Now Is Not the Time for Delay

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President Obama's recent remarks to a largely gay audience at a White House event celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots that he believes that after his term in office, gay people will be pleased with his work were a combination of strange, hopeful and, not least, puzzling. Obama's comments indicate he is clearly aware of the frustration many people feel because of his inaction on a number of important issues such as repealing the military's Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy, failure to take on the ill-conceived Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and to take a stronger position on marriage equality, or at the very least on expanding more benefits to the partners of gay federal employees.

It is too early too know whether Obama's promise at the Stonewall celebration is to be taken seriously or if it was his attempt to extricate himself from a potentially difficult situation by making more promises. While the window for giving Obama the benefit of the doubt regarding his commitment to these myriad issues of important to gays and lesbians is still open, it will close soon, so will the moment when the administration can act on these issues.

The nature of the presidency is that it always faces a number of different, but equally important, issues at the same time. At the top of the list for the Obama administration at this time are domestic policies such as health care, the energy bill and the ongoing economic crisis as well as foreign policy issues such as the fallout from the election in Iran, the upcoming summit with Russia, another handover of in Iraq and recent events in Honduras. This is, to be sure, enough for any president. While one can recognize the challenges facing the administration, the number or breadth of these challenges in of themselves are not sufficient to preclude action on what should be a clear cut issue such as repealing DADT or extending more benefits to the gay partners of federal employees.

There are about two plausible explanations for the delays of the Obama administration on moving forward on these fundamental issues of equality. The first is that they simply do not think these goals are important and have no intention of moving on them at any time. The second explanation is a little kinder to the administration. Perhaps Obama is being sincere when he says that he is going to address these issues, but is simply waiting for the best time to do it. The question, of course, which this explanation raises is, when?

The notion that now is not the right time to address issues of equality for gays and lesbians may, at first glance, make some political sense, but it does not hold up under more serious scrutiny. The argument for delaying would be that health care should not be jeopardized due to gay rights which can be passed at a later date. The problem with this argument, in short, is that it no longer makes sense. It is an argument from another era. The health care fight will be very rough, but opposition to health care will be driven by the insurance companies, medical associations, Fox News and other right wing ideologues. While these groups will use any tactic necessary to win
this fight, it is difficult to see how linking Obama to a gay rights agenda will sway any votes in congress.

While these issues may be somewhat polarizing, the strategic reason to wait is less clear. Strong opponents of gay rights will be vehemently opposed to health care reform and mobilized accordingly almost regardless of what Obama does. Moreover, failure to act on gay rights will not stop the right wing media and political forces from attacking Obama as an extreme social liberal.

Winning a legislative struggle like the one which is looming regarding health care will require Obama to have all his major constituent groups fully supporting him. This fight may require having voters pressure their senators and other forms of mobilizing public support. This will be difficult to do if a key part of the Democratic coalition, such as gay and lesbian voters, is angry and disappointed with the administration.

There is also little reason to believe that the time will be better to focus on repealing DADT or DOMA after the health care battle is over. If the health care bill fails, Obama's presidency will have suffered a big defeat. While the Democrats will still enjoy big majorities in both houses, attention will turn to the upcoming midterm elections and Republicans will be further emboldened to stall or otherwise push back against a weakened president. If health care succeeds, the administration will be in a strong position, but not for legislative purposes, a noticeably stronger position than the current one. More importantly, the idea that holding off on gay rights will improve the chances of winning on health care may well backfire damaging the chances for winning on both.