

# Fred Astaire in the White House

Contributed by Michael Brownstein  
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This is not so much an attack on President Obama but a compelling plea to admit to our deeper problems as a culture. -- Ed.

"You can never awaken using the same system that put you to sleep in the first place." -- Gurdjieff

This is an appeal, an open letter, a cry in the night:

No matter how cranky it may make us to brush the stardust from our eyes, no matter how many friends we think we'll lose by looking long and hard at what's going on around us, let's try to stay awake. Let's not lose touch with what we really want for ourselves. Let's not forget what we know about the nature of consumer capitalism: it is unsustainable and unworkable because it depends on infinite expansion in a finite world. It can only survive by a violent takeover of what belongs to others. Let's not settle for halfway measures.

And let's not wait for deliverance from on high.

Because the president we elected -- out of so much hope for a definitive break with what came before -- is not who he seems. It's true that unlike the previous inhabitant of the White House (remember him?), Barack Obama is sane, intelligent, and mature. He's responsive to what others think. He hopes to institute real change in education, health care, the environment.

But even with his great charisma and silver tongue, he's a proper soldier for the system which is ravishing the planet. As he said in his inauguration speech in January, already aware of the huge financial mess he was inheriting, "We will not apologize for our way of life."

What do these words mean? They mean that the mall-i-zation of the planet will continue. They mean that the commercialization of all of life will not stop. They mean that our massive so-called footprint will never be substantially downsized.

And they mean that the force which has erased indigenous cultures and plant and animal species, which has sullied our air and soil and water, will essentially not be called into question, no matter how many of its most glaring excesses may be curbed.

"We will not apologize for our way of life..." Let's not forget who else used very similar words when insisting that America's energy policy would remain unchanged, no matter how much devastation it might cause: Dick Cheney, soon after taking office in 2001.

Without the active support of those who are running this toxic show into the ground, Barack Obama would not have been

nominated in the first place, much less elected. There is no more sure sign of this than the fact that his supposed nemesis, Hillary Clinton, became his Secretary of State.

Forgetting for a moment the eight schizoid years under George W. Bush, Obama's appointees and the policies they represent form an unbroken line back through the Clinton era and beyond. Those in control of our society have always been in control. Decade after decade their names and identities change, but their outlook, their mindset, remains the same. Since infancy they've been raised to aggrandize, to capitalize on their advantage over others -- whether "others" is defined as business competitors, indigenous people, foreign nations, or the fruits of the earth itself. This is the culture we have exported to the whole world. And once they get a taste of it, it seems that everybody wants more.

The distinction between Democrats and Republicans -- again, except for the neocons let loose by George Jr. -- has always been more negligible than we've cared to admit. The main difference is that Democrats, when in power, usually have shown concern for the less fortunate in our society. They've advanced social programs rather than contracting them. But the basic story line remains the same: in order to keep turning a perpetual profit, someone or something must be ripped off. The clubhouse filled with those who run things has never changed its size or location. It can be found within the high walls of the ruling class.

I'm not subscribing to a conspiracy theory here. Conspiracy theories are unprovable distractions, like the belief in UFOs. I'll leave it to others to insist darkly that our new president is a member of the Illuminati, the invisible cabal which for centuries has supposedly been running the planet. I don't think the greedy subset of humans drawn to naked, unlimited power are capable of trusting one another long enough to keep such plots afloat, so I won't bother taking seriously, for example, the claim that Michelle Obama is flashing the secret gesture of Illuminati membership on the cover of Vogue magazine's March issue.

Absurd? Of course. But how much more absurd than the program we humans are carrying around inside our heads of institutionalized scarcity and hardball competition? How much more irrational than the obscene military budgets the citizens of all nations pay for, year after year?

It's become fashionable to call what the banks and other financial institutions did to this country a Ponzi scheme, but the same is true not only of capitalism but of Western civilization itself. It's built on absence: the absence of all the indigenous people killed. It's built on ballooning expenditures and the continual depletion of resources with -- like the monetary structure on which it depends -- nothing supporting it underneath. Nothing at all. And when mindless trust gives way to nameless fear... well, we're now beginning to experience the consequences.

In order to understand how we may still be sleeping, let's remember that we live in a relative universe. Everything exists in relation to something else. After eight years of subzero temperatures, of trying not to lose heart while locked in the deep freeze, when it's suddenly 38 degrees and we've been let outside we feel expansive, liberated, optimistic. But defined in terms of what we actually need -- a workable, fair, humane way of life -- it's nowhere near summer sunshine out there.

In fact, if we're honest with ourselves regarding some of the moves Obama's administration has made around the economy, the military, commerce, and agriculture, we'll see that replacing Nero with Fred Astaire isn't enough. Stands on issues like state secrets and the rights of detainees are too close for comfort to what came before. The soft shoe may be reassuring, but we deserve more.

The president addressing the marines at Camp LeJeune: "We will not let the pursuit of the perfect stand in the way of achievable goals." But why not? Sure, this sounds level-headed and realistic, except that once these achievable goals go through the legislative wringer of compromise and payback, less than ever will remain.

And two years from now, if (as is certainly possible) the country's still in trouble because of halting economic measures and the Republicans regain control of Congress, where will those goals be then?

