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Holding Barack Accountable

By [JAMES THINDWA](#)

In recent weeks, Sen. Barack Obama (D-III.) has treated his supporters to a series of unsettling revelations about his views.

Obama now supports extending the death penalty to a new category of crimes; he sided with a decision striking down Washington, D.C.'s 32-year ban on handguns; he plans to vote for a bill that sanctions domestic spying; he gave a hawkish speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and promised the audience an "undivided Jerusalem."

Obama recently hired neoliberal economist Jason

Furman, a champion of trade deals like NAFTA that put corporate interests over workers rights — even though Obama had, until now, opposed NAFTA.

Further, Obama has embraced the mantra of personal responsibility. On Father's Day, he excoriated absent dads for failing to "realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child — it's the courage to raise one." He has announced his desire to continue Bush's faith-based initiative program and, in a strange position for a liberal Democrat, says he supports posting the Ten Commandments in public areas "in some cases."

Though many Democratic voters have made peace with their candidate's re-positioning — reflecting their desire to turn the page from eight years of the Bush presidency — we must demand accountability.

Remember, Bill Clinton, too, ran as a centrist in 1992. Democratic voters gave him a pass, assuming this was a customary general election strategy. But Clinton stayed centrist, championing NAFTA, "welfare reform," federalization of crime and expanding the death penalty. Clinton got away with it. In 2008, progressives must not let Obama do the same.

Obama's shift to the right undercuts his emphasis on "change" and threatens to disillusion newly energized voters. What's more, it appeals to the most reactionary elements — the National Rifle Association (NRA), pro-death penalty forces, corporate "free trade" and right-wing Israeli lobbies — at the expense of the Democratic Party's most loyal and growing constituencies.

Obama shouldn't pursue this strategy. With an expanded electorate, his strategists need to reconsider their pursuit of moderates. Obama's new positions conflict with where "the middle" in American politics is today.

Majorities support change. Death penalty abolition has gained momentum, as New Jersey became the first state in more than 40 years to ban executions. Death sentences have declined to a 30-year low, while executions are at 10-year low. Sixty-three percent say NAFTA has hurt the American economy. More than 60 percent want the \$3.3 billion in annual U.S. aid to Israel tied to progress for Palestine. Contrary to the NRA's media echo

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chamber, three-fourths of gun owners support mandatory handgun registration, as does 85 percent of the public.

By adopting conservative positions, Obama is ignoring the lessons of his own ascendancy, driven by progressive-leaning youth. These young people have embraced issues such as gay rights, racial and ethnic equality, and stopping the death penalty.

The risks are high. If Obama abandons his commitment to a new brand of politics, he will alienate these newly energized supporters. Paradoxically, the self-proclaimed agent of change seems oblivious to the fact that the country is in a moment of unprecedented opportunity for progressive transformation.

Obama should understand that committing to conservatives now will complicate his ability to make this transformation later. The dispiriting lesson of Bill Clinton must not get lost on Obama.

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