

Obama, Clinton and Selling the Tax Deal

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The sight of President Clinton defending President Obama's recent tax compromise at a White House press conference may be an indication that Barack Obama is looking at Clinton as something of a model. Like Obama, Bill Clinton campaigned during an economic downturn, albeit one not as serious as the current crisis. Clinton also led his party to a similar electoral defeat two years into his presidency. However, to a great extent, this is where the similarities end.

Unlike Obama, much of Clinton's presidency occurred at a time of peace and economic growth. Obama's presidency is fundamentally different than Clinton's because the economic situation remains dire and the country remains stuck in two wars. Clinton was able to triangulate, compromise or do very little for most of his presidency because the economy was strong and unless Clinton made enormous mistakes that was unlikely to change, at least in the short run. This is dramatically different from the context in which Obama has, for better or for worse, had to conduct his presidency. Accordingly, Clinton's presidency has limited value as a model for Obama.

Obama turned to Clinton to help sell his compromise on the Bush tax cuts, which is extremely unpopular among much of Obama's progressive base. While Clinton still has formidable political skills, he is not the president. This was not at all obvious last week at the White House as Obama left Clinton alone to finish the joint press briefing. Obama did not seem to understand that voters wanted to hear the current president explain his thinking, not to be spun by a former president.

The ease with which Obama let Clinton, who is not only a former president, but was, at one time, one of Obama's harshest critics, take over this press conference, was alarming. Obama chose to defend this very controversial deal, not by speaking honestly to the American people, but by expressing frustration with those who do not share Obama's passion for compromise for its own sake and by calling on a retired politician to defend his position. As a result, instead of a serious discussion of the policy, the American people had not one but two presidents pouring water down our backs, to use a more delicate phrase, and telling us it was raining.

Obama did not offer any meaningful explanation of the deal he cut with the Republicans, but simply urged us to accept at face value his assertion that this was the best deal he could get. While it may in fact have been the best deal Obama could get, that speaks more to Obama's weakness as a negotiator than to the strength or logic of the deal itself. The narrative that Obama has created for his presidency, that he has no choice but to make compromises and that progressives who don't understand this are being unrealistic is insulting and nonsensical, yet Obama seems increasingly committed to that narrative with every passing month.

This contributed to an environment where the president is sufficiently frustrated with much of his base, and indeed with the direction of his presidency that he turned to Bill Clinton to defend his a decision and deal he had made. Obama then added a layer of surrealism to the proceedings by

walking away from the press conference with the former president, not known for being shy in front of the media or knowing when to stop talking. Clinton is popular enough that the politics of this made some sense, at least on the surface, but a confident president, who believed that he had to continue communicating with the American people might have handled it differently. The question of why Obama felt that bringing in President Clinton to help berate a progressive base who no longer thinks too much of the former president was a good idea deserves some attention, but the message he sent by leaving Clinton alone at the podium was more profound, and disturbing. It was almost as if Obama was walking away from the presidency itself, and all the turis it has brought him.

While Obama's frustration may be understandable, and the task of working with congressional Republicans, as well as some Democrats in Congress, cannot be too pleasant or easy, it is worth keeping in mind that Obama wanted this job and spent a great deal of time, money and effort convincing the American people that he could do it. The millions of Americans who voted for Obama, did so assuming that he would remain interested in, and dedicated to, his job in the face of electoral defeat, nasty Republicans and concern from his base. Obama's gesture last week, when he turned the podium over to Clinton, suggested that this is no longer the case. Obama needs to figure out how to reclaim his presidency, from the Republicans as well as from the cynical narrative he has created for himself; and he probably needs to do it without Bill Clinton.