing movement that led inexorably to liberal democracy in the 20th century. Butterfield objected that this wasn’t at all how things worked. It was just a retrospective reading.

“The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present,” he wrote. In fact, “the more we examine the way in which things happen, the more we are driven from the simple to the complex.”

Viewing history from the standpoint of the present not only misrepresented the complexity of events, he wrote, but also risked framing history as a natural progression wherein humans improved over time, going from darker, less intelligent and moral times to an ever-improving present. Butterfield warned against that:

History is all things to all men. She is at the service of good causes and bad. In other words she is a harlot and a hireling, and for this reason she best serves those who suspect her most. Therefore, we must beware even of saying, "History says [...]" or "History proves [...]", as though she herself were the oracle; as though indeed history, once she spoken, had put the matter beyond the range of mere human inquiry. Rather we must say to ourselves: "She will lie to us till the very end of the last cross-examination."

Forget that history doesn’t tell such simple stories and you end up employing this seemingly inexorable progression as evidence that humanity will continue to improve inexorably in the future. Butterfield warned in particular about the temptation to read moral judgments into history, to assume the thrust of events was determined by or proved the validity of reality over alternative possibilities that had not come to pass.

Within a decade of The Whig Interpretation, World War II broke out, providing a visceral example of how the passage of time didn’t necessarily result in progress. But the fallacy recurs occasionally, and Obama seems to have fallen into it. If history is on a trajectory toward perfection, it follows that there can be a right and a wrong side of history. Needless to say, no one wants to believe they are on the wrong side of history, not least a national leader. Because this whiggish view depends on the expectation of progress, liberal politicians are more
susceptible to it than their conservative brethren. It corresponds with a Marxian view of human progress, and it seems to have arisen from the progressive press, according to Ben Yagoda’s research. (Finally, proof Obama is a Marxist!)

Conservatives have tended to criticize Obama’s adoption of whiggish themes. Jonah Goldberg wrote last year that although liberals frequently employ “wrong side of history” argument on social issues, Obama had pioneered its use on foreign policy. I’m not so sure that argument holds, having reviewed the ways in which other Democratic politicians have used the phrase. (Take, for example, this case that Goldberg’s National Review colleague Jay Nordlinger brings up: “Travel back to 1984, when Jesse Jackson was running for president. He said that the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, who were self-declared Marxist-Leninists, were ‘on the right side of history.’” Daniel Ortega is back in power in Nicaragua, so perhaps Jackson was right after all.)

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Some liberals have resisted the temptation to assume that their side is destined for victory. “Those who think of freedom in this country as one long, broad path leading ever onward and upward are dead damned wrong,” Molly Ivins wrote in 1993. “Many a time freedom has been rolled back—and always for the same sorry reason: fear.”

Meanwhile, plenty of conservatives have fallen under the sway of similar misconceptions about history. In the aftermath of the Cold War, many on the right became enamored of the idea—proposed by Francis Fukuyama in 1989—that history had come to a vanishing point. “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government,” he wrote. Even then, critics accused him of reheating Marx, but post-Soviet euphoria overshadowed their objections. Neoconservatives—many of whom had once espoused socialism before turning right, of course—zealously championed the idea that liberal democracy was not only inevitable, but that this made it well-suited for exportation, at the muzzle of a gun if necessary.

The idea was every bit as illusory as the liberal hope of progress, a point proven dramatically by the war in Iraq. Fukuyama repudiated much of his original point, and the idea that history is “over,” with liberal democracy as the winner, seems more tenuous than ever. Meanwhile, George W. Bush sought a new sort of solace in history after he left office, telling CNN, “History will ultimately judge the decisions that were made for Iraq and I’m just not going to be around to see the final verdict.”

That is a sort of abdication of responsibility (although perhaps Bush had done enough to change the course of history already and it was just as well for him to quit). Obama’s position represents a different sort of abdication, a chance to write off the hard work of politics—both enacting policies and trying to bring skeptics around to his position. If he’s on the right side of history, why bother? Everything’s coming his way anyway. One narrative of the Obama presidency is about a man who came to power promising to change the way Washington worked, and who—despite an impressive list of concrete achievements—found himself unable to meaningfully
change the D.C. M.O. It turns out that bending the cost curve is easier than bending the arc of history. Frustrated in his ability to rework the system, Obama and his team seem to have chosen to withdraw on some issues, and trust to the passage of time; he has invoked “the right side of history” more often in his second term than in his first.

One reason Obama’s claims of the “end of history” seem to be gathering more robust criticism these days is that they now offend not just conservative commentators, but more liberal and centrist ones, as well. Say that opponents of marriage equality are on the wrong side of history and you’ll have the support of many elites, as well as a majority of the population (according to polls). The loudest objections will come from people who subscribe to, well, older moralities—making it possible to smugly write them off as historically incorrect.

Yet even if same-sex marriage is here to stay, and even if that is the moral position, it’s hardly proof of the whole whiggish project—as becomes clear when Obama applies the “right side” claim to ISIS. The group’s spread comes amid what Aatish Taseer described as “the return of history” in a recent essay. Fundamentalist religious movements are inherently modern, as Taseer notes. “As the ultimate source of legitimacy, history has become a way for modernizing societies to procure the trappings of modernity while guarding themselves from its values.” This means that radical groups—from Islamists to Buddhist nationalists—can use the mantle of history to assert their legitimacy. And Obama, having done the same himself, is in a weak position to rebut them. At the same time, the so-called modern and Western viewer looks at these events with horror, seeing thought that seemed irretrievably gone to the past surging back.

Theologians have wrestled with the problem of evil for centuries: How can a benevolent God allow terrible things to happen? There may be no single, satisfying answer to that question, but there are many suggested resolutions. The whig interpretation of history is, like religion, a faith-based system of belief, but it’s much less equipped to deal with misfortune. Perhaps ISIS’s barbarism proves that they are on the wrong side of history—but what if, terrifyingly, it’s evidence that they are on the right side of history, and Western civilization is on the wrong? Luckily, there’s an easy way to sidestep the dilemma: relegating the whig interpretation to the dustbin of history. Now that would be progress.

**About the Author**

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