Barack Obama's Theory of Power

Why the president's bipartisan, detached use of power hasn't worked.

ROBERT KUTTNER | May 16, 2011

Power is not only what you have, but what your enemy thinks you have. --Saul Alinsky

Barack Obama is one of the shrewdest and most compelling political figures in modern times. He had to be, to become our first African American president, ascending from obscurity to the White House in just four years. Though his campaign had its ideological ambiguities, Obama basically ran and won as a progressive. But despite a financial collapse created on the Republicans' watch and a current Republican agenda far outside mainstream public opinion, the political center has continued to shift to the right during Obama's presidency. How do we reconcile this gaping contradiction?

To his defenders, Obama has done remarkably well given the circumstances. Notwithstanding Republican obstructionism and his lack of a reliable working majority in Congress, he was able to win landmark legislation. If Obama could have gotten more on the stimulus bill or the health bill, say his admirers, he would have. As for the economy and the budget, Obama is unjustly reaping blame for deep trends set in motion under George W. Bush.

Obama's critics contend that his prolonged fantasy of bipartisanship, his failure to lay the blame for the depressed economy squarely on the Republicans, and his reluctance to use his bully pulpit to tell a coherent story, particularly about jobs, needlessly weakened the Democrats and led to avoidable losses in the 2010 midterm. More fundamentally, under Obama government has lost credibility as a necessary force for economic recovery and fairness, undermining the Democrats' core appeal to voters. At the very least, Obama failed to drive the agenda or exploit the full possibilities of presidential leadership in a crisis.

In the formulation of the political historian James MacGregor Burns, Obama ran and inspired voters as a "transformational" figure but governed as a "transactional" one. Notwithstanding a vow to profoundly change Washington, Obama took the Washington power constellation as a given. Despite an economic emergency, he moved neither Congress nor public opinion very much and only seldom used his oratorical gifts. "He is so damned smart and confident that he thinks he just has to explain things to the American people once," says former House Appropriations Chair David Obey. "He doesn't appreciate that you have to reinforce a message 50 times."

Obama's reticence, his reluctance to lay blame, make sharp partisan distinctions, or practice a politics of class, reflects the interplay of his personality and his tacit theory of power -- one that emphasizes building bridges to opponents, defying ideological categories, shying away from the kind of mass mobilization that swept him into office, and practicing a kind of Zen detachment. At moments in American history, that conception of the presidency has suited the times. This doesn't seem to be one of those moments.

Yet in the third year of his presidency, there are signs of a learning curve. It may be that Obama is playing his own elegant brand of rope-a-dope, biding his time, letting the Republicans lead with their chins, waiting for just the right moment to dramatize their extremism and exploit their schisms -- then demonstrating a toughness that has largely eluded him until now and reshaping the political center as a more progressive one.

The hope of a new, more combative Obama was kindled by portions of his April 13 speech at George Washington University, which showed an Obama that we've seldom seen during his presidency. "The man America elected president has re-emerged," exulted The New York Times' lead editorial. Obama departed from his usual reluctance to be partisan, explicitly criticizing the self-annihilating Republican designs so usefully spelled out in Rep. Paul Ryan's proposed 10-year budget. The president resorted to a formulation he seldom uses -- the injustices of class: "The top 1 percent saw their income rise by an average of more than a quarter of a million dollars each. That's who needs to pay less taxes?" Obama said. "They want to give people like me a $200,000 tax cut that's paid for by asking 33 seniors each to pay $6,000 more in health costs. That's not right. And it's not going to happen as long as I'm president."

At last, Obama shifted the mind-numbing debate from the scale of the budget and its deficits to its content and political meaning. He did what his progressive critics have long advocated, drawing a clear, bright, partisan line and pledging to defend Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.

But the budgetary details of the speech showed an Obama who was still the transactional leader of the Burns paradigm. Obama devoted most of the speech to his own plans for cutting the deficit. Jobs and recovery were hardly mentioned. Most of the proposed deficit reductions came from cuts to programs rather than from tax increases.

