Obama's Best Bad Option
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One of Shakespeare’s most popular plays is “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” a comedy, focused on magic and distinguishing fantasy from reality. Right about now, President Obama is probably having his own midsummer night’s dream, anxious to get back his old magic and separating fantasy from reality as he contemplates the upcoming midterm elections. For Obama, however, dreams could easily become nightmares if he fails to solve the political challenges now confronting him and his party.

In late summer of a crucial midterm election, two political fundamentals are abundantly clear, while two others are almost equally unknown. All four bear enormously on the next presidential election and the fate of the nation over the next six years.

Abundantly clear is that:

1. National Democrats are facing electoral carnage, possibly of monumental proportions, that could cost them the House and even the Senate;

2. The Obama presidency seems increasingly imperiled in this second year of his presidency. Many believe he could not be re-elected if the next presidential election was this November rather than two years from now.

Abundantly ambiguous are two related political fundamentals:

1. How bad is it going to be for Democrats in the 2010 midterms?

2. What will Obama do to salvage his presidency in the aftermath of the inevitable reverses to be sustained in November?

The how bad will it be question seems to offer only a series of equally horrific scenarios for Democrats. Past midterms provide a guide, and that guide suggests that the president’s party almost always loses congressional seats in the first midterm, an average of 30 in the House and five in the Senate since 1938. Only one president in that interval (Bush in 2002) didn’t lose House seats in his first midterm.

Moreover, it has been worse for presidents running in bad economic times and during war. Obama carries both of these disadvantages in 2010. Since 1938, presidents running in such times have lost an average of 44 house seats in the midterm. The Democrats now control the House by just 39 seats.

But these dismal prospects are not the worst of it. To them is added Obama’s personal unpopularity. The president’s approval rating is in the dumpster at 47% and unlikely to move higher anytime soon.

Ominously for Obama, a president’s approval rating in the midterm year is highly correlated with electoral losses for his party in Congress. Obama’s unpopularity rivals Clinton in 1994 (46% approval), Carter in 1978 (49% approval), and Johnson in 1966 (44% approval).
In short, the carnage for Democrats in 2010 is likely to be broad and deep--affecting Democratic candidates at both state and national levels. So to the first unknown--how bad will it be--the answer is most probably very bad indeed. The losses could reach historic magnitudes.

The second unknown is by far the most interesting and the most difficult to forecast. What will Obama do about it? What he ultimately does will determine whether he has any chance for a second term.

For Obama, there are three recent options or strategies employed by comparably embattled Democratic presidencies. Call them the bad, worse, and worst strategies because Obama at this point probably has no really good options.

The “worst” strategy was employed by Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Faced with an unpopular war, hemorrhaging party support and voter unrest, he simply announced he would not run again. The political consequence of that strategy was Richard Nixon’s election, eight years of Republican rule, and, of course, Watergate.

The merely “worse” strategy was Jimmy Carter’s. After modest 1978 midterm losses, Carter entered his final two years facing an insurrection from liberals in his own party. Unlike Clinton 20 years later, he adjusted hardly at all to public opinion, changed few of his policies, and consequently steadily lost popularity for both his domestic and foreign agendas. He ended his term disastrously in the midst of a bungled hostage standoff with Iran.

The “bad” strategy and “best” was Bill Clinton’s in 1994. Voter anger that year over Clinton policies was widespread. Consequently, the GOP captured both houses of Congress. Many believed the Clinton presidency was over. It might have been, but Clinton shrewdly assessed the damage, saw his limited options, and moved to the center faster than you can say “triangulate.” The result two years later was another term and a revitalized party.

Which of these strategies might Obama employ? Maybe none! While each of these earlier presidencies provides a roadmap, they were all traveling different roads. Obama faces a set of conditions and circumstances unique in the modern presidency—a recession bordering on a depression, unprecedented peace-time debt, and an unpopular war. To get out of this one he might have to invent his own strategy.

Indeed, Obama has done just that throughout his life. During his career, he has faced challenges and overcome obstacles. His historic presidential campaign in 2008, becoming America’s first black president, eloquently showcased his immense capacity to overcome adversity and emerge a winner after all. All of those trials probably helped prepare him for this one. But none of them have tested him as he will be tested after November 2nd.

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