

//Notas de Análisis//

Decline and Renewal in American Politics. If not Obama, then Who?

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The short-lived popularity boost of the Osama bin Laden operation having all but faded, President Obama for the first time appears vulnerable and could be defeated in the 2012 election. Indeed, many are starting to wonder if he will be a one-term president like Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush. As congressional leaders continue to meet with Vice President Joe Biden to negotiate a reduction of the federal budget and to avoid a potential default on government debt, the economic recovery seems to be stalling: reports released last week show unemployment rose again to 9.1 % and job growth slowed down, and manufacturing and retail sales are also down from last quarter.

The only good news for the President is that the Republican field of candidates, while still fluid, is very weak so far, and the Republican Party leadership divided and ineffective. Hefty potential candidates such as Jeb Bush (undoubtedly the strongest intellect in the GOP today) and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie have eschewed confronting the formidable President-candidate in 2012 and seem to be lying in wait for 2016, when they expect the field to be wide open.

The first serious national presidential debate for the Republican candidacy took place on Monday, June 13. Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and the author of a health plan there which critics contend is very similar to Obama's, emerged as the solid front-runner and Michelle Bachman, an Evangelical Congresswoman from Minnesota and a Tea Party favorite, as the one who can challenge him. She is a former tax lawyer and a mother of five, who also apparently has found time to raise 23 foster kids. She is often compared to Sarah Palin, but most agree that she has more substance, understands how the government and can articulate ideas. She portrays herself as the anti-establishment figure, although she has been in Congress for a while and is at present the Chair of the House Intelligence Committee. Similarly to Palin, she considers the federal government an "elitist conspiracy" against middle-America and has invoked the War Powers Resolution to force Obama to request Congress authorization to continue operations in Libya. Tim Pawlenty, former governor of Minnesota, also an Evangelical with Tea Party following, was expected to be a serious challenger, but missed an opportunity to confront Romney on his health care plan for Massachusetts, which he had severely criticized the day before on national TV, stating it was very similar to Obama's, and going as far as calling Romney a "co-conspirator in Obama care." This lack of courage to confront the front-runner personally has made him a distant third in the primary race. Romney, on the other hand, was very well-prepared, confident in his own image of the businessman/CEO who can fix the jobs problem.

The rest of the Republican candidates were a motley crew, starting with Herman Cain, an African-American businessman, owner of a pizza chain and talk show host, followed by Ron Paul, a radical libertarian that in spite of his quirky ways is quite endearing in his candid contempt for government, and Newt Gingrich, whose entire campaign staff had just resigned due to his lack of discipline and

inability to run a serious campaign. All candidates focused more on bashing Obama than each other, since it is early in the race and there will be time enough for that this coming fall. Rick Santorum, another fiscal and social conservative (but in this case Catholic) and former Senator for Pennsylvania, completes the second-tier line-up of Republican candidates.

But the Republican field has not firmed up yet, and there could be some surprise Republican candidates entering the race, as the President appears more vulnerable. In fact, only yesterday John Huntsman, a new intriguing figure who has been Obama's ambassador to China, joined the fray announcing his candidacy from Liberty Island, next to the Statue of Liberty, in the same spot where Ronald Reagan announced his in 1980. Huntsman, former governor of Utah, is a billionaire, a moderate and a Mormon, just like Romney. Both will skip Iowa, the first test for candidates, and one dominated by Evangelical "value" voters. Both are well-spoken, good looking family men with no rough edges. Unlike Romney, he has very little name recognition at the national level, and spent years as a missionary in China, where he learnt to speak Mandarin fluently. What he brings to the race is his expertise in that country, the main holder of American's debt, and therefore, the one that worries Americans the most. He has framed this primary contest as one between "renewal and decline".

He speaks in a very quiet, civil tone and he introduced himself to the public through a stream of unusual videos, one for example that shows the candidate himself, in motocross attire from heads to toe, riding his motorbike across the Utah desert, as dreamy country music plays in the background. The White House is said to be concerned about his candidacy, not only because of moderation, his capacity and his presidential demeanor but also because he has been an insider of this administration and may use information thus acquired against the President.

He could become a formidable opponent, a Republican mirror image of the President.

Another prospective candidate, who, if he decides to run, could throw all calculations into disarray, is Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas. He is an attractive candidate for the party establishment and has two very strong qualities: first, he is a social conservative who could supersede Bachman and Pawlenty in drawing the Tea Party vote; second, he has been a successful governor who can boast about his job creation record in Texas (40% of all new jobs during the recovery were created in Texas). He is still testing the waters, and similarly to Huntsman, may perhaps use 2012 as a platform that can propel him into the 2016 election. Although he has not announced his candidacy, observers point to his convening of a "National Day of Prayer" for early August as a sign that he may run. He would be a formidable contender, since he can speak both the language of the Tea Party as well as the national language of this 2012 election, which is the economy and jobs.

In comparing the Republican Party today with the one of ten years ago, one cannot help but notice the big shift that has occurred, and in doing so, perhaps be less dismissive of Ron Paul's philosophical influence on the party rank and file. The truth is the libertarian streak has made important inroads inside the party, and voters are now serious about not only fiscal conservatism and smaller government, but also a retrenchment of America's role in the world.