And Obama was far too generous with the word, we. As in:

But after Democrats and Republicans committed to fiscal discipline during the 1990s, we lost our way in the decade that followed. We increased spending dramatically for two wars and an expensive prescription-drug program -- but we didn't pay for any of this new spending. Instead, we made the problem worse with trillions of dollars in unpaid-for tax cuts. [Emphasis added.]

As Tonto said to the Lone Ranger, What do you mean, we? This fiscal deterioration, of course, was the Republicans' handiwork. Why not point that out? Obama seemed to come to his partisanship reluctantly, almost apologetically. At one point in the speech, having just flayed the Republicans for their sheer extremism, he added, "I'm eager to hear other ideas from all ends of the political spectrum." He further mixed his own message by declaring, "We will all need to make sacrifices."

Indeed, the main ideological themes of the speech had been undermined by Obama's earlier compromises. The left pole that Obama defined in the budget debate had already been moved to the right by his yearlong emphasis on deficit reduction; his prior concessions in the December 2010 tax deal, which failed to restore higher tax rates on the rich; and the 2011 budget deal, which cut $38 billion in programs. If the bipartisan Gang of Six, spawn of Obama's own Bowles-Simpson commission, does reach agreement, it will only add pressure to alter Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid for the worse -- thus fatally blurring Obama's bright line.

Was Obama's speech -- the most resolutely political, partisan, progressive, and effective in recent memory -- a turning point or a one-off? Is Obama now revising his theory and practice of presidential power?

As the political scientist Richard Neustadt observed in his classic work, Presidential Power, a book that had great influence on President John F. Kennedy, the essence of a president's power is "the power to persuade." Because our divided constitutional system does not allow the president to lead by commanding, presidents amass power by making strategic choices about when to use the latent authority of the presidency to move public and elite opinion and then use that added prestige as clout to move Congress. In one of Neustadt's classic case studies, Harry Truman, a president widely considered a lame duck, nonetheless persuaded the broad public and a Republican Congress in 1947-1948 that the Marshall Plan was a worthy idea.

As Neustadt and Burns both observed, though an American chief executive is weak by constitutional design, a president possesses several points of leverage. He can play an effective outside game, motivating and shaping public sentiment, making clear the differences between his values and those of his opposition, and using popular support to box in his opponents and move them in his direction. He can complement the outside bully pulpit with a nimble inside game, uniting his legislative party, bestowing or withholding benefits on opposition legislators, forcing them to take awkward votes, and using the veto. He can also enlist the support of interest groups to pressure Congress, and use media to validate his framing of choices. Done well, all of this signals leadership that often moves the public agenda.

The most effective presidents have worked all these levers. Think of Franklin Roosevelt, or Ronald Reagan, or Lyndon B. Johnson during the era of the War on Poverty and the civil-rights crusade. But except in the endgame of the battle for health care and his recent turnabout in defending Medicare, Obama has been relatively disengaged on all of these fronts. He left the details of his signature legislation and attendant bargaining to his staff. Says a senior Democrat who speaks frequently to Obama, "He is just not someone who enjoys what most of presidential politics entails."

Reviewing Obama's relatively short career, a few core principles emerge in which he deeply believes. These have remained constants.

Building Bridges. Obama, famously, is convinced both by his life journey and his prior experience in politics that he can persuade almost any adversary to find areas of common ground. "Much of Obama's self-confidence," wrote David Remnick in his biography of Obama, The Bridge, "resided in his belief that he could walk into a room, with any sort of people, and forge a relationship and even persuade those people of the rightness of his position." From the Harvard Law Review, to the Illinois Senate, to the Iowa precinct caucuses, Obama's political life before his presidency only strengthened that conviction.

Obama has a deep certitude that the voters, especially political independents, are sick of partisan division and want a leader who will rise above it to solve practical problems. In service of that goal, he has bent over backward to praise his opposition rather than attack it, frequently offering concessions in advance. Mostly, he has pursued common ground by giving ground. The experience of his first two years, when Republicans wanted nothing so much as to destroy him, did not shake Obama from these strategic beliefs. "He doesn't have a fighter's instinct, but he is in the middle of a hugely consequential fight," says a veteran Senate Democrat. "They will keep pushing him as long as he keeps backing up." His drawing of bright lines in the April 13 speech was very much the exception.

