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Gerson on Obama the Un-Unifier

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 10, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Michael Gerson?s critique [1]of Obama?s skills as communicator since the election. The President has not done a very good job tying together the disparate parts of his political program into a coherent argument about the role of government.

In the health care fight, especially, he failed to show how the congressional struggle was linked to his campaign promise of change, and how it was another step in the direction first set by Franklin Roosevelt of creating a government that plays the critical, essential, and indispensable role in fashioning a social safety net that enshrines the common good. When the negotiations on the Hill got bogged down, it looked like the Democrats were focused on health care per se, rather than on a health care plan that would help the economy in both the near term and the long term. His stimulus bill lacked focus, funding a million little things but not creating a central ?America is going back to work? narrative like the one FDR fashioned for the CCC and the WPA during the New Deal.

But, Gerson is unfair when he writes that ?Obama?s initiatives?have made it impossible for him to maintain the pretense of being a unifying, healing, once-in-a-generation leader.? To unify, someone needs someone or something with which to unify and the Republicans made it abundantly clear, early on, that they had do real interest in sharing responsibility for the nation?s economic plight. They produced not a single vote for the Stimulus Bill which, we now know, was not too large but not large enough. They produced not a single vote for health care reform, even after the Democrats caved on the public option.

Coming after eight years of Rovian political strategy that was designed to be divisive, perhaps it was naïve of Obama to think he could bring anyone in the GOP on board. Perhaps, he and his policy team needed to think outside the box. I continue to think that a bipartisan health care bill might have been doable had the Democrats agreed to give the states five years to implement policies to achieve near-universal coverage but, if they failed, a robust federal program, complete with a public option or universal buy-ins to Medicare, would have kicked in. But, Gerson does not charge Obama with naivete or unimaginativeness. He charges him with being divisive. Coming from someone who once penned speeches for George W. Bush, the charge is ironic to say the least.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/08/AR2010090805912.html