

Obama on The Defensive

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 13, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Democrats have a genetic predisposition to hand-wringing. The memo from James Carville and Stan Greenberg criticizing President Obama's re-election effort, and [the commentary thereon](#) [1], is par for the course: In 1992, there were plenty of criticisms of Carville, Greenberg and their man Bill Clinton as he entered the Democratic Convention in New York trailing both President George H.W. Bush and Third Party, First-Tier Crazy Ross Perot. Events, some of them unforeseeable, intervene, upsetting established narratives. Message discipline is important in a candidate and among his or her surrogates, but it is not always enough.

Still, one of the most remarkable facts about the Obama administration has been its dismal ability to communicate with the American electorate. Obama's candidacy was built upon nothing but words at first: He was launched onto the national stage by reason of his 2004 convention keynote speech, not because he had negotiated a peace settlement abroad as an ambassador, nor devised a key piece of legislation as in the Illinois State Senate. His verbiage, combined with the sense that here was history in the making, was his selling point. But, once he got to the White House, what happened?

In January 2006, before Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency, I had coffee with a friend who had worked in his Senate office. The aide admired Obama enormously, pointed to the historical nature of his candidacy, and expressed grave misgivings about then-Sen. Hillary Clinton's polarizing personality, misgivings I shared. I was sold. But, the aide also said something that I did not pay sufficient attention to at the time: "When you peel away all the layers of the onion, at his core, Obama is a policy wonk." The image of Obama as a policy wonk was so at odds with the image we saw during the campaign, that I had almost forgotten the observation. How could a man so capable of giving such inspiring speeches really view the world through the eyes of a wonk?

What is stunning about the Obama presidency has been his unwillingness to defend his own accomplishments. Once some focus group told David Axelrod they don't like the stimulus, the administration stopped defending it. Once the Republicans criticized him for claiming credit for the killing of Osama bin Laden, they stopped claiming credit. As the article in Politico highlighted above notes, even on the bailout of the auto industry, the administration has been slow to take credit where credit is due, or even to point out how mendaciously Mitt Romney has discussed the issue. In 2010, most Democrats were running away from their vote for the Affordable Care Act instead of defending it and, consequently, the GOP was able to define a piece of legislation that should be seen as an enormous accomplishment. I have recalled the story before of having coffee with a White House official shortly after the ACA passed and making the point, which I thought was as obvious as commenting upon the sun rising in the east, certainly nothing like imparting wise, campaign advice, that the administration needed to find a five year old with a pre-existing condition who had been denied health insurance coverage by an insurance company because of the pre-existing condition, but who now had that coverage because of the ACA, that they needed to make that five year old as well known as Ryan White had been, the face of the ACA as White was the face of funding for AIDS research. Did I miss that ad campaign by the DNC?

The bad messaging is seen in other ways as well. One of the most common tropes on Fox News is that the

economic recovery under Obama has been anemic compared to previous economic recoveries. This is undoubtedly true. But, it also entails a big, fat falsehood: Not all recoveries are alike because not all recessions are alike. The Reagan recovery of the early 1980's was built largely on the strength of the successful anti-inflationary policies of Paul Volcker. The Clinton recovery of the 1990s was built on the strength of the dot.com explosion. Neither Reagan nor Bush inherited an economy that was perilously close to implosion, that was contracting at an outrageous clip, and that was shedding hundreds of thousands of jobs per month. It is true that the Obama recovery has been slower because the hole to be climbed out of was deeper than that faced by Reagan or Clinton. But, I never hear the Democrats make that point today and we did not even hear that point made in 2009. Then, Tim Geithner was terrified that any honest appraisal of the economy would be gloomy and gloom would hurt the recovery. But, by failing to make the political case for the Stimulus with rigor and to defend it afterwards, and by failing to hit again and again on just how bad things were, the Obama administration had no grounds for going back to Congress when the Stimulus was not enough.

To be clear, the president has some significant accomplishments he might tout. He did save the American auto industry, and that should count for something. He did give the order to kill or capture Osama bin Laden. He did get the ACA passed. He did stop the economy from going over the cliff, save the banking sector, and lay the groundwork for the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and with it the savings of millions of Americans, to rebound from around 8,000 points when he took office to the 12,000 points it registers today. He did get us out of Iraq. These are not small accomplishments.

Unfortunately, it is probably too late to mount a defense of the 2009 Stimulus, it may be too late to mount a defense of the ACA. It is also probably too late to point out how bad the economy was in 2009. But, if a candidate cannot run on his accomplishments, what can he run on? A newcomer can wow with his rhetoric as Obama did in 2008. Then, the contentless nouns ? hope, change ? were enough. Not anymore. The best public speaker of our lifetime has proven himself a remarkably inept communicator. He has been a decent president, unafraid to make tough decisions, getting health care reform passed where others had failed, etc. But he is a horrible leader of the Democratic Party. And, because time waits for no man, it may be too late for Obama to craft a narrative that would justify his re-election. It couldn't happen to a nicer wonk.

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