Defying Categories. This core political instinct interacts with, and is reinforced by, Obama's personal reticence and determination not to be the angry black man. From his first entry into electoral politics, he defined himself as a different sort of African American and a different sort of liberal. Even though his voting record as a U.S. senator was one of the most progressive, as president he has almost gone out of his way to distance himself from the liberal base. In an interview with The New York Times' Peter Baker on the eve of the 2010 elections, Obama expressed regrets for looking too much like "the same old tax-and-spend liberal Democrat."

Courting Elites, Wary of Mass Mobilization. Obama and his campaign staff brilliantly enlisted an army of volunteers who thought of themselves as a movement built on the values of sweeping change and the tactics of community organizing. Obama repeatedly vowed that he would use these engaged citizens to press Congress to enact health reform and other urgent priorities. But once elected, Obama's political staff quickly downgraded Obama for America into Organizing for America, a denatured arm of the Democratic National Committee -- out of concern that an independent movement might be more of a pressure group than an amen chorus.

While he has maintained a close -- and politically damaging -- alliance with Wall Street (and lately, under Chief of Staff Bill Daley's tutelage, has reached out to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce), Obama has been detached from the one recent popular rising that could help him win lost ground in the crucial states of the Midwest -- the backlash against union busting and draconian budget cuts by Midwestern Republican governors and legislators. Though the line attributed to FDR speaking to supporters -- "Now, make me do it" -- is probably apocryphal, Roosevelt did make good use of popular groups to his left, as did Lyndon Johnson in his complex alliance with Martin Luther King. Obama and his political staff are distinctly uncomfortable with independent mobilizations making him do anything. At a time when progressive movements lack the energy of the 1930s or 1960s, the president has not chosen to help animate them.

Zen Leadership. The adjectives widely used to describe Obama are words like diffident, detached, aloof, professorial. Obama practices restraint to a fault. As a policy expert and intellectual, he is hands-on when it comes to White House deliberation but mostly hands-off with Congress.

As Burns demonstrated, power is enhanced in the course of its exercise. But Obama, despite his eloquence and capacity to motivate, seems to believe that power should be conserved and presidential leadership reserved for emergencies. He waited long and disabling months before becoming personally engaged in the health-reform battle. This left the details obscure, voters anxious, and Democrats at the August 2009 town meetings playing the role of pinata. By the time the bill finally passed, the victory was politically Pyrrhic. An exasperated David Obey told me, "Obama sat and let Jubilation T. Cornpone tie up Max Baucus for all those months. Hell, Chuck Grassley made it clear to me that he'd never vote for the thing."

Obama and his team never embraced such strategies as forcing Republicans (and conservative Democrats) to take awkward votes or using the veto to define clear and principled differences. David Axelrod told me that the White House considered it futile and self-defeating to bring up measures in the Senate that couldn't win.

This stance, the opposite of Harry Truman's, has infuriated Obama's allies in the House. During the last session, important progressive legislation on jobs and energy independence passed the House but was never even brought to a vote in the Senate. In one emblematic episode in December 2009, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pulled out all the stops to get the House to narrowly pass a $154 billion public-investment, jobs, and unemployment-extension bill. The White House, however, rebuffed Pelosi's entreaties to urge Majority Leader Harry Reid to bring the measure to a vote in the Senate. At the time, Obama's aides were convinced that job growth was around the corner, had already moved on to deficit reduction as the theme of the 2010 State of the Union address, and were laying plans for "Recovery Summer," a conceit that entirely backfired.

Except on such rare occasions at late stages of the health debate, it was not Obama's style to call in wavering Democrats to give them an LBJ-style treatment -- or to call them in at all, even to discuss major pending policy decisions. A number of senior Democrats were livid that they were kept in the dark about the April 13 budget speech, which had evidently been months in preparation. They first heard about it when David Plouffe, the White House political director, made the rounds of the Sunday talk shows, three days before the speech.

