



THE BLOG 07/11/2011 12:17 pm ET | Updated Sep 10, 2011

The “Obama’s Brilliant Strategy” Theory



By Marty Kaplan

If you voted for Obama, here’s what you’re *not* supposed to be thinking:

He turns out to be a lousy poker player. He negotiates with himself. He thinks compromise takes only one to tango. He imputes good will to lethal adversaries. He allows them define the turf he fights on. He lets them keep moving the goalposts. He has no stomach for combat and no instinct for the jugular. Huge majorities want him to hang tough on the stands that got him elected, but he doesn’t have the belly fire to call out his opponents and rally the country to his side. He believes that reason is kryptonite to bullies. He misses Larry Summers. He doesn’t want Tim Geithner to go. He’s confident that the CEO of GE has the best interests of the American worker at heart. He actually likes John Boehner.

It’s understandable that his 2008 base might be waking up with those night sweats. It’s not lefty fanaticism to imagine that the health care bill would have turned out stronger if his opening position was the public option he campaigned on, instead of the deals with the drug industry and the for-profit hospital lobby that he made at the outset. In the 2010 lame duck session, when he signed on to a “temporary” two-year extension of the Bush tax cuts on the rich, you didn’t have to be a liberal ideologue to wonder whether an FDR-like use the bully pulpit could have won a better deal.

But nothing has tested the loyalty of Obama voters more than the current negotiations to raise the debt limit. In the wake of the Ryan plan to end Medicare — wildly popular with Republican legislators, and wildly unpopular with Americans — the administration has bafflingly sabotaged its sharpest contrast with the GOP by putting Medicare on the bargaining table. And Social Security, too, even though it has nothing to do with the debt ceiling, or even the deficit. And while Republicans keep upping their spending cut demands by hundreds of billions of dollars, the president has pre-emptively abandoned any attempt to restore Clinton-era tax rates on millionaires, another lopsidedly popular proposal among Americans, and he has instead bought in to his opponents’ narrative that the reason American businesses are sitting on trillions of dollars of cash is because they lack “certainty” about future tax policy.

One way to banish these blues is to believe that Obama actually has some awesome super-secret strategy going on. He’s playing the long game; he’s a master of eleven-dimensional chess; we’re just too shortsighted to grok his Vulcan genius. Only in retrospect will we get it. But since most of us mortals are stuck in the present, here are three theories about what he might turn out to have been doing today.

The second First 100 Days. It's all about independents. The next presidential election will come down to winning 50.1 percent of the 15 or so percent of independent voters in the handful of 2012 swing states. We know from opinion polls what those voters say they want. Stop the partisan bickering. Solve the nation's problems. Make the tough choices. "Eat your peas," as Obama said at his Monday press conference. Sure, his 2008 base may not like the idea that a few hundred thousand people who don't know what side they're on count more to the White House than they do. But if he's to be re-elected next year, it's more important that independents think Obama is willing to compromise with Republicans this year than it is to stop the Bush tax cuts from gutting student aid, food safety, environmental protection, medical research, infrastructure, Head Start and the rest of the GOP hit list. How can Obama reverse those losses if he isn't re-elected? In his second term, he'll finally be free to be the guy we saw that night in Grant Park.

Win the blame game. When voters realize how recklessly extreme the Republican Party has become, they'll abandon it. Sure, if the U.S. defaults, or even if the recovery just stalls, the Republicans will say it's Obama's fault, and they'll have right-wing cable, talk radio and unlimited corporate-funded attack ads to echo them. But calling Republicans economic terrorists, saying they're holding the economy hostage, is a weak endgame for Obama, if ultimately — to prevent catastrophe — he'll have to fold. That's why he's doubled down and proposed a "grand bargain." It's so visionary, so courageous and patriotic and post-partisan, that the Republicans' rejection of it reveals what a rabid cult they've become, and how culpable they are for what misery may now follow.

Those theories are heartening. Here's one that's not.

Right is the new center. If only Nixon could go to China, then only Obama can move the Democratic Party far enough from its past to survive into the future. This is a teachable moment. It doesn't matter that on the issues in this debt ceiling battle, Americans are 80-to-20 on the Democrats' side. Without a progressive tax code, entitlement spending is unsustainable, and without Wall Street's support, no Democratic presidential candidate will be able raise enough campaign money to compete. Republicans have pulled the center so far to the right, and their media demagoguery has so spooked public discourse, that making the case for government as a guarantor of justice, opportunity and decency is, like it or not, a losing proposition. Choose heartbroken pragmatism over bitter idealism. Don't let the good deal you can't get be the enemy of the only one you can. Harsh? Wake up and smell the Hannity.

I can live with the thought that an independent in Florida, Ohio, Virginia, Wisconsin or Colorado will cast a vote that's worth more than mine. I can warm to the idea that putting Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid on the table is a trick to trap Eric Cantor. But I'd much rather believe that Obama is a bad poker player than the possibility that I'm the one being played.

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.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan