

Obama's Labor Day Speech -- Does It Matter?

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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With only about two months before the midterm election, President Obama finally seemed to get some of his old fire back giving a strong speech to the Milwaukee Labor Council, which included a promise of more money to rebuild America's infrastructure and create a few jobs, as well as some reminders of how badly the Republican Party, which is seeking to retake control of congress in November, made a mess of things the last time they were in power.

The speech was good and hit most of the right points, but still seemed a little bit tone deaf on the part of the president. Obama's comments were not so much wrong, or overstated -- far from it. But somehow it seemed a few months late and a few billion dollars short. It is, at least at first glance, inexplicable that Obama would wait until the election was so close before giving a speech that could, at least briefly, mobilize his party's base and generate some excitement. This is the type of speech Obama should have been giving every week since becoming president.

Perhaps the people around the president felt it was unpresidential or would have wasted valuable political capital if Obama had begun doing this type of thing sooner. Those arguments might have been taken seriously as late as mid-2009, but for much of the last twelve months, the president's poll numbers have declined, his party's political future has gotten dimmer and the activist base has been increasingly disappointed. All of those factors pointed to an urgent need for presidential action. The absence of this kind of strong statement by the president as the months went by fed into the narrative that Obama was aloof, unconcerned with the problems facing ordinary Americans or out of touch.

The president's pledge to put \$50 billion into new infrastructure is also a little peculiar. It sounds like more like election-year pork from a powerful senator or a governor seeking reelection, albeit on a significantly larger scale, than a serious effort to either rebuild the country's infrastructure or help the economy. It highlights the president's inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to think in sufficiently big terms, a problem that has contributed to an economic stimulus bill that was not big enough, health care reform that was very mild in nature and likely to be modest in impact, and a presidency that is increasingly disappointing.

The other major problem with Obama's remarks is that they were just words. Obama's attacks on the Republicans were refreshing, but the context was strange. It almost sounded as if Obama were just becoming aware that the Republicans were threatening to win back Congress and derail any gains made during the last two years or so. Obama, of course, has long been in a position where he could have done much more than talk -- his eloquent criticisms of the Republican Party only served to underscore this.

Obama's critics and supporters are both aware of his oratorical skills. The speech in Wisconsin was witty, hard-hitting, largely empirically accurate and demonstrated a command of the English language that his predecessor simply did not have. None of this, however, is relevant. The

president's words, particularly on issues of domestic policy, are just not that important anymore. After being president for nearly two years, he will, and should, be judged by his actions.

It remains true that expecting Obama to have righted the economy by now is not realistic. Similarly, right wingers who assert that it is now Obama's economy and that the Republicans have nothing to do with the current state of the economy are continuing a pattern of avoiding responsibility that has become a core principle of that party. The Bush administration, of course, played a major role in creating the current economic problems. But pointing that out, while still probably necessary, is no longer sufficient. Obama's message would be significantly more powerful if he could point to major accomplishments, or at least a willingness to confront the Republicans, regarding the economy during his time in office.

While it is good that Obama would choose Labor Day to stress the importance of job creation, the speech was too much of a reminder of just how long it took Obama to understand the extreme import of this issue to most Americans. Like most of the last two years, the ongoing state of America's economy calls for a president not just to say something, no matter how witty or eloquent, but to do something big and bold and to fight tooth and nail for its success. This has been missing from an Obama administration both in style and in substance. Obama's Labor Day speech cannot change that.