Let's not forget what we've always known about politicians: their primary motivation is to get elected and, once elected, to stay in power. These two things are often in conflict. That's why, for example, there's disappointment around the gap between what candidate Obama said in Ohio and Michigan regarding NAFTA and the signals he's sent since taking office. There's disappointment about his hesitation to really hold accountable the very banks and financial institutions which have brought the country to the brink.

And there's disappointment about his determination to extend the war in Afghanistan. Which looks to include Pakistan as well.

Fear of terrorism is being used in the same way fear of communism was used in previous generations. For decades we've established more and more military bases around the world, allowing us to grab any source of raw material we deem necessary. The fact that other nation-states are playing the same game is no excuse for our behavior. The only way to change is to change, pure and simple. Because all human predators are enemies of the gods, enemies of creation.

Real change can only mean a change of consciousness. On the social level, it means things like a new way of educating our children, alternative forms of exchange and energy, local agriculture. On the macro level, it means adopting an entirely new system, such as Herman Daly's Steady State Economy. This will only come about if we risk what seems impossible. But maybe it isn't impossible.

Let's not forget that many of the changes happening in our lives now are taking place outside the political structure. We need that structure with its cynical baggage and tunnel vision much less than we think.

We're not interested in dragging solutions from the past into the future. If they didn't work then, why should they work now? We're not interested in lifelong defensive postures. We have no more patience for indulging our fear and paranoia simply because that's what our so-called enemies are doing. Let's either go for broke or "fade away into our own parade."

In fact, we have no choice. Systemic breakdown awaits us otherwise. We can no longer maintain American hegemony, even the reasonable, personable, happy-face version. We can no longer maintain rampant materialism, even of the green variety.

Remember Obama's campaign slogan? "Yes we can."

Yes we can what? Stand the robot of monoculture up on its wheels again? Our challenge goes beyond universal health insurance or fixing the economy or saving the environment. In fact, it's no less than pulling the plug on 8000 years of Empire. We need to rid ourselves of what has made us a consuming, semi-psychotic collective.

And that means we have no further use for nationalism, either. Flushing down the tubes that pattern of knee-jerk reaction to the Other constitutes the most important change of all. Let's take a cue from the Internet, all lit up around the globe with communication among people having no more identity than their names.

"We are one" is the only acceptable slogan. What's happening to the Bushmen in Botswana is also happening to us. What's happening to the Amazon rainforest is also happening to us.

Obama's narrative that everything went wrong only eight years ago disregards the history of this country and the policies which for decades have set us on a collision course with reality. George W. Bush did not invent military hegemony. He did not magically create uncontrolled greed or global warming. He did not loose on the world mortgage-backed securities and other forms of "toxic waste." (What about the toxic waste in landfills that reach to the sky? Can't we show the kids in our schools how the two are related?)

Naomi Klein reminds us in a recent interview (<http://www.thestar.com/>) that it was Bill Clinton who periodically bombed Iraq and tightened economic sanctions which killed one million Iraqis. It was Bill Clinton who axed Depression-era restrictions preventing investment banks from also being commercial banks. It was he and Alan Greenspan who resisted regulating the huge derivatives industry.

As we've seen, these policies were in place long before Bush and Cheney took them to new levels. Let's not forget that the United States didn't recover from the Depression until the Second World War amped the economy up to speed, and that this lesson was not lost after the war. Ever since then, the internal contradictions of a system which depends on limitless growth have been dealt with by a ballooning military industry. They've been dealt with by a post-modern colonialism which, now called economic globalization, nevertheless fulfills the same function: eviscerating less developed cultures around the world for profit.

If we succumb to amnesia about this, then, as Naomi Klein says, "you do exactly what Obama is doing. You resurrect the Clinton economic and foreign policy apparatus, and you appoint Larry Summers, the key architect of the economic policy that has imploded at this moment. The amount of money that's at stake in the bailout, if you include everything -- the deposit guarantees, the loans, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, AIG -- is now up to \$9 trillion. The American GDP is only \$14 trillion. So they've put more than half of the American economy on the line to try and fix a mess that actually cannot be fixed in this way."

In our desire to be reassured, let's not lose track of the fact that Obama's bailout plan refuses to admit the obvious: the banks are zombies, they're the walking dead, and as such they should be allowed to go under or else be nationalized. And the people responsible for this state of affairs need to be held responsible. Otherwise the freefall of foreclosures, unemployment, and frozen credit may go on for longer than we care to imagine.

And it's equally important that we come to terms with our recent history instead of being so quick to consign to oblivion the criminal acts of the last eight years. Obama is already making noises for impunity, for not dwelling on the past, for brushing ourselves off, picking ourselves up, and getting on with our lives.

Naomi Klein again: "So much comes down to whether there's going to be any accountability for what happened, whether it's the illegal occupation of Iraq or torture or the economic crimes that led to this disaster."

Is she right? Do we have no choice but waiting around to find out?

Instead, no matter how unfashionable this may sound, we need to protest. Rather than finding clever new ways to beat the cellphone bills that have suddenly become onerous, now's the time for something we Americans seemingly have

forgotten how to do, as opposed to the Greeks, the Latvians, the French, even the Chinese. We need to mobilize.

We need to turn off that comforting DVD of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers -- of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton -- dancing across our field of vision, and make our voices heard.

Otherwise, let's just head down to Baja and hang at the beach. After we've had our fill of swimming, we'll turn and watch from afar as the global power game vaporizes, whirling like a dust devil out on the desert floor. Maybe there'll even be some water left to bathe in before we go to sleep under the stars.

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