

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 22, 2010 at 11:06am

Bearing with Obama

by Joe Feuerherd

Just six months into his presidency, in late 1945, a beleaguered Harry Truman sat at his White House desk and wrote a letter to his elderly mother back in Grandview, Mo.

"Wish I could accommodate every friend I have in every way they'd like," wrote Truman, "but I'm in such a position now that I can't do as I please myself! They'll have to bear with me."

A year into the presidency of Barack Obama, his friends -- particularly those on the political left, especially those on the religious left -- should bear with him.

Case in point: the "public insurance option" that is part of the House version of health care reform but is likely to die as the administration and congressional leaders hammer out the compromise needed to move the legislation to the president's desk.

Obama backed the idea during the campaign, supported its inclusion in the House bill, and then brushed up against a nasty reality: The public option simply doesn't have the votes necessary to pass the Senate, where every Democratic senator (if you still count Joe Lieberman as a Democrat) has an absolute veto over the legislation.

The political atmosphere in Congress is now so warped that it takes a filibuster-proof majority to even begin consideration of major legislation such as health care reform. The president's rhetorical skills have been praised by both supporters and critics alike, but not even the golden-tongued Obama possesses the persuasive power necessary to change the math.

Those of us who believe that health care is a basic human right, and that the best means to assure that right is through a single-payer system, wish this weren't the case. But it is reality.

Some on the left (cheered by mischievous conservatives) argue that progressive members of Congress should withdraw their support for any bill that does not include a public option -- even one that expands health insurance to 30 million Americans and reins in the rapacious health insurance industry. With such friends prepared to forgo the largest expansion of the social welfare system in more than four decades at the altar of the public option, who needs Republican opposition?

Way back in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan pledged a 30 percent across-the-board tax cut and then settled for a 25 percent reduction implemented over three years, conservatives were smart enough to realize they'd won. Those tax cuts forced reductions in social programs (it was called "starving the beast") that reframed the national debate over social spending for more than a generation. The poor and the middle class paid the consequences.

Fifteen years ago this month, President Bill Clinton, having failed to pass health reform and facing a newly empowered Republican Congress, declared that "the era of big government is over." And it was. With the exception of a disastrous "reform" of the welfare system, Clinton played small (remember his push for school uniforms and the "V-Chip?") and rode the crest of a bustling economy for the remainder of his two terms.

Yes, the secular and religious left should challenge the Obama administration, not least for its reliance on a military response in Afghanistan.

But make no mistake: Obama -- through health care reform, the \$800 billion economic stimulus bill, hefty increases in domestic social spending, stringent environmental regulation, the prospect of increased oversight of Wall Street and the banking industry included in legislation now under consideration -- is playing large. He has launched an era of activist government, one that carries with it the prospect of political realignment that will make Americans amenable to a progressive agenda for a generation to come.

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Will he succeed? There are strong forces working to derail the agenda and, with the economy still in the pits, they are emboldened.

"If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog," Truman famously quipped. Obama's got Bo, but he needs more help than that.

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