

# **From the Audacity of Hope to Timid and Kvetchy**

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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The Republican landslide last week was far from unexpected. Moreover, given the state of the economy and the breadth of problems which President Obama inherited when he took office, it was inevitable that the Democrats would lose seats in this election. This has been clear since Obama's historic election victory in 2008. The extent of this defeat, however, is significant and probably could have been reduced somewhat had the president handled his first two years in office differently.

Obama's record on legislation and governance issues is a matter of some debate across the political spectrum, but given the political realities which he confronted it is not obvious, although certainly possible, that he could have done better. What is most puzzling about Obama's first two years in office is how somebody who was uniquely able to understand and respond to the feelings of a troubled country in 2006-2008, became so out of touch once he became president. In 2008, candidate Barack Obama communicated hope to an electorate that had all but given up hope. He put successfully put forth a message, albeit a somewhat amorphous one, of change to a country that desperately wanted change.

Since 2009, Obama has become a president who seems to have lost this understanding of the American people which helped make his candidacy possible. Instead of offering hope, he has offered mediocre legislation and bristled when the import of this legislation has been challenged. It is strange that a candidate who was able to read voters so well has become a president who seems to think citizens simply want legislation. Voters don't care about legislation; they care about outcomes. If the outcomes are not good, a president must offer understanding and demonstrate that he understands the worries, concerns and troubles of the American people. As president, Obama has been unable to do this.

The health care reform, which the president has presented as one of his signature accomplishments is illustrative of this. Criticisms of Obama for focusing on health care rather than jobs during the early stages of his presidency may be accurate, but only to a degree. The problem was not that Obama led by trying to reform health care, but that his goals were so modest, thus ensuring that he would get all the Republican criticism, but no enthusiasm from progressive quarters and, more importantly, that he never sought to connect the dots for the people and show that health care was indeed an economic issue, and a jobs issue. Instead of inspiring the American people with the belief that better, cheaper health care would make America more competitive and put people to work and legislating accordingly, the president ended up with a bill about which this could not be said, and allowed the Republicans to portray the new legislation as a drag on the American economy.

As a candidate, Obama was a bold and confident risk taker. His decision to challenge a heavily favored establishment candidate like Hillary Clinton, his willingness to look past all those who believed an African American with a funny name could never get elected and his belief in the

better instincts of the American people are all evidence of this. The title of his book *The Audacity of Hope*, makes it clear that Obama was a man of deep courage and confidence. This makes it all the more confusing to see his presidency that, if one had to sum it up in one word, might be described as timid. As president Obama has been unwilling to think big-unwilling to push for a big enough stimulus package, for health care reform that would have made real change or to challenge conventional wisdom on the war in Afghanistan which, of course, is the biggest foreign policy issue which Obama's presidency has faced.

Equally significantly, Obama's communications with the American people has also been timid, largely falling into three areas: blaming his predecessor, bemoaning the intensity of partisanship in Washington and arguing that nobody really appreciates what he has done. All three of these themes are well grounded in truth, but they are also standard complaints offered by all presidents. If the American people had wanted to hear this, and see these themes reflected in their president's approach to governance, they could have elected any other candidate. These explanations are not exactly what one might expect from a president who built a campaign around the theme "yes we can" and inspired us to believe that "in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope."

Now Obama faces a very different political environment. His ability to think in grand terms and to seek bold solutions to America's problems is much smaller now because of the Republican gains, so returning to those themes from the campaign will not be possible. Obama can, and must, however, determine a new way to communicate with the American people. The next two years will likely bring more partisan fighting to Washington, largely over who is to blame for what. For Obama to avoid a similar defeat in 2012, he needs to either turn the economy around or once again plug into the national gestalt the way he did in 2008. The former is largely out of his control, so the latter is even more important.