"You've heard of the 'great man' theory," says Robert Borosage, who co-directs the progressive Campaign for America's Future. "They believe in the 'great speech' theory." Obama's stirring speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention established the novice as presidential timber. During the campaign, his superb address on race, a subject he dearly wanted to avoid, saved his candidacy from being destroyed by the controversy over the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. But as president, much of the time Obama has been AWOL rather than a defining presence driving the debate. His great speeches, like April's budget address, often come late in the game, after concessions have been made and damage done. Obama seems to relish demonstrating that he can score the occasional touchdown run starting from his own end zone. But politics, like football, is a game of cumulative scoring. If you keep giving ground, the clock eventually runs out.

Hands off, above the fray, turning the other cheek, representing decency and common purpose, conserving rather than wielding power, uncomfortable with popular movements he doesn't control -- by some alchemy, this style of leadership is expected to produce the voter approval that puts polite pressure on the other party to join the quest for consensus. Reciprocity and compromise then result in effective government and popular adulation.

This has been Obama's operating theory of power. For the most part, it hasn't worked.

At times in American history, a detached and bipartisan presidency did work. Republican Dwight Eisenhower had his staff collaborate closely with Democratic Speaker Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. Ike, the war hero, loomed benignly as a figure above party.

As late as the 1990s, there were still moderate Republicans -- and no economic catastrophe. Today, we live in drastically different times, ill-suited to Barack Obama's operating theory of a conciliatory, above-the-fray presidency. At best, it may save his own re-election (though it may perhaps doom it, as Guy Molyneux argues on page 17). Either way, the cost is Obama colluding in the shift of our politics further to the right and the weakening of the president's own party.

The parallels with Bill Clinton are instructive, but so are the differences. Clinton faced resurgent Republicans, especially in the House, almost as ferociously nihilistic as today's Tea Party. In 1994, Democrats lost eight seats in the Senate and 54 in the House, giving Republicans control. As Clinton ruefully wrote in his memoir, "Ironically, I had hurt the Democrats by both my victories and my defeats. The loss of health care and the passage of NAFTA demoralized many of our base voters and depressed turnout."

Clinton then brought in Dick Morris, who sent for center-right pollster/strategists Mark Penn and Doug Schoen. Together they devised a strategy of triangulation -- the president above both parties, eerily prefiguring Obama. But though Clinton gave ground on fiscal issues, promising to achieve budget balance within a decade, he also began fighting back on traditional Democratic terms. On one flank, he was defining a new centrism, while on the other, he was vigorously smacking down Republicans for threatening popular core Democratic programs.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich, like his successor John Boehner, threatened to shut down the government over spending cuts. Rather than caving in, Clinton went after the Republicans with a series of TV ads warning that Republicans would cut Medicare, as well as with several scathing speeches. "This Republican budget," he said in a radio address on Sept. 30, 1995, "ends the national commitment that any senior citizen, regardless of how much money they have or don't have, will have access to quality doctors and good facilities."

Clinton refused to accept Republican cuts. Twice, Gingrich carried out his threat to shut down the government, blocking appropriation bills. After a second shutdown, it was Gingrich who flinched first, and Clinton whose stock rose in the polls. On Nov. 27, Gingrich abandoned plans to run for the presidency. Less than three years later, he was forced out as House Speaker.

In the meantime, though Republicans retained control of Congress, Clinton -- appealing to public opinion and working with traditional liberals such as Ted Kennedy -- persuaded Congress to enact such essentially liberal measures as a minimum-wage increase, the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill protecting the rights of the insured, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program. During the six years of his presidency that Republicans controlled Congress, Clinton managed not only to protect Social Security but to use it to fend off a Republican tax cut.

As the economy moved into high growth and near full employment, Republicans coveted the accumulating budget surpluses for big tax cuts. Clinton responded with the slogan "Save Social Security First" -- use the money to keep Social Security solvent for the next generation. Some of this reflected Clinton's own political intuition, and some of it required pressure from progressives in Congress. But it worked.

