

Obama a socialist? Come on; today, no one is

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Humor is hard to find on today's economic scene, as unemployment lines grow longer and investment asset reports grow shorter. But thanks to some of President Obama's critics on the right, there is the allegation that Obama is turning the United States toward socialism.

What a hoot.

Outside of the ossified brains of a few despots like North Korea's Kim Jong Il and Cuba's Fidel Castro, socialism is as obsolete as the buttonhook, both in America and abroad. Even those political parties in Europe and elsewhere that call themselves socialist are nothing of the kind. Today, everyone recognizes which means of economic integration won the test of time, and it wasn't socialism.

It was capitalism.

It is the individual competitive drive on which capitalism rests that produces affluent societies. Socialism, or the control of means of production by government, produces inefficiency, chaos and poverty.

No significant player on the U.S. political scene today - from Bobby Jindal to Barney Frank - disputes that. And no one suggests moving toward the system that had its greatest experiment, and its greatest failure, in the Soviet Union.

There also remains no real socialist movement in this country. The Socialist Party under which such figures as Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas ran for public office is gone, and so are the other organizations that promoted nationalization of industry and government economic planning.

What has the talk-show economists - who are as reliable in their analyses as bar-stool biologists - inflamed about Obama's actions since he took office is his effort to rescue capitalism from the canyon into which some of its practitioners drove it. It turned out that an absence of regulation, once promoted by former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan and other conservatives, enabled fast-buck artists to abuse the system and imperil the affluence it produces.

Greenspan has since admitted he was mistaken. That's something you'll never hear from the Limbaughs and Hannity's calling Obama a socialist, though. To them, the administration's moves to get money flowing through credit markets again, to stimulate economic activity with government spending and to seek ways to prevent

future collapses like this with expanded regulation represent alignment with Lenin and Stalin.

They don't, any more than a tax-financed safety net for capitalism's losers signals a socialist state.

In fact, the main reason Obama was unable during his recent overseas trip to persuade European countries to direct much more cash to economic stimulus is the stronger safety nets those countries already have in place. The resources they provide people down on their luck automatically act as stimulus during hard times.

As the Washington Post's Harold Meyerson puckishly points out, the only thing those who shout "Socialist!" at Obama are doing is reviving the word's popularity among a younger crowd that loves the prez and never witnessed the belly-flop of real socialism. - J.F.