

Bobby Jindal, Dan Quayle and Socialist Health Care

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: 07/21/09 04:11 PM ET

Bobby Jindal has "seen enough" and Dan Quayle thinks President Obama needs to "tame the left wing of his party." Perhaps it is time to give the Republican Party some credit for consistency, if not exactly relevancy or accuracy. Dan Quayle, who has gracefully made the transition from boy wonder vice president to elder statesman of his party without pausing along the way to actually accomplish anything, and Bobby Jindal, who seems to have succeeded in combining the politics of Ronald Reagan with the earnestness and credibility of Ronald McDonald, seem to agree that the biggest threat to the country is that President Obama will pass health care reform and lead the country irrevocably down the road to socialism.

For most of Obama's presidency, the Republicans have vacillated between attacking the president for being weak and unable to get anything done and attacking him for being a socialist who, as Quayle suggested, is a captive of radical elements in the Democratic Party. You might say the Republican Party cannot decide whether Obama reminds them more of Jimmy Carter or Josef Stalin, two people who, other than having been born in Georgia, have almost nothing in common. The Carter angle seems to have less sticking power than the red baiting because an ineffective president is not as frightening to the Republican base as socialism is. Fear, not surprisingly, has remained one of the key tenets of the Republican message during Obama's presidency.

Labeling any program seeking to use public resources to help poor people or provide opportunity to more Americans as socialist has been a tactic employed by many Republicans and no small number of conservative Democrats over the years. It has at times been quite effective. In this regard, Quayle, Jindal and others in the Republican leadership are not employing a new strategy. To the contrary, they are relying on a the same tactic conservatives used more than 40 years ago to fight against Medicare, and more than 70 years ago to fight against Social Security. Labeling any progressive program socialist remains a tried and true conservative tactic, but in the 21st century it feels almost quaint and seems to have little power to move voters outside of the Republican base. One cannot help but wonder if this message, and these messengers, are the best the Republicans can find.

If Obama succeeds in passing meaningful health care reform, his political skills, the large majorities and relative unity of the Democratic Party in both houses of Congress and the decades of work activists contributed to this cause will all be singled out as reasons for Obama's success where other Democratic presidents have failed. The failure of the Republican Party to recognize the limits of their appeal and that hollering "socialist" repeatedly on Fox News does not exactly swing voters during a time when getting sick, or having a family member get sick, without health care is a far greater concern to most Americans than creeping socialism or Soviet expansion.

The threat of socialism may strike fear into the Republican base, but seems to have little impact beyond those voters. This was demonstrated during the campaign as luminaries such as Sarah Palin and Joe the Plumber spent the last days of the campaign calling Obama a socialist and watching the Republican poll numbers drop.

Bobby Jindal and Dan Quayle notwithstanding, the struggle for health care will still be very difficult. In addition to strong opposition from the Republican Party, free market ideologues, insurance companies and others, there are many Democrats in Congress who have not yet committed to doing pushing for strong reform. Additionally, the final bill still has not been written so we cannot yet be at all certain that Congress will vote on something truly meaningful. Even with the implosion of the Republican Party still showing no signs of abating, opposition to a genuinely significant health care bill will be very strong.

If Obama is able to push through a real health care bill it will have an immediate and positive impact on millions of uninsured Americans and will rationalize a complex and costly system more generally. A victory for Obama on health care will also put to rest the scare tactics which have been used to defeat health care reform for about half a century. It may also discredit playing the socialist card in general as a useful conservative tactic for fighting against any and all progressive change. This would be a powerful and paradigm shifting victory.