

THE DAILY MAVERICK

Barack Obama and the revenge of GOP Sith



Cue the familiar John Williams' Star Wars theme: ... Long, long ago... in a political galaxy far, far away... there was a brilliant young, rhetorically gifted leader, with his bright, attractive wife, Michelle, and their two smart children - and the four lived their lives in the glare of the public eye... and this was the same young leader who had led a charge of the young and eager with cries of 'yes we can!' for 'change you can believe in' ...until it became clear the eloquent young leader, his attractive wife, and all his equally brilliant advisors and friends were being pummelled mercilessly by those evil Republicans in Congress... By J BROOKS SPECTOR.

...Or not. Just where, exactly, are those political snows of yesteryear? As virtually everyone on the planet knows, Barack Obama swept to the American presidency in November 2008 with resounding popular vote and electoral vote majorities. And, as with John F Kennedy half a century earlier, once again a new generation of Americans took charge of shaping the future. Obama's victory consigned then-president George W Bush, senator and would-be president John McCain – along with their increasingly archaic Republican Party – back to the political wilderness for at least a generation. Or not.

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Even with supposedly solid majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Democrats and their president were quickly immersed in a series of legislative battles that sapped their energies and pitted different parts of their party in complicated legislative battles among themselves. These struggles gave their increasingly unified Republican opponents openings to paint the Democrats as the party that would waste the money of increasingly harassed taxpayers as the economic crisis squeezed every bit of value out of homeownership or life savings held as stocks. That wasn't how it was supposed to work out at all.

The Democrats were supposed to have taken power to give space to a new generation of leadership to undertake those urgently needed fundamental reforms in healthcare, to create innovative investments to rebuild America's ageing infrastructure, to reset American relations with the world that were so fundamentally damaged by eight years of Bush (and which eventually brought us the WikiLeaks), to bring the war in Iraq to an early end and reshape American activity in Afghanistan.

But popular resentment over the ongoing economic malaise that started in the laissez faire Bush era; continuing, stubborn, near-10% unemployment; the increasingly unpopular auto and banking industry bailouts; the seeming directionless drift over the enormous undersea oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico all stuck fast to sully Obama's reputation for take-care liberal activism. By its second year in office, his administration had decisively proved the adage that while running for office is like speaking poetry, actually governing is like reading tax code.

Coupled with the rise of the Tea Partiers to the right of the Republican Party, this set up near-perfect conditions for what Obama himself called the Democratic Party's shellacking in the 2010 midterm election. It didn't matter that many of the people self-identifying as Tea Partiers were actually better off financially than the average American or that the movement itself was effectively bankrolled by a few right-wing, under-the-radar corporate donors. Regardless, it captured media attention and a sizeable chunk of Republican electoral support in the primary elections – and then rode to victory in numerous races at the congressional and senatorial levels in November. Besides claiming the House of Representatives, the result is a decidedly more right-leaning Republican Party.

Perhaps it was inevitable, then, that when Obama's administration agreed to work out what it termed the best deal it could with congressional Republicans over taxes, it faced the growing distress – even the wrath – of the Democratic Party's left wing – instead of the Tea Party. The new liberal hero suddenly became Vermont independent (but decidedly leftist) senator Bernie Sanders who led a doomed filibuster against the tax deal. This deal was struck during what is called a "lame-duck" session of congress – a short rump session that comes after the election, still with many of the people who were beaten in the election, but before the newly elected congress is sworn in to take office in January 2011.

The Obama administration made its decision to go with a deal on the Bush era tax cuts – and to get what it could on a variety of modest social welfare

benefits, most noticeably the extension of unemployment payment benefits – in exchange for a two-year extension of those tax cuts for everyone, including the very rich. This was in contradiction to Obama's earlier insistence that an extension of the Bush administration tax cuts should not benefit those at the top of the heap. The response from many Democrats has been an outpouring of sackcloth and ashes – mourning over the premature death of any liberal Obama administration legacy-in-the-making.

