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A Speech for Obama to Ponder
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President Obama begins an important new phase of his tenure on Wednesday morning. After surveying the political damage of Election Day – which likely will bring a new Republican-controlled House and a more closely divided Senate (even if Democrats retain control of it) – he will have to interpret the results and decide how to maneuver in this new environment.

The pundits will proclaim the results a strong repudiation of his leadership, and they have been arguing for weeks whether he will respond by moving to the political center or digging in his liberal heels to solidify his political base.

It's a false dichotomy, however.

Voters have been shifting their allegiances between the parties with greater frequency in recent decades, giving the White House and Congress first to one party, then the other, and then back again as their hopes are dashed. Even as they cast their votes first with one party and then the other, they are growing increasingly disgusted with both of them and choosing to label themselves “independent.”

What the voters want are not philosophical predispositions but solutions to problems, both the everyday problems of raising their families and educating their kids as well as the national problems of soaring deficits and debt and the challenges posed by a rising China, a resurgent Russia, and a fundamentalist Islam.

In that spirit, and as Obama seeks a viable way forward in a more difficult political environment, he would do well to read a seminal speech that President Clinton delivered in the aftermath of the 1994 mid-term elections.

It was April 1995, five months after voters had given Republicans both chambers of Congress and while House Republicans were busy enacting as much of their campaign document, the “Contract with America,” as they could. Clinton traveled to Dallas and, speaking before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, decided to explain – or, as he surely would put it, remind people – who he was, why he ran for office, what he stood for, and what he would or would not accept.

Clinton reminded his listeners that, in his first two years, he had made progress on the issues voters cared about; acknowledged that he needed to make more; listed the priorities that Republicans had said they shared with him; outlined the ways that the two sides could make progress on those priorities; and, most importantly, drew lines in the sand on each issue beyond which he would not go.

He would, for instance, build on his 1993 tax cut for 15 million working families by cutting taxes for more middle-income families, but he would not accept the much larger Republican tax cut that would disproportionately help the wealthiest Americans.

He would reform welfare, as he had promised, but he would not accept a Republican approach that was “weak on work and tough on kids.”

He would cut the deficit by cutting spending, but he would not “cut help to our children...cut their education, their immunization, their school lunches, the infant formulas, or the nutrition programs.”

He would push regulatory reform but he would not “stop the government from regulating what it needs to regulate,” he would push legal reform but he would not “take the entire civil justice system away from the states for the first time in 200 years,” and he would push for another crackdown on crime but he would not “repeal the commitment to 100,000 [more] police [under the 1994 crime bill] or...repeal the assault weapons ban.”

Obama has a similar opportunity to define himself vis-à-vis the incoming Congress.

On the deficit, for instance, he has already signaled a willingness to cut domestic discretionary spending. Republicans will want to cut both the total amount of such spending more than Obama, and they will try to eliminate some programs that he favors. He can define himself by drawing his own line.

On taxes, both sides want to extend President Bush’s tax cuts, which are due to expire at the end of this year, for everyone making up to \$250,000 a year. Republicans would extend them for everyone over that threshold, while Obama says we can’t afford another tax cut for people who don’t need it. The President is at a defining moment on this issue and, if he relents, he will be less defined and fuzzier.

In the coming months, Obama will have a host of other issues on which to draw his lines in the sand. The trick is to seek progress where he can without accepting the things that neither he nor the country will stomach.

Herein, as Clinton proved, lays a strategy for resurrection.