

Summer Woes: Can the Republican Party survive?

**By Maria L. Fornella*

President Obama enters the second half of his first year with very high approval ratings (high 50s to mid-60s) and nearly unanimous support within his own party. He continues to fight his battles for long-term change with discipline and rigor, ignoring possible distractions but also exercising pragmatism and the art of compromise. After his initial successes on the stimulus bill, tobacco regulation, employment discrimination and children's health coverage, and in spite of questions raised on the mounting deficit, he recently managed to get the House to pass major legislation on energy and climate change, albeit by a narrow vote (219 to 212).

His main strategy has been to lay out the general principles and parameters of his final objective and then let Congress write the legislation and fill in the details, thus giving legislators some latitude. Some question whether this strategy involves too much compromise, too many concessions to the other party and to interest groups, to the point that the final product is a watered down version of his initial proposal which will result too weak to solve the core problems.

The irony for Obama is that some parts of his proposals that were considered central and non-negotiable are now on the table. A main example is the public option in health care legislation, according to which a government plan would compete with the rest of the private insurers, and consumers would be able to choose which one to buy. This type of competition would bring down the costs, which is one main purpose of health care reform. Republicans are adamantly opposed to this, but even some Democrats in Congress are becoming skeptical about it (the latter, mostly because they will have to face conservative constituencies in the next legislative elections of 2010), and even Obama now appears ready to compromise, if absolutely necessary.

In contrast, there is immense support for this initiative all across the country. Does that mean that the actual center of the political public spectrum is today more to the Left than Congressmen and Senators of both parties recognize it to be? Or just that people really want change in health care, and cannot any longer be cowed into a corner by the boogey man of Big Government? Of course, there is a third and perhaps more obvious interpretation and that is that health industry groups exert more influence on Congress than the public itself. But at this time and on this issue the public is more mobilized and demanding than ever before, so Congress should take heed.

Similarly, while Obama gets a positive response from the public as he continues to stitch together a broader view of how his proposals on

health, energy and the stimulus package all fit together in the creation of a new foundation for the economy, the Republican Party appears bent on opposing him indiscriminately, denying him every possible venue to bipartisanship. That is the only position of strength for a weakened party.

The “Party of No”, as Rahm Emmanuel calls it, continues to block, sometimes successfully, every initiative the Democrats put on the table.

There is a total absence of alternative policy proposals; instead, Republicans are just saying no to comprehensive change. Even as most interest groups convinced that change in health care and energy policies is inevitable are taking part in the negotiations, the Republican Party directive to its senators in the Senate Finance Committee -where health legislation is being discussed- is not to deal at all.

The result is that Democrats are being pushed toward one concession after another, and that bad politics are getting in the way of good policy. The Republican strategy, if any, is to instill fear in moderate voters about the mounting deficit, and arouse skepticism about the President’s ability to bring about change. They have succeeded in consolidating the extreme right’s opposition to everything Obama does, thereby animating an alarming hostility toward him. This is an enormous achievement, if one considers the Republicans’ lack of leadership and the personal woes of some of its potential leaders. But they have made no gains in the center and very few with independents. And unexpected events continue to shake the party’s foundations.

During the sleepy summer days around the Fourth of July, when most Americans go on vacation or take time off to prepare their cookouts and load up on beer and fireworks, the public was jolted by two stunning political developments, both coming from the Republican side and both bringing to a melodramatic end the careers of two potential presidential candidates: the five-day disappearance of South Carolina Governor Stanford, and Sarah Palin’s resignation as Governor of Alaska.

Governor Stanford, a “straight arrow” Republican with a picture-perfect family which he often paraded in front of the cameras, had always portrayed himself as a family man and a model of fiscal rectitude, going to the extreme of refusing to take the money allocated to his state as part of the stimulus package. After disappearing for five days during which his wife and aides claimed not to “know his exact location, but he was probably hiking along the Appalachian Trail and had turned off his Blackberry”, he re-emerged and walked straight into the trap of a press conference. In front of the cameras, he rambled for twenty minutes about his life as a governor, husband of a wonderful woman and dad of four great boys, and asked for forgiveness for letting them all down ...in the pursuit of an affair with an Argentine woman he had met in the world-renown resort of Punta del Este, Uruguay, in 2001. After explaining that this was not, in the end, a reckless act of adultery nor an irresponsible abandonment of office, but “a true love story” during which he had found his “soul mate”, the Governor decided not to resign and to “try to fall in love again with his wife and continue his political career”. We won’t cry

for him, neither here or in Argentina, but we wish him good luck.

While infidelity and other human foibles are not limited to one side of the aisle, for the Republican Party, which claims a monopoly on morality and family values, the last two years must have been a hard trial: from Representative Mark Foley's "sexting" of underage male pages in Congress, to Senator Larry Craig's gay sex soliciting in a public restroom, to Senator Ensign's infidelity to Governor Sanford's Rio de la Plata escapade (unknowingly paid for by South Carolina taxpayers), the party has had its hands full with spinning the unspinnable, and will have a difficult time if it insists on exclusively continue carrying the torch for family values .

And then there is Sarah Palin, who, in an equally rambling, bizarre and juvenile statement delivered in her well-known unique and colorful syntax and diction, decided to stun her party, her base and the country as a whole by resigning her governorship 18 months before the end of her term. The reasons are known only to herself and her family, but she represented herself as not wanting to "milk" the State of Alaska treasury during her "lame duck" period, and preferring to bring change for "all our children's future from outside the Governor's office". Among the most commonly heard speculations: that the 16 ethics inquiries into her actions as governor by the Alaskan legislature (mainly Republicans) have put a lot of strain on her life and finances, that she wants to concentrate on a book deal, and that her governorship was getting in the way of her life as a celebrity. Less likely but also heard: that this is a move to pursue higher office, and/or that a new scandal is about to be revealed about her or her family. (Please, no more scandals!)

Whatever her motive, her timing for the GOP could not have been worse: not only was Palin the most galvanizing force for the Evangelical Christian base of the party, but with her departure, the party has lost three strong presidential candidates in one month. If we add to this the lamentable performance by Governor Bobby Jindal, another Republican rising star, when he responded to Obama's first State-of-the-Union address, the party's presidential candidate landscape is quite deserted. Of course it is still early to talk about 2011 primaries, but considering that the two main pillars of the party, namely fiscal responsibility and family values, have been demolished,(the first by George W. Bush and the second by the peccadilloes and tribulations above recounted), there is a lot of heavy lifting the party must do to become competitive again.

Like the Tories since 1997, the Republicans will probably have to lose two or three national elections before they can redefine themselves, charter a new course and become competitive again. The paradox of Republican opposition is that in the short term they have no other recourse but to strongly oppose Obama in the hope of chipping away some of his aura, while in the long term their big demographic problems with the young, women and minorities will force them to move to the center, modernize conservatism, abandon their unerring defense of pure, unrestrained capitalism and speak the language of community and common endeavors.

Only then will they be able to reclaim the mantel of the Grand Old (but renewed) Party.

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