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## Column

### **Obama's Shift to Center: Big Payoff at a Big Price** By LAWRENCE HAAS

President Obama's move to the political center and the accompanying rise in his approval ratings is good news both for him and the country because a weak President usually means a weak nation, at home and abroad. But Obama's tortuous path to greater popularity says something disturbing about our political system and the ability to govern consistently in ways that most Americans would prefer.

Consider what has occurred since 2008:

Obama campaigned for president as a unifying figure, one who would replace the hyper-partisanship of Washington with a new cooperative era in which the two parties would work together on the problems facing the nation.

But, with Americans overwhelmingly concerned about the economy and jobs, Obama spent much of his first two years focused on achieving health reform, which made him seem out of touch, if not a bit arrogant. Moreover, with Republicans opposing the thrust of his reforms, he pushed a Democratic-only plan through a Democratic-run Congress, which made partisanship worse. All of that prompted independent voters, who had backed Obama heavily in 2008, to flee in droves.

But, since his party's "shellacking" in November's midterm elections, Obama has moved with dispatch and Machiavellian adroitness to the political center with a breathtaking array of new initiatives and new staff, all explained through centrist rhetoric.

Since Election Day, he has announced a two-year freeze on federal civilian pay, cut a deal with Republicans to extend President Bush's tax cuts for two years, begun to rebuild relations with the corporate community, launched an effort to scrap unnecessary federal regulations, appointed General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt to head the president's new Council on Jobs and Competitiveness and appointed Clinton-era centrists to serve as his chief of staff, chair of his National Economic Council, and director of his Office of Management and Budget. Vice President Biden contributed to the effort by appointing Bruce Reed, a leading Democratic centrist, as his own new chief of staff.

Obama capped his centrist repositioning with this week's State of the Union address, in which the most liberal Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson essentially mimicked the GOP line that the deficit problem is a spending problem (rather than, as Democrats usually do, explain that deficits are caused by the combination of too much spending for some things and not enough revenue to support what is needed).

He called for a five-year freeze on nondefense domestic discretionary spending and boasted that it “would reduce the deficit by more than \$400 billion over the next decade” and “bring discretionary spending to the lowest share of our economy since Dwight Eisenhower was president.”

Even before Tuesday’s nationally televised address, from which Obama surely will receive another boost, his approval rating had risen to 53 percent in the latest Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, up eight points since December. A CBS News/New York Times poll and the website Real Clear Politics also showed bump-ups.

Obama’s political revival mirrors that of President Clinton nearly two decades ago. With voters angered by what they viewed as Clinton’s excessive governing from the left, congressional Democrats suffered an even more sobering bloodbath in the 1994 midterm election, losing control of the House and Senate simultaneously for the first time in 40 years.

Clinton then moved to the center with his own series of initiatives, pronouncements and personnel shuffling, and found ways to play Democrats off of Republicans in a strategy that came to be known as “triangulation.” He forged agreements with Republicans over the ensuing two years on budget cuts, welfare reform, immigration reform and other issues, paving the way for his reelection in 1996.

The question, of course, is why Obama and Clinton both had to travel this path from public dismay to public redemption to begin with. Part of the answer has to do with the growing gulf between the political extremism that plays an increasingly significant role in the election of our nation’s leaders and the traditional centrism of the American people.

Would-be presidents are beholden more than ever to their parties’ wings – for Democrats, the grassroots activists, funders and bloggers who are more liberal than Democrats as a whole; for Republicans, their own grassroots activists, funders and bloggers who are more conservative than Republicans as a whole.

These activists on the ideological edges of their parties provide the workers and money, and create the coast-to-coast energy, to propel a presidential campaign to victory. With victory in hand, they seek their just rewards in the form of legislation that makes centrist voters nervous. Obama’s relentless drive for passage of health care reform legislation – the top legislative goal of many of the liberal groups that vigorously campaigned for him in 2008 – is probably the best recent example of a newly elected president repaying a political debt, even if liberals were disappointed with the final version that Obama and Congress enacted early last year.

To be sure, every modern-day president has faced the challenge of retaining the support of his most active supporters while appealing to America’s broad political middle.

But in recent years, the growing clash between political extremism and public centrism has made that challenge even harder. It’s what prompted Clinton and Obama to govern from the left initially and then move decisively to the center to boost their standing.

It's all profoundly unsettling, giving policymaking a disconcerting unpredictability that raises public cynicism about what America's leaders believe in their hearts as opposed to what they'll do to win at the ballot box.

Here's an idea for the next president, whoever he or she may be: After assuming office, promote the kind of incremental change that will show your core supporters that you're making progress without alarming the broad mainstream.