

Building a majority coalition for progressive change in America

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

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President Barack Obama began to get his "mojo" back when he addressed a joint session of Congress September 9th. Seeking to recapture the momentum in the health care reform debate, he articulated the most detailed outline of his vision for universal health care to date. The problem is that the vision, passion and leadership the President showed in his speech should have come much earlier in the debate. By nature, the American policy-making process is resistant to dramatic change. Disjointed incremental change is the norm.

Only in moments of major crises like the Great Depression or war is sweeping change generally possible. Certainly the disaster Obama inherited qualifies as such a moment. By failing to act more boldly and decisively early on, the President missed the opportunity to enact a more fundamental overhaul of the health care system. Compromise and a watered down version of his plan is now inevitable. Given the current political terrain, compromise is preferable to defeat. It is not in the interest of millions of uninsured Americans or the progressive movement that President Obama meet his "Waterloo" on this issue. Three quarters of a loaf as a "victory" is better than none. Let's accept it and gird for the broader strategic struggle of building a majority coalition for progressive change so these kinds of compromises are no longer necessary.

If the opposition/resistance to meaningful health care reform has exposed anything, it is the urgent need to devise a strategy to isolate, marginalize and defeat the reactionary forces of the right. The radical conservatives exploit the ignorance, anti-government rage and racism of a significant minority of the American electorate to advance an agenda of "unbridled" capitalism/militarism. They have even been effective in persuading poor and working class adherents that pro-rich, anti-worker, anti-poor policies are in their interest. Liberal/progressive forces must devise a strategy to counteract the conservatives by proactively educating and organizing people around a vision of a more just and humane society where government has a critical function. Just as George W. Bush, Cheney and company consciously worked to consolidate and expand the conservative movement, President Obama must be persuaded to use his time in office to expand the base of the liberal/progressive movement.

If I had the ear of Patrick Gaspard, President Obama's Political Director, I would tell him that the President should vigorously educate the American people on the history and impact of liberal reforms and the role of government in improving the quality of life for ordinary people. The President hinted at this in his speech before Congress when he touted the importance of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid to ordinary Americans. He reminded the nation that at every turn conservatives opposed such programs. Liberals/progressives have inexplicably allowed conservatives to get away with making the "L-word" and "government" dirty words in the American political discourse.

Historically, it has been the liberal/progressive forces (of both parties) that have enacted measures to rein in the ruthless "public be damned" behavior of the "Captains of Industry" and "Robber Barons" in the interest of protecting workers, the middle class and the poor. Anti-trust laws, National Labor Relations Act, workers compensation, Federal Housing Administration, Product Safety Commission, consumer and environmental protection laws, women's rights, civil rights, Medicare, Medicaid, the War on Poverty were advanced by liberals/progressives over the strenuous objection of conservatives. Armed with this history and record, it is imperative that liberals/progressives take every opportunity to teach the American people that the public

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space/government within this Capitalist political economy is the "great equalizer," ensuring a decent standard of living and equal rights for every human being in this nation. Liberals/progressives must drive home the message that with their input and proper measures for accountability, government is the friend, not the enemy of the people.

Labor, Latinos, women, younger voters, Blacks and other people of color minorities should comprise the core of a majority coalition for change. President Obama needs to educate the American people on the important role labor has played in improving the quality of life of poor and working people and the middle class. As labor struggles to reverse its shrinking base among an American electorate suffering from historical amnesia, the President should vigorously work to pass the Employee Freedom of Choice Act -- thereby rewarding labor for its support and giving the labor movement a new tool to expand its base. Immigration reform is a crucial issue, but it is particularly high on the agenda of Latinos. Accordingly, the President should take the lead in working to ensure that fair/just immigration reform legislation is passed in the near future. It should be clear that women have a friend in the White House. In addition to the admirable number of women that he has appointed to his administration, the President should consistently seek the input of progressive women's organizations on issues of concern and work them into his policy agenda. A similar approach can be used with youth/young people.

Finally, Blacks have been the most loyal/reliable ally of the Democratic Party for decades and the overwhelming support of Black voters was a major key to Obama's election victory. President Obama must respond to the enormous unfinished civil rights/human rights agenda in the Black community. Attorney General Eric Holder is already taking steps to redirect the Civil Rights Division to undertake its traditional mission of enforcing anti-discrimination laws. However, the President must also develop an urban/rural agenda that targets resources towards the elimination of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, poor housing, poor performing schools, drug trafficking and violence in disadvantaged Black communities.

The point is that the President should consciously be implementing a strategy that will assist the core constituencies in a prospective majority coalition to consolidate and expand. In that regard, it may be necessary to concede that much of the South is beyond reach, that the ignorance, rage and racism is so deep that it will be difficult to pull the wool off enough eyes in that region to make meaningful progress in the near future. The future of the Democratic Party and the progressive movement is in the Southwest and the West where there is a combination of higher income and more educated Whites, large Latino populations, highly motivated Blacks as well as other people of color minorities. Beyond the traditional Democratic strongholds in the Northeast and Midwest, "go West" should be the order of the day in building a progressive majority coalition.

The task of building a progressive major coalition cannot be left to the President alone or even be viewed as his primary responsibility. Most of the work must be done by organizations, constituencies and leaders in the progressive movement. While the radical right is well organized to get out its message, the progressive movement is in disarray. What we have is a range of disparate organizations, leaders and interest groups who are incredibly fragmented and disoriented. In that condition, it is much easier to express outrage and frustration with what

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Obama is or is not doing. It allows us to skirt the issue of doing the real work required to develop the kind of collaboration and joint work among organizations, leaders, progressive media outlets and funders necessary to galvanize a progressive majority coalition. President Obama must be encouraged to do his part, but the heavy lifting must be done by activists and organizers in the progressive movement. If we fail to come together to develop a feasible work plan, we will forever be confined to being outmaneuvered and frustrated by our more well organized adversaries and their adherents on the right!

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