



THE BLOG 01/22/2013 08:47 am ET | Updated Mar 24, 2013

The Post-Kumbaya President



By Marty Kaplan

I wonder where Eric Cantor and Paul Ryan had dinner last night.

Four years ago, while Democrats danced at inaugural balls, Reps. Cantor and Ryan dined at The Caucus Room, a Capitol Hill steakhouse, along with other top Republicans, including Rep. Kevin McCarthy, and Sens. Jim DeMint, John Kyl and Tom Coburn.

Barack Obama's presidency was by then all of eight hours old. At midday, the man who rocketed to prominence in 2004 by declaring America to be not red states or blue states, but the United States, had told the nation, "On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics." With those words, and the applause of 1.8 million Americans on the National Mall still ringing in their ears, some 15 GOP leaders discreetly gathered in the restaurant's private room to decide what to do with the olive branch the president had extended.

As we know from a new *Frontline* documentary based in part on Robert Draper's book, *Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives*, the Caucus Room caucus decided, in Draper's words, "to fight Obama on everything — this meant unyielding opposition to every one of the Obama administration's legislative initiatives."

No matter what was on Obama's agenda, even if it was identical to Republican proposals, they planned to attack it. No matter how many times Obama met with them, sought common ground or negotiated with himself, their strategy was to keep the number of Republican votes he got for anything whatsoever as close to zero as possible.

This happened before there was a Tea Party, before there were 87 far-right GOP freshmen, before the birthers had migrated from the lunatic fringe to the party's mainstream. The economy was in crisis; a second Great Depression was conceivable. Also conceivable was actually working together on behalf of the country. But from night one of day one, the Republicans decided to torpedo Obama, a sentiment

echoed the next year when Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said publicly that denying President Obama a second term was his top priority.

Now that second term has begun. The president has had plenty of experience with Republican intransigence. He has learned the hard way that you can't sing Kumbaya as a solo. But even so, in his second inaugural he said that the oath he swore, "like the one recited by others who serve in this Capitol, was an oath to God and country, not party or faction." Though he surely has the Republicans' number by now, he said, nevertheless, that "we cannot mistake absolutism for principle," that we cannot "treat name-calling as reasoned debate." Was any of that more than wishful thinking?

Seven times he said "together"; five times he said "we, the people." Does he really think his opponents are capable of collaborating, or is he just laying down a marker to collect when they behave badly?

A lot is riding on the answer. "We will respond to the threat of climate change," he promised at heartening length; "we will preserve our planet." But scores of Republican science-deniers hold very safe seats in gerrymandered House districts; they will face no electoral penalty for sticking it to the president every chance they get. Immigration reform, tax reform, school reform, gun control: It's hard to imagine Luntz, Gingrich & Co. working up a different playbook for dealing with the 2012 Obama agenda in a back room at steakhouse 2.0 than they did four years ago.

Though the president didn't put a fix for Citizens United in his inaugural address — isn't fighting political corruption as important as the long shot legislation that made it into the speech? — he did use the word "citizen" eight times. He said it at the top ("fellow citizens," instead of the traditional "fellow Americans"), and he said it repeatedly in the peroration.

I connect that word "citizen" with something else he said. Between going after absolutism and rejecting name-calling, he said that we cannot "substitute spectacle for politics." In an age when the public holds politicians in such low esteem, it's so striking that he chose to use "politics" as a positive term.

Politics is what citizens do — that's what I took him to mean. Spectacles need spectators; democracies need citizens. Spectacles treat citizens as consumers, markets, eyeballs to sell to advertisers. Politics treat citizens as stakeholders, constituents — people to listen to, not just persuade. Spectacles are circuses to distract us; citizens know the risk we run of amusing ourselves to death.

The most important political event of the past week may turn out to be neither the inaugural, nor the sirloin-fueled cabal it may have prompted, but rather the morphing of Obama for America into Organizing for Action. Obama for America was an attempt to convert his 2008 ground game into a grassroots group at the Democratic National Committee, but it barely played a part in his first term's legislative battles. Organizing for Action will try not to make that mistake again. His 2012 top command is determined to make the 2012 vote the beginning, not the end, of political action. His first term was about negotiations between party elites; his second term will be about mobilizing citizen power.