

The Obama Revolution: First One Hundred Days

**By Maria L. Fornella*

“Opportunities multiply as they are seized.”

Sun Tzu

On the eve of the one hundredth day of his Presidency, Barack Obama received a wonderful gift: Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, announced he was leaving the Republican Party to become a Democrat. This puts the number of Senate Republicans at 40, the lowest level in over 30 years, and gives the Democrats, at least on paper, the special majority of 60 votes needed for them to override a filibuster of legislation by the opposition.

Besides the obvious advantages for Democrats, Specter’s pivotal decision has other important implications, not only for Republicans but also for Democrats.

First, it highlights the sad state of the Republican Party: Specter explained that he felt compelled to leave the party because he knew that, as a moderate, he could not win another Republican primary election. The Republican Party under G.W Bush employed the electoral tactic of consolidating the white, Southern, right -wing Christian base, rather than reaching out to the middle. This helped them win two presidential elections and gave credence to the claim that they were the “party of the permanent majority”. That was only four years ago. But Bush’s disastrous second term had the effect of alienating two major constituencies: the realist establishment in foreign policy who were dismayed by his stated goals of bringing democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan, and the fiscal conservatives who saw the federal budget surplus rapidly turn into deficit. The party then entered a downward spiral of contraction. It lost ground with centrist voters, at a time when the center of the political spectrum was expanding. It suffered from a leadership void that left it at times voiceless, while at other times it spoke in a cacophony of inchoate opinions. During these 100 days, no articulate Republican counter-case was made to Obama’s proposals. The “big tent” party has become so narrow in its geographical and ideological base that it is as irrelevant today as the Whigs were in the 1850s.

Second, Arlen Specter’s switch is also significant in that it may have a moderating force on the Obama agenda, forcing him to accommodate it toward the center instead of pushing ahead at full steam. This could be a timely correction, since some fiscally conservative Democrats (so-called Blue Dog Democrats) are increasingly voicing their concern, not only about the frenetic pace of reforms but also about the ambitious scale of the spending: the request for \$ 800 billion in the form of a fiscal stimulus will be followed by another \$ 600 billion for health care and \$ 500 billion for infrastructure. This will add two trillion dollars to the national debt, and would represent the biggest expansion in the role of the Federal Government since Lyndon B. Johnson’s

Great Society program. According to Niall Ferguson, economic historian at Harvard, the federal debt which is now around a still-healthy 70% of GDP, will balloon to 180% of GDP, similar to Japan's. These are serious concerns that may come back to haunt the administration further down the line, if the economy does not pull ahead in a year or two.

The first one hundred days is by most measures an inconclusive, artificial period of time in which to evaluate a President's success. In all likelihood the next one hundred days will be more determinative, once the legislative agenda moves forward. But we can still use this early stage as a barometer of public support and as a measure of how much Obama has worked to fulfill his campaign promises. In many ways, this period only writes the afterword of the 2008 presidential election. The President has been given an extended period of grace by the American people, in the understanding that he inherited the worst economic crisis since 1930. In the face of tumultuous times and unprecedented unease over the economy, he has maintained his calm and collected demeanor and continued to communicate, explain, and give hope. Thus he was able to avoid a flare-up of populist rage at the excesses of Wall Street, and focus with calm persistence on fixing the economic mess at home and the frayed international ties abroad. His ability to recognize US missteps and open up to the world reaching out to Iran and Cuba has already changed the entire tone of US foreign policy. This new moderation and sensitivity about how others perceive the United States was welcomed around the world and even has not borne fruit yet, it bodes well for future exchanges.

The main criticism that has been raised is that the Obama team is embarking on too many different tasks and that this "frenzied flurry" of activity will not allow it to focus on solving the two main problems it faces: the economy and the fight against terrorism. Both are labor intensive and complicated and demand full-time attention and concentration. There is some value in these criticisms, but there are two main reasons why the White House has chosen this approach.

First, the President has a vision that ties all his initiatives together, and he so far deserves praise for pursuing it without neglecting any of the major problems he faces. For Obama, fixing the economy alone is not feasible without changing the country's energy base, reforming its health care and education systems. His vision encompasses a technological, knowledge-based economy where the new jobs will be in the green energy sector and in bio-technology and robotics. To meet the job demands of these two revolutions in technology and energy, a third revolution will have to take place in the educational field, with a renewed stress on mathematics and science, as well as a restructuring of curriculums and developing inter-disciplinary skills for problem-solving. At the same time, these revolutions would also transform the international landscape in many ways, some predictable (the demise of oil-based economies would certainly solve a problem or two in the Middle East), others not so. But the United States is clearly at a crossroads in its history and must choose between continuity and demise, or change and a renewed claim to leadership in the XXI century.

Second, blessed by a prolonged period of grace granted to them by the American people and the media, and with no opposition in the horizon, the administration has adopted this frenetic pace to make the most of this enlarged window of

opportunity. Propelled forward by a vision but at the same time imbued of a healthy pragmatism, Obama has not kept every single promise to every constituency, and has preferred instead to pick his battles. For example, he did not re-open NAFTA in the realization that economic recovery will require free trade. Similarly, he has postponed a fight over making permanent a ban on the sale of assault weapons. He also gave up on pushing for a reduction of farm subsidies when it was clear that Congress Democrats would not yield on that issue. Instead, he has focused on a set of non-negotiable priorities, trying to do as much as he can and knowing that only a few will bear fruit in the long run. Obama is now at the peak of his power but has not lost sense of the ephemeral nature of politics, and he knows that the seeds of the downfall are often sowed at the highest point of power. A student of history, he is well aware that presidents inevitably become reactive, as unforeseen events beyond their control begin to shape their tenures and their place in history.

If a year or two from now the economy has not recovered and promises made in the first hundred days remain unfulfilled, disillusionment will set in and his power will wane accordingly. His outsized expansion of the federal government would then be harshly criticized and cost him the support of moderates. His strong repudiation of all of Bush's national security policies, including the publishing of the torture memos, could also become a huge liability in the case of another major terrorist attack. Ultimately, the strongest moment for a president is also the riskiest, since there is a temptation to overreach.

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