This was apparent during last week's debate and the public conversations that followed in the airwaves throughout the week. Most of the candidates blasted Obama for intervening in Libya and called for an early withdrawal from Afghanistan. Michelle Bachman invoked the War Powers Resolution, passed in 1973 during Watergate, which obligates the President to seek the approval of Congress 60 days after the beginning of hostilities. The Republican Party has traditionally been the home of National Security "hawks", and the last strong isolationist mood in the party dates to the 1920s. While an isolationist wing emerged again right before Gen. Eisenhower became president, after that it was represented by a very small group, led in the last twenty years or so by Pat Buchanan. Today, a war-weary and budget-conscious American public is in favor of withdrawal from Afghanistan by a wide majority (73% of all Americans, 59% among Republicans), in spite of the fact that most had understood that to be a "war of necessity" as opposed to Iraq, a war of choice. If we count American military presence in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and the tribal areas of Pakistan, today the US is involved in five different conflicts, and spending billions of dollars a month on them, most of which are considered wars of choice. Today, President Obama is in fact a victim of his own success: bin Laden is dead, so Americans want out of Afghanistan. This is echoed loudly enough by his opponents. The President is thus under pressure to bring the troops home not only by libertarians but also by extreme Right candidates (Bachman) and even by mainstream candidates like Huntsman and Romney.

After the debate, Republican Senators John Mc Cain and Lindsay Graham and Defense Secretary Gates took to the airwaves to admonish the candidates on this issue, accusing them of choosing politics over policy in matters of national security. Mc Cain went so far as to say that Reagan would not recognize his own party: "This is not the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan, who was always willing to stand up for freedom all over the world". He insisted that Khadafy was crumbling and that US logistical support, intelligence and refueling capabilities had to be continued to finish him off. He went even further and picked the opportunity to criticize Obama for not using America's own airpower, and instead "leading from behind". This was a theme that Bachman had also used in her speech, somewhat incoherently, since she vilified Obama for allowing the French to lead the operation in Libya while at the same time invoking the War Powers Resolution and demanding US withdrawal, since there were no apparent US interests involved there. Mc Cain in his own interview with Christiane Amanpour, later refuted Bachman's claim by stating that Khadafi had consistently supported terrorism, was responsible for the bombing of Pan Am 103 and was about to massacre his own people at Benghazi when NATO intervened and stopped him. "Our interests *are* our values" and "Sometimes leadership entails sacrifice," he added.

To Romney's equivocal reference to the "Afghanis (**sic**) war of *Independence*" (an expression that *per se* brings serious doubts to his basic knowledge of geopolitics) Senator Lindsay Graham also in his own interview, later retorted: "This is not a war of Afghan independence, from my point of view" (of course, it isn't, it's a civil war!). He continued: "This is the center of gravity against the war on terror, radical Islam. It is in our national security interest to make sure

that the Taliban never come back”. He warned them not to try to position themselves to “the Left” of President Obama on this issue” and he hinted that that decision would lose them the nomination.

Among the wide array of opinions, only Tim Pawlenty heeded the party line that the advice of military commanders and the situation on the ground would be the main determinant of troop withdrawals under his watch.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Robert Gates criticized the “declinists” who put the short term expediency politics ahead of long-term national security interests. He added that examining the bottom line only is short-sighted, since intervention is not about sheer cost, it is about the cost of failure of early withdrawals, such as Afghanistan in 1989. Earlier, on his last trip as defense secretary, Gates had bluntly told NATO members meeting in Brussels that the military weakness of most members and their lack of will to share risks and costs of NATO operations were putting severe strains on the organization and particularly on the United States. Indeed, less than a third of NATO members are taking part in the Libyan operation, although NATO is a consensus-based organization and therefore, all members voted to approve it.

According Secretary Gates, the need to cut spending and radically reduce the budget has become an obsession and sparked a new current of isolationism that now insidiously divides the traditionally hawkish Republican Party. This, he told a Newsweek interviewer, is one of the main reasons that have led to his resignation, after serving two administrations and becoming the epitome of bipartisanship. His unwillingness to plan for more withdrawals and find other ways to reduce the bloated defense budget has been criticized both from the Left and the Right. He complains about how both “Congress budget hawks and defense hawks” constantly interfere with his work. He ends by saying he refuses to be part of a nation that is forced to scale back its military power so much that it can no longer lead. His frustration is apparent; his resignation paved the way for Obama’s announcement of troop withdrawal, a few days later.

This last week, the presidential politics of war became clearer. Feeling the pressure of Republicans attacking him from his “left flank”, President Obama told a war-weary nation that he plans to start withdrawing troops by December this year, ending the surge by the summer of 2012 and bringing home most of the rest by 2014. Although there is a widespread sense that Obama has gotten so involved in the daily details of the war that would prefer to stay on and see his counterinsurgency policy through, he has quickly readjusted to the realities at home and accelerated the withdrawal timeline that his generals had recommended. With his earlier decisions of aggressively pursuing the war on terror, signing off on drone killing missions, and having bin Laden killed inside Pakistan, he successfully beat the image of a Dovish President, weak in National Security. This past Wednesday, with the words, “It is time to do nation-building at home”, he acknowledged the public’s concerns about the waste of American power, blood and treasure abroad while the country is still suffering from the recession, and quickly moved back to center.

This is the spirit of the times. It requires a new type of leadership, one that is

strong enough to face down enemies, yet flexible enough to accommodate to the new and constantly shifting realities, to accept a revised status of the nation and to lead it into new era in its history. Time will show whether such leader is among the Republicans new line-up or whether he is already in the White House.

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