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Noonan: His Terms Are Always Hostile Ones

No one has good faith but Obama. Doesn't this get boring, even to him?



By PEGGY NOONAN

Presidential inaugurations are rare and notable events, coming only once every four years since April 30, 1789, when George Washington raised his right hand and took the oath on the second-floor balcony of New York's Federal Hall.

It's a big day with all its pomp and ceremony, and among its purposes is this: to encourage all who watch to let go, for a moment, of the ups and downs of the political day-to-day and think, for a moment, about the longer arc of our history. A president's inaugural address is a chance to go big and *be* big—to be thematic and not programmatic, to declare the meaning, as he sees it, of his leadership, to speak of where America is and ought to be. The whole day, from breakfasts to balls, is meant to be, insofar as possible within the confines of human nature, one of democratic fellowship and good feeling.

A president approaching that day will necessarily be, in his spirit, benign, embracing—unifying.

So here is what is utterly remarkable: President Obama has been using the days and weeks leading up to his inauguration to show the depth of his disdain for the leaders of the other major party and, by inference, that party's voters, which is to say more or less half the country. He has been spending his time alienating instead of summoning. It has left the political air more sour and estranged.

As a presidential style this is something strange and new. That has to be said again: It is new, and does not augur well.

What was remarkable about the president's news conference Monday is that he didn't seem to think he had to mask his partisan rancor or be large-spirited. He bristled with unashamed hostility for Republicans on the Hill. They are holding the economy "ransom," they are using the threat of "crashing the American economy" as "leverage," some are "absolutist" while others are

"consumed with partisan brinkmanship." They are holding "a gun at the head of the American people." And what is "motivating and propelling" them is not a desire for debt reduction, as they claim. They are "suspicious about government's commitment . . . to make sure that seniors have decent health care as they get older. They have suspicions about Social Security. They have suspicions about whether government should make sure that kids in poverty are getting enough to eat, or whether we should be spending money on medical research."



Zuma Press

President Obama at the White House event on gun control, Jan. 16.

And yet, "when I'm over here at the congressional picnic and folks are coming up and taking pictures with their family, I promise you, Michelle and I are very nice to them."

You're *nice* to them? To people who'd take food from the mouths of babes?

Then, grimly: "But it doesn't prevent them from going onto the floor of the House and blasting me for being a big-spending socialist." Conservative media outlets "demonize" the president, he complained, and so Republican legislators fear standing near him.

If Richard Nixon talked like that, they'd have called him paranoid and self-pitying. Oh wait . . .

Throughout the press conference the president demanded—they'd "better choose quickly"—that Republicans extend the debt ceiling. Pressed by reporters on whether he would negotiate with them to win this outcome, he made it clear he would not. He would have "a conversation." Bloomberg's Julianna Goldman asked: "So you technically will negotiate?"

"No, Julianna," he answered. "Either Congress pays its bills or it doesn't."

There was a logical inconsistency to his argument. A government shutdown would be so disastrous to the economy that he won't negotiate with Republicans if that's what it takes to avert it.

This, he said, is what will happen if the debt ceiling is not extended: "Social Security checks and veteran's benefits will be delayed. We might not be able to pay our troops, or honor our contracts with small businesses. Food inspectors, air-traffic controllers, specialists who track down loose nuclear material wouldn't get their paychecks."

Why talk to Republicans when the stakes are so high? They must be the kind of people who like to see planes crash and bombs go off.

Two days later, unveiling his gun-control plan at a White House event, it wasn't only Republicans in Congress who lie: "There will be pundits and politicians and special-interest lobbyists publicly warning of a tyrannical all-out assault on liberty, not because that's true but because they want to gin up fear or higher ratings or revenue for themselves. And behind the scenes, they'll do everything they can to block any common-sense reform and make sure nothing changes

whatsoever."

No one has good faith but him. No one is sincere but him. Doesn't this get boring, even to him?

The president was criticized for surrounding himself with children during the event, but politicians use props and the props are usually people. Was it out of bounds that he used kids? No. Was it classy? No. But classiness doesn't seem to be much on his mind. Perhaps his staffers were thinking less about gun control than warming up his image—"Julia, I will try very hard"—and trying to get people to think of him, after four years, and with his graying hair, as Papa Obama, instead of Irritating Older Brother Who Got 750 On His SATs And Thinks He's Einstein Obama. Which is sort of how half the country sees him.

His gun-control recommendations themselves seemed, on balance, reasonable and moderate. I don't remember that the Second Amendment died when Bill Clinton banned assault rifles; it seemed to thrive, and good, too. That ban shouldn't have been allowed to expire in 2004.

What was offensive about the president's recommendations is what they excluded. He had nothing to say about America's culture of violence—its movies, TV shows and videogames. Excuse me, there will be a study of videogames; they are going to do "research" on whether seeing 10,000 heads explode on video screens every day might lead unstable young men to think about making heads explode. You'll need a real genius to figure that out.

The president at one point asked congressmen in traditionally gun-supporting districts to take a chance, do the right thing and support some limits. But when it comes to challenging Hollywood—where *he* traditionally gets support, and from which he has taken great amounts of money for past campaigns and no doubt will for future libraries—he doesn't seem to think he has to do the right thing. He doesn't even have to talk about it. It wouldn't be good to have Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino running around shouting "First Amendment, slippery slope!" or have various powerful and admired actors worrying their brows, to the extent their brows can be worried.

On cultural issues, this Democratic president could have done a Nixon to China—the bold move that only he could make without inspiring fierce dissent, the move that could break through.

Instead he did a Nixon to the Orange County GOP.

Maybe the president doesn't operate with as much good faith as he thinks, and maybe the other side isn't as bad as he pretends. As I watched his news conference and his gun-control remarks, I thought, for the first time in a while, that the Republicans are finally getting a break.

He is overplaying his hand.

He does that. He's doing it again.

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