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# The Off-Center President

*Obama says he'd settle for a single term—and seems to mean it.*

By PEGGY NOONAN



There is, I think, an amazing political fact right now that is hiding in plain sight and is rich with implications. It was there in President Obama's Jan. 25, pre-State of the Union interview with ABC's Diane Sawyer, who was pressing him about his political predicaments. "I'd rather be a really good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president," he said. "And I—and I believe that."

Now this is the sort of thing presidents say, and often believe they believe, but at the end of the day they all want two terms. Except that Mr. Obama shows every sign of meaning it, and if he does, it explains a lot about his recent decisions and actions.

A week after the Sawyer interview, the president had a stunning and revealing exchange with Sen. Blanche Lincoln, the Arkansas Democrat likely to lose her 2010 re-election campaign. He was meeting with Senate Democrats to urge them to continue with his legislative agenda. Mrs. Lincoln took the opportunity to beseech him to change it. She urged him to distance his administration from "people who want extremes," and to find "common ground" with Republicans in producing legislation that would give those in business the "certainty" they need to create jobs.

While answering, Mr. Obama raised his voice slightly and quickened his cadence. "If the price of certainty is essentially for us to adopt the exact same proposals that were in place leading up to the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression . . . the result is going to be the same. I don't know why we would expect a different outcome pursuing the exact same policy that got us in this fix in the first place." He continued: "If our response ends up being, you know . . . we don't want to stir things up here," then "I don't know why people would say, 'Boy, we really want to make sure those Democrats are in Washington fighting for us.'"

When I saw the videotape later, I wondered how the senator, now down by as much as 23 points in her bid for re-election, felt. Actually I wanted to ask, "Apart from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?"

The Washington Post's Charles Lane, one of the few journalists to note the exchange, said he found it revealing in two ways: First, the president equates becoming more centrist with becoming more like George W. Bush, and second, he apparently sees movement to the center as a political loser.

These are two surprising things to think, and they have contributed to our astonishing political moment, in which a popular young president who won by 9.5 million votes 15 months ago has seen support for his programs slip to the point that a Gallup poll this week found him running even with a nameless Republican in 2012.

His reaction to all this is striking. He doesn't seem a man at sea who's flailing and trying to grab any deck chair that floats by. He seems a man who is certain he is right, in the long term if not in the day-to-day. And if the cost of being right is a single term, then so be it. Which, again, is not how presidents usually think. And not how legislators, who live to be re-elected, want the president of their party to think.

This touches on the still-essential question that historians will write books about: How did the president lose the room? How did he lose popularity?

The leftward edge of the left says he did it by being too accommodating, by trying for a bipartisanship that doesn't exist. The rightward edge of the right says he did it by revealing his essentially socialistic agenda. The center has said, in polls and at the polls, that it didn't like his administration's first-year obsession with a health-care bill that was huge, costly and impenetrably complicated, and would be run by those people who gave you the DMV and the post office.

The political class this week blamed it on the Chicago Mafia, the longtime Obama friends and associates who surround him in the Oval Office. But even that doesn't explain it. What did they do wrong? And why do people think Mr. Obama's advisers are different from Mr. Obama?

Washington's pundits have begun announcing that the White House is better at campaigning than at governing, but that was obvious last summer. The president and his advisers understand one thing really well, and that is Democratic primaries and Democratic politics. This is the area in which they made their careers. It's how they defeated Hillary Clinton—by knowing how Democrats think. In the 2008 general election, appealing for the first time to all of America and not only to Democrats, they had one great gift on their side, the man who both made Mr. Obama and did in John McCain, and that was George W. Bush.

But now it is 2010, and Mr. Bush is gone. Mr. Obama is left with America, and he does not, really, understand it. That is why he thinks moving to the center would be political death, when moving to the center and triangulating, as Bill Clinton did, might give him a new lease on life.

But there's something else that has led Mr. Obama to his falling poll numbers. When FDR followed the disaster that was Herbert Hoover, he took a new and different path. The government would now hold a new place in the daily American reality. When Ronald Reagan followed the disaster that was Jimmy Carter, he took a new and different path. The federal government would be pushed back from its intrusions on Americans. But when Barack Obama took over after the disaster that was George W. Bush, he did not, in terms of the most pressing domestic issue after unemployment, take a new and different path. He spent, just like Mr. Bush, only even more. It was as if he were saying, "You think Bush broke the bank? I'll show you what a broken bank looks like." This isn't a departure, it's a doubling down.

One can argue that in some areas Mr. Obama had little choice—an economy in collapse, a desperate attempt to prop it up. But he initiated plenty of spending that involved plenty of choice, and that garnered little centrist support.

Do the Democrats have hope? Oh, yes. Many Republicans spent the past year watching the president self-destruct, and not getting in the way while he did. A lot of Democrats will spend the next year hoping the Republicans self-destruct by overplaying their hand, by coming up with their own legislation and policy ideas that leave the center, and the middle class, anxious.

Republicans have a recent history of overplaying their hand when up against Democrats with difficulties. It can be hard in policy decisions to determine the difference between what is brave and what is foolhardy, what is desirable and what is possible, especially in a time such as this, when few feel secure. If the Republicans begin to jabber about the abstract and theoretical, they will find the public has little appetite for it. If they amuse themselves with speculation about the potential popularity of "playing the war card," they will find out that war, actually, is not as popular as they think, and is not, actually, a card.

Democrats in Congress, on the other hand, may choose this spring to save themselves by revolting—not only against the Republicans, but against the possible one-termer who jeopardizes their positions.

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