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Loony Progressives Yell Louder
By LAWRENCE HAAS

You know the old story about Americans who, traveling in a non-English speaking country, try to get the local folk to understand them not by speaking in their native language but, instead, by speaking English louder?

That's apparently how leading progressives approach the issues of taxes and spending, jobs and health care, housing and the environment. They believe that, to get their way in a centrist America, they just need to yell louder.

The latest frustrated progressive to sally forth was Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun and chair of the interfaith Network of Spiritual Progressives, who took to the Washington Post op-ed page on Saturday to call for a progressive challenge to President Obama in the 2012 Democratic presidential primaries in order to strengthen Obama by forcing him to move further to the left and, in this way, further advance progressive policy.

Lerner's piece stresses the outlook of the loony left, which has convinced itself that Obama and progressive congressional Democrats could enact more progressive legislation if only they would yell louder, fight harder and compromise less.

"To many liberals and progressives," Lerner wrote, "the president's unwillingness to veto any measure that includes continued tax relief for billionaires is the last straw, building on a record of spinelessness that includes his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, abandonment of a public option for health-care reform, refusal to prosecute those who tortured in Iraq or lied us into that war, and unwillingness to tax carbon emissions."

A challenge from the left, Lerner says, will force the president to move to the left, which will buck up the party's progressive base, which will strengthen the president's position heading into November 2012.

The challenger's platform would include, along with more friendship and less hostility in foreign affairs, a "massive" jobs program, a freeze on mortgage foreclosures, a national bank to offer interest-free loans for small business, health reform implementation that would benefit ordinary citizens and build support for universal coverage, and lower drug prices for critical diseases. "We need," Lerner wrote, "a progressive push for a new New Deal, which in the 21st century could be the Caring Society: 'Caring for Each Other and the Earth'."

But, the America of 2010 is not that of 1933. Today's America is far more suspicious of big government, as reflected in the number of Republicans and moderate Democrats that it has sent to Washington in recent years. That, even after the 2008 elections, Obama didn't have a progressive working majority on Capitol Hill is proof positive of that reality.

Wrong on the politics of public policy, Lerner and his acolytes are also wrong on the politics of 2012. And – if they follow Lerner’s path – they will likely weaken Obama enough to cause his electoral defeat, leaving them with far less power in a more Republican Washington.

For one thing, there is no modern-day precedent (in either party) for success through Lerner’s formula. Primary challenges do not strengthen incumbent presidents – they weaken them. Ronald Reagan in 1976 challenged Jerry Ford, who then lost to Jim Carter; Ted Kennedy in 1980 challenged Jim Carter, who then lost to Ronald Reagan; Pat Buchanan in 1992 challenged George H.W. Bush, who then lost to Bill Clinton.

For another, Obama has two big political problems – not one. On the left, yes, he has a disheartened base that believes he has not catered enough to its interests. In the middle, however, independent voters who broke for him in 2008 are fleeing in droves because they think he has governed too much from the left – and he can’t win re-election in 2012 unless he brings at least some of them back.

Lerner and his colleagues may support the big-government agenda outlined above, but Middle America does not. The public is increasingly uncomfortable with rising deficits and debt, viewing the red ink as a symbol of an out-of-control Washington. The bailout and stimulus measure of 2008 and 2009, respectively, though effective, remain hugely unpopular, and the public remains deeply divided over whether the Democrats’ government-centric health reform was a wise idea.

Despite what Lerner argues, Obama can’t win simply by reinvigorating progressives because, to put it bluntly, there aren’t enough of them left in centrist, increasingly “independent” America. His path to re-election is to hold his base and win back centrists. That Obama recently proposed to freeze federal civilian pay as a budget-cutting measure and visited the troops in Afghanistan suggests he understands as much.

So, progressives have a choice:

They can thank Obama for a stimulus measure that eased the recession and landmark health reform legislation that largely fulfilled a dream of Democratic presidents dating to Truman, and they can work closely with him to blunt future conservative efforts to undo much of what progressives hold dear.

Or they can whine about farcical missed opportunities to enact even more progressive legislation, close their eyes to the fact that most of America doesn’t share their vision for much larger central government, and take steps that will hurt Obama and, in the end, move the country in precisely the direction they so fear.

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