



Obama's Inaugural Challenge to Republicans

By Michael Tanner January 23, 2013

There was an odd contradiction at the heart of President Obama's inaugural address on Monday. On the one hand, the president celebrated how far we've come toward inclusion and equality, toward enabling all Americans, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, to fully participate in American life. In this sense, it was a speech firmly anchored in today and looking to tomorrow.

On the other hand, much of the president's remarks amounted to a clarion call for America to return to 1965. It was as if all we had learned about social and economic policy over the last 50 years had suddenly vanished. The president did not just reject the conservative revolution of Ronald Reagan and the New Democrat agenda of Bill Clinton; he might as well have been Lyndon Johnson announcing the Great Society.

In the president's world, unreformed welfare worked and entitlement programs have not led this country to the brink of bankruptcy. Indeed, the president sounded as if he had suddenly discovered a magic money tree growing out behind the White House. He called for all manner of new spending on education, infrastructure, and fighting poverty at home and abroad, while vowing to protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid from any serious efforts at reform. The need to get the deficit under control received a cursory mention — the inevitable reference to "tough choices" — followed immediately by a promise for more "caring" and "investing." After all, "when times change, so must we." And so will basic math, apparently.

The president may well be correct in his interpretation of the political winds, though. Republicans have already signaled a retreat on the upcoming fight over spending. The GOP gave the president exactly what he wanted in the fiscal-cliff deal: zero cuts in spending in exchange for a huge tax increase (the deal actually amounted to a \$47 billion spending increase). It now appears that the GOP will give President Obama what he wants, again — an increase in the debt limit without any accompanying spending cuts — in exchange for a requirement that the Senate finally pass a budget in the next three months. While certainly not every fight should be treated as the political equivalent of Stalingrad ("Not one step backward"), it remains to be seen whether we are seeing a tactical retreat or the start of a full-scale rout.

There will be two other opportunities in the next 90 days to take on federal spending: the expiration on March 27 of the continuing resolution currently funding the government, and the sequester cuts scheduled to begin on March 1. Both fights will require Republicans to show more backbone than they have to date. Are they willing to allow a partial government shutdown if the president continues to refuse to negotiate over spending cuts and entitlement reform? Are they willing to allow the sequester to begin, even if it means slowing the growth of military spending? How Republicans respond to these fights will go a long way toward determining the direction of the next four years.

But beyond political tactics and budgetary priorities, the president's speech issues an even bigger challenge to Republicans. If there was any doubt before, the president has now clearly spelled out what he believes.

Obama sees an America where the only alternative to an ever-growing government that intervenes in every aspect of our lives is an atomistic individualism with no regard for our fellow man. Either we are all wards of the state or we are Ted Kaczynski, hiding alone in our Montana cabin. Civil society and voluntary action — private charity and civic organizations, churches, synagogues, mosques, and businesses large and small — do not exist, or if they do, they are simply distractions from the work of government.

We can dismiss such remarks as little more than the president's penchant for attacking straw men, but everything he says or does suggests that he believes them to be true.

On the other hand, what do Republicans believe? Beyond opposing the president, do they have a view of how the individual and the ideal of liberty fit into our society? How would they meet the challenges of today, in an America that is different and more diverse than ever before? Will they reform the institutions of government and challenge the modern welfare state?

The president closed his inaugural address with a statement that we should all embrace. We "have the obligation," he said, "to shape the debates of our time, not only with the votes we cast, but the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideas."

The president has set out an agenda and a vision. It is now up to Republicans to answer with an agenda and a vision of their own.