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The President's Pivot

By: Charles M. Blow – October 18, 2013

“Thus it is that in war the victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.”

That quote, from Sun Tzu's ancient Chinese treatise “The Art of War,” perfectly captures President Obama's strategic victory over Tea Party members of Congress on the government shutdown and the debt ceiling debate. It also explains his immediate pivot to another topic that Tea Partiers hate and over which their obstinacy is likely to get the party hammered again: comprehensive immigration reform.

This is a brilliant tactical move on the president's part. And Republicans know it.

As the G.O.P. was nearing its moment of collapse on the shutdown and debt ceiling, Representative Raúl Labrador, Republican of Idaho, said, “I think it'd be crazy for the House Republican leadership to enter into negotiations with him on immigration.” He continued: “And I'm a proponent of immigration reform. So I think what he's done over the last two and a half weeks — he's trying to destroy the Republican Party. And I think that anything we do right now with this president on immigration will be with that same goal in mind: which is to try to destroy the Republican Party and not to get good policies.”

The conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer laid out the president's calculus more bluntly on Fox News: “With immigration, he wins either way. I'm not sure he thinks he can get it passed, seeing the resistance among the Republicans to the deal over the budget. I think he knows he's not going to have a good chance of getting immigration through, but he thinks — and he's probably right — that he can exploit this for the midterm election as a way to gin up support, for the Democrats to portray the Republicans as anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic, etc.”

Republicans have a tough choice.

They can ride shotgun once again with the politically suicidal Tea Party faction, a group that the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found this week to be “less popular than ever.” They can allow the most strident voices on the far right that oppose comprehensive immigration reform — Rush Limbaugh has likened it to the Republican Party's “authoring its demise” — to direct their path and further alienate Hispanic voters, who are increasingly coming to see the party as an unwelcoming place. Mitt Romney lost the Hispanic vote by 44 points last year, and the Republican National Committee's own autopsy on that loss surmised:

“If Hispanic Americans perceive that a G.O.P. nominee or candidate does not want them in the United States (i.e., self-deportation), they will not pay attention to our next sentence. It does not matter what

we say about education, jobs or the economy; if Hispanics think we do not want them here, they will close their ears to our policies.”

Or Republicans can take the less likely path and demonstrate that they’ve been cowed enough to move ahead on a major piece of legislation that is supported by the majority of the American people — a July Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Americans believe that passing immigration reform is important. And that would be good not just for the president’s legacy but for the health of the country as a whole.

In a 2012 paper published by the Cato Institute, Raúl Hinojosa Ojeda, director of the North American Integration and Development Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, used computing models to estimate the following:

“Comprehensive immigration reform generates an annual increase in U.S. G.D.P. of at least 0.84 percent. This amounts to \$1.5 trillion in additional G.D.P. over 10 years. It also boosts wages for both native-born and newly legalized immigrant workers.”

Comprehensive immigration reform is the right thing and the thing that Americans want. But the far right is hardly concerned with what’s right and has little appetite for agreeing with the will of the majority of the American people (despite talking ad nauseam about standing up for the American people).

The far right is angry at the government and the man at the top of it. According to a Pew Research report released Friday: “Anger at the federal government is most pronounced among Tea Party Republicans. Fully 55 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who agree with the Tea Party say they are angry with the federal government — about double the percentage among non-Tea Party Republicans (27 percent) and Democrats and Democratic leaners (25 percent).”

They have been blinded by that anger. The president knows that. And he knows that blind soldiers don’t often win battles. In choosing to pivot to immigration reform, he has created a win-win scenario for himself and the Democrats. Clever, clever.