A surprising aspect of Clinton's resurgence was his little-appreciated close alliance with Kennedy. Back in 1994, when Kennedy was facing a tough re-election, Clinton counseled Kennedy to sound less like an old-fashioned liberal. But after Kennedy won his race by 17 points and Clinton was widely blamed for the Democrats' heavy congressional losses, Kennedy turned the tables on the New Democrat president.

In conversations with Clinton, and in a strategy memo obtained by The New Yorker's Elsa Walsh, Kennedy advised Clinton that the Republican "harshness will not wear well over time" and to remember that the budget that Clinton was about to submit to Congress was "a political document, not a policy document." Kennedy counseled that Clinton would regain lost ground not by defining a new center but reclaiming traditional Democratic themes. "No cuts to Medicare except for health-

care reform will be a great 'wedge' issue if we can keep distinction clear. ... Resist all cuts in student aid. ... Make every dollar taken away from students a dollar taken by Republicans." To a substantial degree, Clinton thrived by accepting the advice.

According to former Kennedy staffers, the late senator gave similar advice to Barack Obama. Kennedy had substantial access -- his early support of Obama in January 2008 helped make Obama a first-tier candidate. But Obama was a far less willing pupil than Bill Clinton had been, and there is nobody personally close to Obama currently playing the Kennedy role.

Note the signal differences between then and now. First, Clinton had a huge economic tailwind. He could afford a glide path to budget balance without sacrificing major progressive principles or programs. Indeed, it was high growth, not program cuts or belt-tightening, that got the budget to balance several years ahead of schedule -- a lesson that Obama would do well to study. Second, Clinton was in many respects a far better retail politician. Once he recovered from the rookie stumbles of 1993-1994, he proved an astute infighter.

Obama won more legislative trophies during his first two years than Clinton did, but in many respects, they were poisoned chalices. Health reform proved broadly unpopular because of political missteps -- a net negative for Democrats in the 2010 midterm. The stimulus, though valuable, was too small to be a major political plus. Obama hailed it as a great victory rather than pledging to come back for more until recovery was assured. He prematurely abandoned the fight for jobs as his administration's central theme, though the recession still wracked the nation. And because of the administration's alliance with Wall Street, Obama suffered both the appearance and reality of being too close to the bankers, despite a partial success on financial reform. Obama's mortgage-rescue program was the worst of both worlds -- it failed to deliver enough relief to make an economic difference yet still signaled politically disabling sympathy for both "deadbeat" homeowners and for bankers. (See this month's special report on page A1.)

Throughout his career, Barack Obama has benefited from luck as well as skill. (How many novice candidates for the U.S. Senate have had their leading Democratic and Republican rivals drop out due to lurid domestic scandals?) On that scale, Rep. Paul Ryan's budget, with its scrapping of basic social insurance, its bogus arithmetic, and its tax cuts for the rich, may be an even better form of opposition self-destruction than a sex scandal.

Thanks to the sheer radicalism of the Republican program, the awkward divisions between the Tea Party caucus and the GOP congressional leadership, and the pressure from Wall Street not to play chicken with the debt ceiling, Obama is now tactically better positioned than the Republicans. As Clinton did, he can make the House Republicans blink first, if he chooses to keep playing hardball. Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security continue to be wedge issues that could divide the Republicans and unify most Democrats. It's worth recalling that Obama's popularity dropped when Republicans contended that his health reform would jeopardize Medicare. That was a fable -- but now it's Republicans who are deliberately dismantling Medicare as we know it.

Obama, in spite of himself, may also get lucky when it comes to the bipartisan Gang of Six. Sherrod Brown, the progressive Ohio senator, observes that the long-sought grand fiscal bargain to cut Social Security and raise taxes may be a bridge too far. Too many Democrats, not least Senate Democrat Leader Harry Reid, won't agree to more than token trims in Social Security, Brown notes, and too few Republicans would accept tax increases on the rich.

Progressives can fairly say that Obama's shift in positioning is a day late and a dollar short. In his eagerness to cut the deficit, Obama may concede more than necessary to appease real and imagined austerity fever. But with the clarifying discipline of an election looming, Obama now has some running room to regain lost ground and reclaim lost affections. As always with Barack Obama, the question is how he will use his ample gifts.