

Christian left foresees a bolder Obama

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue

Heartened by his calls for gay marriage and for bold action on climate change, leaders of the Christian left are confident that President Obama will now claim the progressive legacy they believe he craves.

While acknowledging disappointment over aspects of the president's first term—worry over the use of drones as a foreign policy tool is a repeated refrain—progressive Christians say they believe that the president's solid reelection in November has freed him to pursue concrete progressive goals they say have always been in his heart.

Still, those goals and the legacy they could produce won't be achieved early, says Gary Dorrien, an ethicist at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

"He's got to 'plant a flag' on something," said Dorrien, whose 2012 book, *The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective*, offered a nuanced view of a figure whom Dorrien describes as full of "protean irony and complexity."

While Dorrien thinks that Obama "punted on third down" on a number of issues during his first term, including major long-range economic reforms and a "public option" health care measure, he believes that Obama is set to embrace a more progressive agenda.

Immigration reform and expanded public investment in infrastructure, clean energy and the environment could be among the benchmarks of a successful second Obama term, he said. Left behind for good, Dorrien believes, is any possibility of breaking the power of the nation's large banks or introducing the health care public option—two things he thinks that Obama could have accomplished early in his first term had he not "settled for less than what he could have gotten."

Peter Heltzel, who teaches at New York Theological Seminary, shares Dorrien's mix of admiration and caution about the 44th president.

“I am proud of President Obama and look forward to working for justice with him the next four years,” Heltzel said, one day after penning an op-ed in *USA Today* in which he bemoaned the “dramatic expansion of the notion of war” during Obama’s first term.

“Through global counterterrorism activities and excessive reliance on drones and covert operations, we have normalized the use of violence and desensitized ourselves to the killing,” Heltzel wrote.

Heltzel praised Obama’s renewed push for gun control as an example of “building blocks for becoming the nation of peace that [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] dreamed about.”

The evocation of King and his vision of peace is an example of a complex dance those on the Christian left have had to perform with the president, a former community organizer and onetime member of one of the most socially liberal Christian denominations in the country, the United Church of Christ.

While those on the left feel that Obama understands and is sympathetic to their agenda, they also feel obligated to keep the president’s feet to the fire on the issues they care about.

Sometimes the mixture of hope and grassroots pressure has worked, say two Christian leaders who have championed the issues of gay and lesbian rights and the environment, respectively.

Recently retired Episcopal bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay man to be elected bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion, said Obama’s linking of rights for women, blacks and gays during his inaugural address was a milestone—and not merely because it was the first time any U.S. president had done so in such a prominent way.

“It wasn’t just a nice turn of phrase,” Robinson said of the president’s evocation of “Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall.” “I don’t think we’d have heard that from a white, middle-class president,” Robinson said. “It was really significant because the movements have often been ‘siloe’d’ into separate constituencies.”

As for the president’s public call for gay equality in his inaugural speech—another first—Robinson said grassroots activism played a role in pushing Obama on the

issue, but credit must also be given to the president himself. “He has offered his support for our love,” Robinson said, “and that’s above and beyond what any other president has done.”

Sally Bingham, president and founder of the San Francisco-based Interfaith Power and Light, a national faith-based campaign focused on climate change, said the president’s call to “preserve our planet, commanded to our care by God” was another marriage of grassroots activism and presidential leadership.

“He could not ignore what people are talking about on the ground,” she said. Bingham believes that the theologically crafted language was a signal to environmental activists and faith-based advocates that the president recognizes the religious dimension of care of the planet—an affirmation for clergy like Bingham who have embraced the issue for years and are seeing the results pay off in growing support.

“That sentence [about ‘commanded to our care’] was just overwhelmingly positive,” Bingham said, adding to a feeling of momentum “that we’re finally getting somewhere” on the issue of climate change.

Robinson, Bingham and Dorrien all acknowledge the frustration many progressives felt over the president’s first term, with Robinson cautioning, “We can’t look for a messiah in a president, especially those of us who are in the messiah business, and the messiah is not Barack Obama.”

Yet all three feel that progressives’ criticism of the president was sometimes misplaced; Dorrien argues that liberal disillusionment—particularly acute in 2010 and 2011—was misdirected. Obama never claimed to be anything but a

“liberal-leaning politician who still acted out of the center, someone who could mediate conflict. That’s the kind of politician he is,” Dorrien said.

Moreover, while the left will seek to keep the pressure on Obama, Dorrien argues that the nation’s first nonwhite president has faced the toughest and most entrenched opposition of any president.

While unafraid to critique the president, Dorrien has never “felt betrayed” by Obama as have other progressives—most notably the eminent African-American philosopher Cornel West, who at times has harshly criticized the president.

In his book, Dorrien writes that Obama's promise as a leader "is still in play because Obama is singularly gifted, and he has historic accomplishments to his credit to build upon—achievements that too many progressives and others often fail to acknowledge." —RNS

This article was edited Feb. 19, 2013.