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\"Question Time\" - Thumbs Up!

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 30, 2010 NCR Today

For those who did not watch the President?s meeting with the House Republican Caucus in Baltimore yesterday, try and catch it on C-Span this weekend. Unlike the State of the Union, which even when it is good, is a set piece with little dramatic impact, yesterday?s back and forth with the opposition was fascinating, both good politics and good theater. It has been compared to ?Question Time,? when a British Prime Minister weekly (and sometimes weakly) submits to questions from members of the House of Commons. Of course, American politics, in formal settings, lacks the rough-and-tumble of the Commons, but the event in Baltimore came as close to anything I have seen in a long time in forcing the participants past the their own sound-bites.

President Obama should submit to ?Question Time? once a month. I use the verb ?submit? intentionally. There is not better way to beat back the charge of arrogance, to show that he is holding himself accountable, not just to the citizenry but to the facts, to explain his own policies and highlight the lack of seriousness that characterizes the opposition than to do these events regularly. The President would not be ?submitting? to Congress but to the voters whom those congressmen represent. The events would have the effect, desperately needed today, of turning the political opposition into the ?loyal opposition,? forcing them to make real proposals, to engage in genuine dialogue, and to stop the grandstanding for the tea party crowd. "Question Time" submits the Congress as well as the President to a reality check.

You can imagine White House handlers terrified at the prospect: One mistake, repeated over and over again, could doom a presidency. Besides, handlers like to glorify the presidency, not least because of where it places them in the social and political firmament of Washington. Presidents, especially since World War II, have been very mindful of the dignity of their office. Remember Nixon?s version of the Pope?s noble guards? Think of the countless refusals, by presidents of both parties, to comply with congressional subpoenas. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the locus of political power and political genius was the Senate not to the White House. We all remember Clay and Calhoun and Webster who served in the Senate at the same time as a string of forgettable and forgotten presidents lived at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. But, there is no going back. Webster did not have the nuclear football with him at all times and Obama does.

The point is that the short-term political risks are outweighed by the transforming effect regular ?Question Time? would have on our polity. What we saw in Baltimore was only a foretaste: If the President were, over time, to fail to embrace any GOP ideas, they could call him out. On the other hand, as the President did yesterday, when the GOP liken his policies to a Bolshevik plot when they more closely resemble earlier proposals from radicals like Bob Dole and Howard Baker, he gets to call them out. The events would make reckless, baseless charges harder to sustain over time. Regularly scheduled ?Question Time? would require more seriousness and less posturing by both parties. And, so far from courting political risk, regular events actually diminish the risk because an occasional flub would only be news for so long and a stellar performance the next round would relegate the flub to oblivion.

One other benefit of regular ?Question Time? sessions is perhaps the most important. It would be impossible to have a ninny as president. I always thought that the caricature of George W. Bush as a not very bright martinet,

whose strings were pulled by Cheney and others, was just that, a caricature. Bush was committed to a set of ideas I think are inadequate but he was no dummy. That said, if he had gone to Capitol Hill once a month for a session like the one we witnessed yesterday, the caricature would have been exploded or confirmed very quickly. As well, if you have spent any amount of time around members of Congress, you realize that some of them are not the brightest bulbs on Broadway. Regular ?Question Time? sessions would put a premium on intellectual rigor and make it harder for dullards to make their mark and stay in office. These sessions could make the otherwise pernicious effects of redistricting less forceful: No one wants a dullard.

Politicians are risk averse. You can be sure that any and all proposals contained in the State of the Union speeches of the last thirty years were tested in polls and focus groups first. But, scheduling a regular time when the President submits to questions from the Congress would do much to elevate the quality of American politics. Bravo to President Obama and the congressional Republicans for starting it. The rest of us should insist that it continue.

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