

The Debt Ceiling and Obama's Silence

Posted: 08/1/11 12:15 PM ET

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Back in the 2008 presidential campaign, Republican candidate John McCain often suggested that Democratic candidate Barack Obama would rather see the U.S. fail in Iraq if it meant that President Bush's policies would fail, then see the US succeed if it meant success for Bush's surge. McCain used this line of attack to suggest that Obama was insufficiently patriotic. During the last few weeks, the Republicans in the House of Representatives have more or less overtly stated that they would put the country at risk of default if they did not get their way on massive spending cuts, thus placing their narrow ideological interests above the good of the country in a way that was clearly unpatriotic and probably worse.

In the face of this type of opportunist and selfish behavior, President Obama was faced with several options, none of which were good. In the end, Obama decided that to avoid default and greater economic problems he would simply capitulate to the Republican demands. The deal that was finally struck to increase the debt ceiling, something that until the last few months was done almost automatically every few years, is an enormous victory for the Republicans featuring huge spending cuts to programs supported by Democrats, and no revenue increases or cuts to programs which enjoy heavy Republican support. According to many economists, continuing to cut spending at a time like this will plunge the economy back into recession, just as it is beginning to recover.

While observers, particularly progressive observers, may be upset or even angered by the president's failure to stand up to Republican extortion, they can no longer be surprised. Giving in to Republicans and pursuing poor negotiating strategies have been among the hallmarks of the Obama presidency. It is not exactly news that Obama has been a disappointment to many progressives, but many have dismissed this as progressive frustration in the face of the need for Obama to negotiate and work in a reality that is confined by a far right Republican Party and division within the president's own party.

This, however, only captures part of progressive frustration. Of course, many progressives wish that Obama had been a better negotiator on issues ranging from health care, to the Bush tax cuts to the debt ceiling, but there is more to it than that. Perhaps more frustrating than the regularity with which the president either gives in to the right wing or negotiates poorly with them is his unwillingness to be a moral and progressive leader either through his words or actions. The far right has not only spent three years making nasty and often personal attacks against the president, but they have consistently called for programs and expressed views that represent a genuine threat to the prosperity and security of the country as well as to the survival of the American social fabric. The right wing of the Republican Party, which as we have seen in recent days, has enormous influence in the Republican Party, has articulated a program that would drive the US

further into recession, destroy U.S. financial and political credibility abroad and abdicate US leadership on environmental and other global issues because of its radically anti-science world view.

In the face of this, Obama's silence is depressing and represents a failure to take moral leadership in the face of the grave and surreal threat posed by the far right. The president can be excused for negotiating poorly and has certainly faced some obstacles from the Republican Party which have made pursuing his agenda more difficult, but his failure to push back against the Republican rhetoric about the urgency of addressing the budget deficit in the middle of a severe economic downturn, unwillingness to aggressively take on right wing nonsense questioning the veracity of climate change and inability to present a defense of the necessary investment, and yes, taxation, which is essential for the survival of the U.S. as a functioning modern state, is far more difficult to explain away.

Obama's legislative record will continue to be subject to debate as varying arguments regarding the import of the health care reform bill, questions of whether the initial economic stimulus bill was big enough, for example, can be bandied back and forth. Obama's failure to engage and have an impact on the larger picture national debate is more troubling for many progressives. During the last three years, it was his voice that should, and could, have been the loudest and most convincing counter to the right wing. It was the responsibility of a Democratic president, or any president, charged with being the country's chief executive, to refute the Republican rhetoric regarding deficits, spending and the specter of socialism and to, at the very least, point out the dangerous unpatriotic nature of Republican brinkmanship on the debt ceiling negotiations. Obama has been unnervingly silent in this regard, thus missing the opportunity to speak truth from a position of power.