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Thank You, Robert Gibbs



By Marty Kaplan

If Robert Gibbs hadn't said last week that Democrats may lose the House in November, then House Democrats might not have been so infuriated that the president himself had to travel to Capitol Hill to let them vent.

And if Obama hadn't personally heard how enraged they are by Senate Republicans, and how galled they've been by the White House's clueless kumbayas, then he might not have come to his senses at last in his weekly address on Saturday, when he drove a stake through the heart of the post-partisan vampire that has possessed him since his election.

It wasn't an angry talk. He used the same level voice that has enabled the "professorial" put-down to be attached to him by his critics. Nevertheless he made a merciless, convincing case that cynical filibustering by Mitch McConnell's disciplined minority is the enemy of economic recovery.

He hammered Senate Republicans for using procedural tactics to block up-or-down votes on his plans to boost lending to small businesses, and to give them tax incentives to hire workers, buy equipment and expand their companies.

He nailed Republicans for standing in the way of extending unemployment insurance, and for retailing the canard that a few hundred dollars a week will transform jobless Americans into welfare queens.

He drove home the point that people out of work will spend unemployment benefits quickly, which will do more to boost local economies than the Republican answer to everything: more tax cuts for the rich.

It was so simple and effective a take-no-prisoners case that it raises the question, What took you so long, Mr. President?

If you listened to Joe Biden on ABC's Sunday show *This Week*, you'd think that the White House's real difficulty has been that wheezy workhorse, a communications problem — their message's inability to break through to the beleaguered American people, who "don't know a lot of what's going on." Yep, we have to do a better job telling our story: the universal faux mea culpa of low-polling politicians.

To be sure, this Administration could be doing a way better job touting successes like health care and Wall Street reform. Whatever those acts' shortcomings are — and the ones on my list aren't trivial — they still represent historic accomplishments.

But I have no doubt that Obama and Senate Democrats would have had to bargain away much less — would have split differences from a position of strength, in the middle, instead of on the far right where they'd permitted the Republicans to drag the center — if only the White House had had the guts back then, instead of just now, to label McConnell's tactics for what they really were, and if only Democrats had enforced a comparable discipline on the hapless ersatz statesmen in their own caucus.

The alleged desire of independent voters to “get beyond the partisan bickering” is a fairy-tale, promulgated by chin pullers who have never worked in a campaign and by pollsters whose survey questions are worded to make it as impossible to profess skepticism about the dream of a peaceable political kingdom as to say you dislike apple pie.

I'd argue that if Obama and Senate Democrats — instead of effectively inviting Olympia Snowe, Chuck Grassley, Joe Lieberman and Max Baucus to grab them by the short hairs — had lived up to their 2008 mandate, exercised their power, drawn a line in the sand around core principles, and given their partisan base something to bark and bite about, their legislative achievements would have been more impressive than the record they have now, and their success (or even their lack of it) would have warranted the political price they're already paying anyway.

In a throwaway line on *This Week*, on his way to explaining the Administration's frustration, Biden referred to Senate Republicans as “a bunch of guys, who are good guys, but....” That's the animating folklore of the Senate: the collegiality of good, serious people who at the end of the day simply want to do right by the country. In truth, it's less a mythology than a pathology, and both Biden and Obama had ample opportunity to drink that Kool-Aid when they served there.

I hope that Biden's saying that was no more than a courtly flourish, or at worst an atavism he's working to overcome. And I hope that Obama's Saturday address turns out to be more than a one-off.

The bum hand he was dealt when he took office accounts for some of what's pulling Obama down. So does some bad luck, and what chief-of-staff Rahm Emanuel calls “the G force” — the oil spill in the gulf, the debt crisis in Greece, and the aftermath of Israel's attack on a flotilla determined to break its Gaza blockade. But it's not bad advice that's been hurting Obama. With presidents, it never is. His standing, and his party's prospects, will depend on how tenaciously he can hold on to what he seems to have learned from the House Democrats riled up by his press secretary: that he can do more for the country not by holding hands with Mitch McConnell around the campfire, but by taking names and kicking butt the way FDR did.