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# It's Tough Love Time for Obama



By Marty Kaplan

First I worried that Obama was foolhardy to put Goldman Sachs alumni and other Wall Street geniuses in charge of fixing the mess that they'd made in the first place. But then I bought the pragmatic argument that these masters of the universe were the only people with enough inside experience to understand the derivatives con game well enough to shut it down.

Then I was afraid that Obama was naïve to court Republicans who kept stiffing him on vote after party-line vote. But then I convinced myself that a majority of Americans wanted him to persist at bipartisanship even though House Republicans unanimously preferred warfare to finding common ground, and that being gracious to kneejerk obstructionists gave him enough political cover to get enough Republican Senators to block a Republican filibuster.

Then I thought Obama and his Justice Department were being wussy to oppose calls for hearings about torture and for giving a pass to the supine Bush appointees who concocted a "legal" rationale for waterboarding. But then I bowed to the notion that health care and energy and the rest of the reform agenda would die if torture took up all the oxygen in Washington.

Then I was troubled that we were ramping up in Afghanistan without an exit strategy, and that rendition and military commissions would continue, and that withholding promised torture photos would lead to the very enemy propaganda victory that the policy reversal was meant to avoid. But then I had to acknowledge the national security and realpolitik props it was winning him from columnists, from the military establishment and from Republicans, and the political upside of being willing to alienate civil libertarians like me.

Then I was concerned that the single-payer option doesn't have a seat at the administration's health policy table, and that the White House didn't lobby the Hill for an interest-rate cap on usurious credit card companies, and that giving laborers a reasonable chance to organize their workplaces isn't a legislative priority, and that ending "don't ask, don't tell" has become don't-go-there. But when I recalled that Obama has already reversed Bush's ban on stem cells, and cancelled Bush's last-minute rule permitting

mountaintop mining waste to be dumped near streams, and signed a law extending the statute of limitations on equal-pay lawsuits, I remembered how hostile the last White House was to just about everything I believe in.

Throughout the campaign, candidate Obama refused to take the advice I shouted at my television. During the debates, when I pleaded with him to counterpunch at McCain more aggressively, he instead kept calmly saying, "I agree with John..." When I urged him to respond ferociously to Sarah Palin's poisonous charge that he was "pallin' around with terrorists," he coolly ignored me. When I begged him to replace his let's-look-forward-not-backward rhetoric with a promise to hold Bush lawbreakers accountable, it seemed like he didn't even hear me. And since his strategy clearly worked, it turned out to be a good thing that he blew me off.

I don't think that President Obama is in a policy bubble, that he's not doing what I want him to do because there's no one in the White House forcefully making my case to him. On the contrary, I'm pretty sure that in every decision he makes, the political, moral and policy pros and cons are all starkly in front of him. Nor is it plausible to me that he lacks the smarts and values to know the right thing, or the courage to do the right thing, or that he's become a captive of the Washington insider/corporate media establishment, or that he's a bait-and-switch President who ran as a Democrat but governs as a post-partisan.

On the other hand, I don't have to agree with Obama all the time. In fact, it's my responsibility to be loud and clear when he lets me down.

During the Bush years, I was astonished by the ability of Republicans to walk in lockstep, to justify everything the administration did, to bend themselves into a pretzel in order to claim that night is day and black is white. On the Hill, among the interest groups, in the right-wing echo chamber, there was no lie too blatant or hypocrisy too appalling to be saluted as sweet reason.

Obama doesn't get that kind of treatment, nor should he. There's no reason his supporters on the left should suck it up and defend him when we disagree with him. Tough love for him is a sign of respect. Sure, vocal dissent runs the risk of propagating a media meme: "Obama's in trouble with his base, but where are they going to go?" But so what if criticism plays into that narrative? After eight years of dissent being demonized as unpatriotic, it's a relief to be mixing it up again.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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