Commentators, political activists and even some of the more militantly leftwing Democratic politicians have now begun to mutter about a primary challenge from the left to try to unseat Obama in 2012 – or at least bring him back to his senses as an avatar of the social democratic side of his own party. Nobel Economics Prize laureate and The New York Times columnist Paul Krugman has been a leader of this effort, effectively charging Obama with economic policy apostasy from the values that had brought him to power. Many liberal Democrats, Obama's natural support base, are expressing the kind of political dissatisfaction that might, over time, generate a kind of split or internal struggle within the Democrats – creating a situation that would almost certainly spell political disaster at the next election.

Meanwhile, in the moderate centrist camp, another NYT columnist and charter member of the national political commentariat, David Brooks, has been arguing that America's real political war is between extremists – left and right – and their more moderate counterparts in Republican and Democratic camps prepared to carry out political negotiations to lead to something being accomplished through politics. Brooks, in effect, is arguing these more ideological wings would rather be right than successful, while centrists see the goal of politics as reaching decisions that will stick and will work.

There is, in fact, growing evidence the Obama administration has reached the conclusion that the first two years of its tenure has been the easy part – that creating any sort of consensus will be that much harder in the future as Republicans control the House of Representatives and have an effective tie in the Senate – assuming a couple of conservative Democrats remain loose. To secure the administration's ambitious foreign policy goals on nuclear weapons with Russia, with Iran and North Korea; to continue the orderly departure from Iraq and begin one from Afghanistan; to find some traction for the improvement of relations with China in the current economic circumstances; all of these will require the active cooperation of the Republicans on both policy and budgetary turfs.

The key element in this new realism by Obama is the growing influence and impact of vice president Joe Biden after the locus of power was still largely with Obama's close-knit group of advisors from before his presidency. The famously gregarious Biden's more than 30 years in the Senate means a lifetime of personal ties, and his decision to keep using the congressional gym is symbolic of ways to gain informal face-time on Capitol Hill with Republican interlocutors to find the right path to compromise.

Over the next two years, Biden is going to be hunting hard for possible Republican support, or at least acquiescence for key Obama proposals. And

failing that, at the very least find a way to bring Republican and Democratic ideas closer together. In the Clinton administration, this approach was called triangulation after Democrats lost the congress, finding ways to split off a few Republicans at a time to support a centrist Democratic agenda. But given the changed political dynamic of hard-core Republican opposition, for Obama it may look like a way to find Republicans with a moderate agenda his administration can embrace with as little damage to themselves or their left.

Ironically, during the next two years, the Democrats and Obama are probably going to look back at 2009 to 2010 as the happy times when good things were still possible. Remember too the run-up to New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucus voting as the first wave of the 2012 presidential election is now only a year away. And once that season starts, major decisions become even tougher to make in the American political system. Interestingly, this new tax-cut deal will come up for renewal, change or abolition just as the political silly season starts. A whole pack of would-be Republican presidential candidates – Mitt Romney, Mike Pence, Mitch Daniels, Tom Pawlenty, Mike Huckabee, Bobby Jindal, Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, to name just a few – will soon be spending much of their time in these two small, but suddenly politically potent states. They will be trying out the applause and dog whistle lines that generate voter enthusiasm, donor cash and volunteer time and energy and all of this will mean political rough territory for Barack Obama's presidency. **DM**

For more on the struggle within the Democratic Party read [The New York Times](#), [The New York Times](#), [The New York Times](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Economist](#) and [Politico](#). On Biden's new importance read [The New York Times](#): To follow the growing debates over policy prescriptions and recommendations, follow reports from politically-attuned Washington think tanks across the political spectrum, including CSIS, the Brookings Institution, the Peterson Institute for International Economics, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Center for American Progress, and the congressionally funded but nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, among dozens of others at: <http://www.csis.org>, <http://www.brookingsinstitution.edu>, <http://www.piie.com>, <http://www.aei.org>, <http://www.heritage.org>, <http://www.cato.org>, <http://www.americanprogress.org>, <http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/>

Monday 13 December, 2010

To quote Sarah Palin.. "how is that hopey changey thing working for ya?"
Nicholas Kühne on Mon, 13 Dec 2010 at 10:31

Love that quote!

Joel Basson on Mon, 13 Dec 2010 at 11:15

She might be a dimbulb, moosebrain (insert epithet) here but is the exact opposite of Barack, and I guess that is why she is getting great coverage. She is the American Malema, intellectuals hate her but the masses can't get enough!

Nicholas Kühne on Mon, 13 Dec 2010 at 11:26