



Republicans and the siren song of the past

By Jill Lawrence

January 2, 2015

President Obama's dramatic move to reopen relations with Cuba crystallizes the larger story of his presidency: In many significant ways, he has dragged America into the 21st century. But how long will we stay here? I ask because so many Republicans seem nostalgic for the golden era of Chubby Checker, Elvis Presley and The Shirelles, or the slightly more recent decade when Lionel Richie and Olivia Newton-John topped the charts.

For now, Republicans are sitting in the metaphorical green room of history, waiting for their onstage close-up. They're free to rail against anything and everything Obama does, knowing that his core achievements will be protected for two more years by Senate Democrats and Obama himself. Even the new Republican-controlled Congress can expect filibusters and vetoes if it goes too far in trying to obliterate the Obama era.

The real test will be what the GOP does if and when it has the relatively unfettered capacity to work its will — for instance, if it elects a president in 2016. That person would have to decide whether to roll back the many Obama policies achieved through executive action, regulations and a handful of major laws. Would he or she revive a Cold War with Cuba, stop nuclear talks with Iran, break a climate agreement with China? Revoke temporary legal residency for millions of immigrants? Take away health coverage from millions who are newly insured? Lower the minimum wage for federal contractors? Weaken consumer protections against banks? Reduce tax rates on the rich?

At least a few GOP lawmakers and 2016 prospects must be secretly relieved that Obama is taking the heat for some decisions that were necessary and-or inevitable. We have thriving automobile and renewable energy industries, even as Republicans have been able to rail against government "bailouts" and "picking winners." We aren't sending combat troops into quagmires, prolonging a long-failed isolation policy toward Cuba or courting confrontation with Iran, and the GOP can still hammer Obama as weak, indecisive and naive. America has finally joined the

rest of the developed world in offering broad access to health insurance — and Republicans, in an act of political jujitsu for the record books, have ridden the new law to two midterm routs.

The positioning so far in the 2016 presidential race is revealing. Most of the hot GOP prospects have a foot in the 1980s, the 1960s or both. The field is crowded with aggressive interventionists, supply-side tax cutters and climate-change skeptics. Some seem to want to prolong the Cold War. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, whose parents left Cuba well before Fidel Castro's revolution and takeover, has been so emotional and militant in opposing Obama's Cuba shift that The New Yorker's Andy Borowitz wrote a parody called "Rubio Vows to Block Twenty-First Century." ("We cannot stop time, perhaps, but we can defund it"). What's most striking about Rubio's old-school views is his age. He's just 43.

To give them their due, several future contenders are trying to formulate plans for a 21st-century Republican Party. Rubio and Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan are looking at alternative ways to fight poverty, while Rubio and former Florida governor Jeb Bush support comprehensive immigration reform that deals with the millions of illegal immigrants already in America. Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky is a warrior for privacy rights and criminal justice reform, he backs Obama on Cuba, and he's against what the libertarian Cato Institute's David Boaz calls "promiscuous interventionism" abroad.

Yet in crucial areas, they and many other GOP prospects are still modeling themselves on an illusory Ronald Reagan. The actual Reagan raised as well as cut taxes, grew the government, terminated a U.S. mission in Lebanon — that is, cut and ran — after 241 military personnel were killed in a bombing, and negotiated with "evil empire" leader Mikhail Gorbachev to reduce nuclear weapons. But who in the Republican field will emulate the practical, flexible Reagan who was open to discussion and compromise?

Paul stands out at this point for rejecting the Reaganesque Republican ideal of America as global supercop with its nose — not to mention its bombs and troops — in everyone's business. He's on the same page as his colleagues, however, when it comes to tax cuts as an economic cure-all. His draconian proposals to cut taxes, slash spending and balance the budget in five years are about as new-fangled as Hall and Oates.

Given his name and his race, Obama's two election victories were potent symbols of a new century and the promise of an increasingly diverse nation. Yet the real 21st-century pillars of his presidency are his policies, from energy and health care to immigration and diplomatic engagement. My fingers are crossed that in their rush to reject all things Obama, Republicans won't reflexively climb into the wayback machine and embrace the ideas of the past.