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Sounds Great, But What Does He Really Mean?

By Alec MacGillis
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Last week, President Obama told Sen. Orrin Hatch, the veteran Utah Republican, that he would appoint a "pragmatist, not a radical," to replace retiring Supreme Court Justice David Souter.

The assurance was hardly necessary. After all, everything Obama does is pragmatic. His adviser David Axelrod let it be known just after the election that Obama was a "pragmatist and a problem solver," which was a good thing, because, as Axelrod had said shortly before the election, "people are in a pragmatic mood, not an ideological mood." When Obama introduced his national security team, he declared that "they share my pragmatism about the use of power." And as he recently told the New York Times, the same goes for his economic policy, where "what I've been constantly searching for is a ruthless pragmatism."

Ruthless pragmatism! It sends shivers up the spine. But what does it mean, really, to have a "pragmatic" president?

Very different things in different arenas, it turns out. On some issues, such as tax policy, Obama's invocation of pragmatism shrewdly frames an egalitarian agenda. On some social issues, such as stem cell research, pragmatism means settling on a middle course to avoid distracting battles on lesser priorities; and on thorny questions such as how to handle detained terrorism suspects, pragmatism means a search for expedient solutions that can seem at odds with the president's principled rhetoric.

Since his start in the Illinois legislature, calling Obama pragmatic has been a handy way of capturing his conciliatory tone, his disavowal of shopworn solutions and his willingness to bargain with opponents. But the more he and his team use the term to describe his politics -- the recent 100 days coverage was chock full of the P-word -- the less useful it becomes, and the more it seems like a way to deflect questions about what he's trying to accomplish.

The fault hardly lies with the White House alone. The media thrive on labeling those they cover, and "pragmatism" has become the easy answer with a politician like Obama, who disdains categories. Reporters have embraced the term as a contrast to the "ideological" Bush administration. And for many Beltway pundits, calling Obama a pragmatist allows them to praise him without relinquishing their centrist credentials.

Across the political spectrum, though, there is grumbling over the label. After the election, former Bush adviser Pete Wehner wrote that the word does not show where Obama would take a stand. "When gale-force political winds hit, pragmatists, because they do not have deep-seated convictions, rarely hold shape," he wrote. "A pragmatist avoids hard choices. A great leader makes them."

On the left, the Nation's Chris Hayes argued that Obama supporters were embracing pragmatism after

incorrectly concluding that Bush had struggled not because he had the wrong ideology, but because he had an ideology, period. "Obama may [say] he's interested in 'what works,' " Hayes wrote, "but what constitutes 'working' . . . is impossible to detach from some worldview and set of principles."

Pragmatism has distinguished roots. William James and John Dewey promoted it as a philosophy that elevated knowledge gained through action over theory and concepts. Obama has been pragmatic in this sense when it comes to, say, the financial crisis, embracing trial and error and resisting the more systemic solution of nationalizing banks. But pragmatism fails as a political definition, says Robert Reich, who served as President Clinton's labor secretary, because it describes how a politician moves toward a goal, not the goal itself.

"It's possible to be ruthlessly pragmatic in terms of how you get to an objective," Reich said, "but the phrase is nonsensical in terms of picking an objective."

That leaves us searching for the intent and belief beneath each "pragmatic" approach so far.

Start with economic policy. Here, pragmatism can serve to obscure or repackage the ideological conviction at the heart of Obama's program, that growing income inequality is destructive and that government must try to reduce it. He flashed ire over capitalism's excesses early in the campaign. "Our free market was never meant to be a free license to take whatever you can get, however you can get it," he said in a fall 2007 speech. Obama's plans add up to a clear shift toward a more egalitarian system -- a return to Clinton-era marginal tax rates for the rich, a $787 billion stimulus plan that in many areas is targeted to those most in need, and lower deductions for wealthy taxpayers' mortgage interest and charitable gifts.

In defending the deduction proposal, Obama showed some moral edge. "If it's really a charitable contribution, I'm assuming that a [tax break] shouldn't be the determining factor as to whether you're giving that $100 to the homeless shelter down the street," he said in a White House news conference in late March. "It is a realistic way for us to raise some revenue from people who've benefited enormously over the last several years. It's not going to cripple them. They'll still be well-to-do. And, you know, ultimately, if we're going to tackle the serious problems that we've got, then in some cases, those who are more fortunate are going to have to pay a little bit more."

At the same time, however, the president has tried to cast his economic policies as simply the most proven route to prosperity, in contrast to the "failed ideas that got us into this mess in the first place," as he put it in February.

To hear Obama tell it, his platform is non-ideological because any thinking American that shares basic values of fairness and decency would see that it is right. In this regard, the president shares a skill with Ronald Reagan, who cast a conservative program in mainstream terms. That skill, Reich says, is enormously valuable -- as long as Obama uses it to move the public toward his desired end.

"Most presidents who were change agents . . . described themselves as centrists but clearly had a collection of values about what was good and right," Reich said. "The question becomes one of how much you reveal about where you want to lead people."

Obama's pragmatism takes a different shape when it involves issues that don't seem as central to his

platform. During the presidential campaign, for example, he said that he would lift President Bush's funding restrictions on research on embryonic stem cell lines derived from leftover embryos in fertility clinics. On several occasions, he said that he would go further and support therapeutic cloning of stem cells, which involves creating an embryo for the purpose of harvesting stem cells that are genetically matched to the donor organism. Many scientists say that procedure, although not yet fully realized, holds the greatest potential for medical breakthroughs.

In March, Obama issued an executive order lifting the Bush restrictions, giving a forceful speech in which he rejected the "false choice between sound science and moral values." But he said that he would leave it to the National Institutes of Health to devise new regulations. When the draft rules came out last month, many supporters of stem cell research were dismayed that the agency had approved funding for lines derived from fertility clinic embryos, but not for therapeutic cloning. In this case, pragmatism seemed to mean leaving the tough call up to someone else and adopting a middle course.

To Irving Weissman, director of Stanford University's Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine Institute, pragmatism of this sort has no place in science. "This is not an issue for compromise," he said. "This is an issue about how you conduct science, and since NIH has one mission, to advance the health of Americans, you cannot say that abandoning this research advances that goal."

Obama's pragmatism takes yet another turn with suspected terrorist detainees. On his second day in office, he declared a formal end to the Bush-era interrogation program and announced that he would close the prison at Guantanamo Bay next year. But he has upset civil liberties advocates with his decisions to leave prisoners at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan in legal limbo and to consider trying detainees before military commissions instead of in federal courts.

On this front, pragmatism becomes unapologetic expediency in the face of difficult choices. Some Republicans praise Obama for being realistic in reassessing his options now that he is in office. To civil libertarians, his pragmatism is a path of least resistance that risks undermining the values Obama ran on.

"Pragmatism is not just taking the two extremes that are out there and finding some golden mean," said Elisa Massimino, head of Human Rights First. "Ideally, you want to see a kind of principled pragmatism which is really focused on the goal but with a clear-eyed sense of how you can get there. . . . But if you forget the right direction or where the goalposts are, then pragmatism becomes a kind of abdication of leadership."

What kind of pragmatism is Obama practicing? For that, she said, "it's too early to say."

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The writer will be online to chat with readers at 1 p.m. Monday. Submit your questions and comments before or during the discussion.

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