

The Goldilocks Principle in American Politics

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In politics, text and subtext don't always tell the same tale. This time, however, they do. The text in question can be found in almost any story this summer about the Obama administration. Some recent column titles from *Real Clear Politics* paint the picture poignantly: "It's time to take back the healthcare debate," "Obama has failed to answer the difficult questions," "Obama must inspire passion and conviction." And so forth! The subtext of these and dozens of similar stories is crystal clear-Obama is in early trouble and the fate of his presidency may be at stake. The presidency that many thought might resemble FDR's is looking more and more like Jimmy Carter's. The aspirations of last November are becoming the trepidations of this September.

But this dismal depiction merely describes what is happening to the once lofty hopes for Obama. The far more interesting and useful question is, why?

Clearly part of the answer is the bogging down of national healthcare reform-Obama's crown jewel of his first term. The issue has been spectacularly mismanaged, if not mangled, by the administration. Few who lived through the Clinton healthcare quagmire in 1993 would have expected to see the same party repeat the same mistakes two decades later. But healthcare is only part of the problem. It is Obama's entire aggressive agenda that has been shut down.

And it has been shut down because Obama has violated a fundamental rule of the presidency. Call it the "Goldilocks principle": presidents who under-reach their agendas end up tasting "too cold" to the American people, while presidents who over-reach their agenda end up "too hot." But presidents whose agendas are ambitious but limited taste "just right." They not only get to eat their porridge, but they get re-elected, too. Examples of all three types of presidencies have been observed throughout American history.

The crux of the Goldilocks principle is that successful presidents align their agendas within broad parameters defined by widespread voter approval. Reagan did that, Carter didn't, and Obama so far hasn't.

On his present trajectory Obama is a "too hot" president. His ambitious and expansive agenda has transformed a party with too few bold ideas into a party with too many bold ideas. And in the process he has left behind a solid hunk of the American people.

But how did a smart guy get himself into a dumb spot only some eight months into his presidency? Many will say inexperience mixed liberally with hubris prevented him from learning history's oft taught lessons about over-reaching agendas. But even more fundamentally Obama is in trouble because he has misread the tea leaves. His administration is floundering because it has failed to understand the nature of its 2008 electoral victory.

They have fallen prey to the flawed view that Obama has a mandate for massive change-a mandate to transform the fundamental relationships that have existed between the American government and its people since the New Deal. In point of fact they have no such mandate.

It is not a minor point to emphasize that Obama, like most American presidents, is trying to do what he said he would do. His problem, like other presidents who stumbled early, is that he didn't distinguish between what he thought he said and what the American people largely heard.

Obama was elected not so much as an agent of big change but in reaction to the Bush presidency. He won the presidency because the nation was mired in both a recession and an unpopular war, not because most voters endorsed his agenda. In truth, most voters were not focused on the ambitious nature of his agenda, and they did not mean to endorse many of the specifics of it with their vote. Moreover, Obama further muddied the exact meaning of the election by constantly shifting his positions on important issues. In short, the American people, while rejecting the status quo, never bought into any fundamental New Deal type reform.

But even if voters had endorsed the agenda-even if Obama had the mandate he thinks he had-he would still be in trouble because his agenda does not well fit the temper of the times. Healthcare reform is the signature issue of his agenda. But he is trying to radically overhaul a system in which 85 percent of voters are reasonably happy with their healthcare coverage.

Obama has often been compared to FDR and the current recession to the Great Depression. Both comparisons, however, seem specious. 2009 is not the 1930's, a time when unemployment was at 25%, GDP had fallen 46%, prices had fallen 72%, no safety net existed of any kind, and the stock market dove to levels it would not recover from until the post World War II period. Nor has Obama approached his agenda as FDR did.

Surely the Obama administration would have learned much from a deeper understanding of how FDR was able to bring about fundamental reform. In fact, the early New Deal programs were widely supported by all segments of American society. FDR did not start the vast permanent reform programs of the New Deal-such as Social Security, the TVA, and the NLRA-until 1935 after his support in Congress was reinforced by the 1934 mid-term elections. Even then he waited until pushed to the left by political movements and potential presidential rivals. By contrast, the initiatives of the Obama administration have more deeply divided the nation-miring us in ever more conflict and ever less consensus.

Has Obama now so thoroughly trashed the Goldilocks principle that his reverses are permanent? Probably not, but neither does he have a lot of time to recover with the 2010 mid-terms hovering ominously over him.

Even more disquieting for him is the pressure he is getting from a re-energized American left now increasingly restive with him. This raises the real possibilities of a challenge from the left in 2012. Carter, of course, faced the same challenge in 1980 from liberal Ted Kennedy in similar circumstances, fatally weakening him against Reagan. If this transpires it will rank as one of the greatest political ironies of all time-Obama is elected president as the most liberal senator, only to be challenged and lose his office not because of conservative unrest but because of liberal frustration.

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