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Journalists expect Obama to forcefully pursue legislative agenda

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Jan. 24, 2013
Washington

Emboldened by his re-election, look for President Barack Obama to more forcefully pursue a legislative agenda that includes gun control, immigration reform and civil rights for gay people, four journalists said at The Catholic University of America.

Whether he is successful will depend on his ability to carry out the key message of his inaugural address: that all Americans must work together to create a better country, the journalists said.

Speaking Tuesday, a little more than 24 hours after Obama outlined his priorities from the steps of the Capitol following his ceremonial inauguration, the journalists pointed to other concerns the president raised as well, such as climate change and protecting federal programs benefiting the poor and elderly as vital for the common good.

Looming overhead though are the continuing legal challenges to the Department of Health and Human Services contraceptive mandate from religious organizations and a few companies objecting on faith-based grounds as the Affordable Care Act moves toward full implementation in 2014, said Greg Erlandson, president and publisher of Our Sunday Visitor.

Calling Obama's inaugural address more "like his final campaign speech," Erlandson told the audience at the program sponsored by the university's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies that it is difficult to predict what the president can accomplish given the divisive nature of the political environment in Washington.

Erlandson remained focused on the issue of religious liberty through much of the discussion, maintaining that Obama can expect to face challenges throughout his second term from segments of the faith-based community unless the administration's definition of a religious organization is widened under the health care reform law.

"In looking at the next four years, there are many issues that the church has a stake in or has an opinion about, and yet there's a huge roadblock right now and that is the HHS mandate and the debate over religious liberty," he said.

Panelist Michael Sean Winters, who writes the "Distinctly Catholic [1]" blog for *National Catholic Reporter* and is an institute visiting fellow, said the bishops must better identify the terms they use in the religious liberty debate and that it was important for the church to draw "very bright lines" around conscience protections in federal law.

Beyond religious freedom concerns, Rachel Swarns, a New York *Times* correspondent who reports on demographic and social trends and an institute visiting fellow, said Obama's priorities reflect his biracial roots as well as the country's increasing diversity.

"It's easy to forget just what a big deal this and how who he is and who his wife is really reflect how much the

country has changed," Swarns said. "Who they are reflects a little bit about who we are."

Calling for immigration reform and tying civil rights for gay people to the women's suffrage movement and the civil rights campaign for blacks is indicative of Obama's beliefs in the need to guarantee the rights of all people under the Constitution, she said.

Obama also contested oft-repeated claim during the 2012 presidential campaign that many people are "takers" when they access Medicaid, food stamps and unemployment benefits, offering insight into his belief that government has a role to help people when unforeseen misfortunes arise, said Washington *Post* political writer Melinda Henneberger.

"He made a point over and over of saying we don't have to choose between caring for the people of the generation who built this country and people of the generation who are responsible for our future," she said. "He kept repeating 'We the people.' It really was a restatement of his central and his party's central belief that we're all in this together."

Winters suggested that the inaugural address was the first step to conduct a political style campaign to promote issues that are most important to Obama.

"The man, whether you agree with his politics or not, is finally creating the narrative to counter the tea party's narrative," Winters said. "He's saying, 'No, you don't own the American Revolution, you don't own the U.S. Constitution. Here's what it means to in this moment in our history.' I think it remains to be seen whether or not he can carry that over and continue. You can't just do it in one speech. You have to do it again and again and again.

"My question for this administration," Winters added, "is will they continue to create a counter narrative that links the American founding and all the deep resonance that event has for all Americans with his contemporary agenda?"

The panelists voiced the most pessimism for Obama's plan to reinstitute a ban on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity gun clips. Erlandson said Catholic bishops already have offered their support for reasonable gun control measures and willingness to work with the White House to get a ban passed by Congress.

Henneberger said she expects a consensus will develop to improve mental health services to reduce the risk of deadly firearms being obtained by the severely mentally ill.

Beyond that, the journalists were skeptical that Congress would do much more.

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