

Dear Washington,



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Health Care Arena

An ongoing discussion on the health care debate

Nov. 09, 2009

Driving the Conversation:

Arena Ref: [Fred Barbash](#)

Is it a "tragedy" (Newt Gingrich) that Obama did not go to Berlin to commemorate the fall of the wall?

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Roger Pilon

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There are many ways to characterize President Obama's failure to appear personally today, on behalf of the American people, to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall. None does him credit. Yet to criticize his decision is to invite the derision of his apologists, as we are seeing already here at Politico Arena. It is as if the Cold War never ended. And at a fundamental level, it hasn't.

The Berlin Wall fell for many reasons, ranging from the internal contradictions of communism to the moral clarity and courage of communism's opponents. Above all, however, the Cold War marked a fundamental clash of ideas. And nothing symbolized that clash more starkly than the Berlin Wall. It was erected not to keep West Germans out of the "workers paradise" but to keep East Germans trapped behind the wall, many of whom were mercilessly shot as they tried to flee their brutal captors. What greater symbol could there be of the difference between freedom and oppression.

Yet for all that time there were apologists and temporizers in the West. "Detente," "moral equivalence," "convergence" -- "we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism," President Carter said in 1977, even as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Bukovsky, Natan

Sharansky, and others were documenting the horrors of communism. And only two years before the wall fell, as the Wall Street Journal notes editorially this morning, we heard CBS's Dan Rather say, "Despite what many Americans think, most Soviets do not yearn for capitalism or Western-style democracy."

Which brings us to President Obama. What does he think? Where does he stand on this fundamental clash of ideas? What meaning is to be drawn from his decision to forgo the commemoration in Berlin today? One can only speculate from what he has said and done, but the record does not inspire.

To be sure, several of his speeches suggest that he is a man of freedom -- but his actions contradict those words. Where has he been on the great human rights issues of our day? When reformers were being brutalized in Iran, both over the summer and last week, he was slow, at best, to find a voice. When the Dalai Lama visited last month, Obama declined to see him -- the first time, in 10 visits since 1991, that a U.S. president has done so. He's had us join the U.N. Human Rights Council, the main mission of which seems to be to criticize the U.S. and Israel while lending credibility to its own oppressive members. There's more, but on balance it's a sorry record. He's no Ronald Reagan.

It's on the domestic front, however, that questions loom especially large. His every move is that of a government man. True to his roots as a "community organizer," he sees government as the solution to our problems. On autos, he has converted a bailout into ownership, fired the head of GM, and told the auto companies what kinds of cars to build, despite what the market might say. He has appointed a "pay czar" -- among many other "czars," not to go unnoticed on this day -- and empowered him to set executive pay scales. He is promoting a union organizing scheme that effectively eliminates the secret ballot, environmental policies that fall most heavily on the poor, and tax and spend policies that penalize ambition and thrift while indebting us for generations to come. And his healthcare policy will in time make us all dependent on government. Those policies, like so much else on his agenda, will restrict rather than expand our choices. If enacted, we will all be less free.

It is the siren song of government "beneficence" that Obama seems most to hear, oblivious to the lessons of the 20th century. The tragedy would be that we ourselves forgot that the fundamental clash of ideas will always be with us, even when the Berlin Wall is a distant memory.

Subject**Date****Open Mic**

Nov. 07, 2009

Will the House pass healthcare this weekend--or not? Speculate, please, on the consequences either way?

Nov. 06, 2009