

Breaking the Grip of the Past

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM, WITH ITS “STATUS quo bias” (as political scientists call it), is not set up for moments like this when the economy is sinking fast and the country requires strong action that breaks with previous policy. After the election, many people concluded

that conservatism was over and done with, and at least in one sense, that’s true. No credible response to the crisis has come from the right. But if conservatism seems dead, it isn’t nearly as dead as it should be. As the battle over the stimulus package indicated, the right can still exploit the many “veto points” in the system (such as the need for 60 votes to pass legislation in the Senate) to delay, water down, and obstruct the kind of coherent and capable action we need.

For Barack Obama and the Democrats, the problem is not just the hard-right conservatives who dominate the Republican Party and the right-wing media echo chamber. Given the urgency of present circumstances, the critical impediment may lie in the ambivalent center—among the middle-of-the-road Democrats and Republicans who hold the margin of votes in the Senate, much of the business and opinion-leader establishment, and a large part of the public who are not strongly affiliated with any party or ideological position.

Winning over those groups poses the key challenge if Congress and the new administration are to free the country from the dead right hand of the past. Obama’s mix of conciliatory and assertive stances—an openness to talking with the other side and a willingness to concede, in principle, that it may have a point, yet a determination when pressed to fight for his policies—is not just an expression of his personality. It’s the rational strategy

of a politician who can’t get his program through unless he peels off some part of the opposition.

During his campaign and now as president, Obama has tended not to confront conservatism in general terms, and that disinclination may also make political sense, up to a point. Many Americans who identify themselves as conservative nonetheless favor liberal positions on specific policies. In his 2004 book, *Tides of Consent*, the political scientist James A. Stimson estimated that about 22 percent of the public fall into this mixed category—symbolically conservative, yet operationally liberal. Since the election, while some surveys have shown more Americans continuing to identify as conservative than as liberal, the polls have also recorded large majorities supporting Obama’s program, which suggests a big increase in that symbolically conservative, operationally liberal segment of the public.

Much of Obama’s rhetoric seems geared to appeal to this group. For example, his Inaugural Address, with its invocation of responsibility and other traditional virtues, along with clear signals of government activism, embodied that symbolically conservative, operationally liberal mix. Often Obama seems

to distance himself from any ideological position, insisting that he just favors what works and that if Democrats and Republicans would only put aside their ostensibly petty arguments, they could agree on solutions. That post-partisan stance doesn’t seem terribly realistic, but it’s a way of appealing to the deep American strain of anti-partisanship and keeping focused on the concrete steps Obama wants to take.

But reflexive, conservative ideology—support for tax cuts, no matter the facts and circumstances; a preference for policies that favor the well-off; a bias against the use of public institutions and public regulation—remains a powerful factor in national debate. So it’s crucial, perhaps more for others than for Obama, to continue to press the case that our present problems have ideological roots—that they are not due equally to all sides but rather to the mistaken premises, malignant neglect, and sometimes outright malfeasance of a long era of conservative government.

In his first press conference on Feb. 9, Obama repeatedly emphasized his efforts to include Republicans, but he added that if conservatives just wanted more tax cuts for the well off or for government to do nothing, “we’re not going to make much progress.” Deftly done, this stance, which is becoming Obama’s signature, could gradually educate the public about the folly of conservative views and help move the country toward a new progressive center. But if he concedes too much, it could be another version of disabling triangulation.

We need new policies, but we also need a new public philosophy to make sense of those policies. If, as Rahm Emmanuel has told us, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, it would be a waste if this crisis didn’t serve to draw some lessons about the principles that a decent and prosperous society requires. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

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