

After the Shellacking

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It seems that since the midterm election which President Obama aptly described as a "shellacking", a new political environment has begun to emerge. This is partially due to the Republican victory which catapulted that party back to the center of Washington politics and made John Boehner the incoming Speaker of the House, but it was also due to a number of other events including the release of George W. Bush's memoir, the potential departure of Nancy Pelosi from the national stage after two decades of steadily climbing up the Democratic hierarchy followed by two terms as Speaker of the House, continued criticism of the White House for their cowardice on DADT, discussions of the Republican agenda in congress and the recommendations of the deficit commission.

All of this has contributed to a new reality where for the first time since sometime in early 2007, Barack Obama is not at the center of the American political world. While the president is a long way from irrelevant, and may in fact be around for another six years, he occupies a very different political space than he did even a few weeks ago.

The excitement, hope and sense of history which accompanied the early period of Obama's presidency now seem like distant memories even to many who counted themselves among the President's most ardent supporters. Obama's presidency has long since become just another presidency, now it is one that is struggling to stay afloat and to reassert a leadership role in American political life. Unless Obama is able to reclaim the political initiative, the new Republican leadership in the House will continue to fill political vacuum that has been created by an increasingly difficult Obama presidency.

It should not be overlooked that at earlier points in his presidency, Obama has been capable of decisive and successful action at key moments. The two most notable examples of this were the successful package of the economic stimulus bill just as the first burst of national adrenaline that accompanied Obama's inauguration was beginning to recede, and the passage of the health care bill after Scott Brown's election to the US Senate from Massachusetts when most pundits thought the bill had no chance. Both of these successes altered the political dynamic and brought the momentum, however temporarily, back to Obama.

Interestingly, the strategic path to reelection may be relatively clear for Obama and will consist of positioning himself as the adult supervision in Washington, allowing the Republicans to overplay their hand and scare the American people and passing a few centrist bills while hoping that the economy begins to recover. The path back to being the driving force in American politics, on the other hand, is much less obvious and presents a greater challenge. At stake is not just the future of Obama's leadership, but of the progressive movement generally. This past election was more of a retrospective vote based on the poor economy and frustration with Obama's inability to turn the economy around in only two years, than a decisive swing to the

right. Nonetheless, the new Republican leadership and much of the media will continue to argue otherwise and point to this election as a defeat for progressive America and its values.

Perhaps surprisingly, the election defeat has freed Obama to do what he wants with his presidency. With the House of Representatives firmly in Republican hands there is little pressure and almost no expectation that there will be much successful legislation coming from the White House. Working with the Republicans in congress to help pass a few laws or standing up against these Republicans while portraying them as extremists may have similar political impacts. Therefore the decision regarding in what direction to now take his presidency probably cannot be made based on a strict political calculation.

This decision, however, is extremely important. If the Obama administration is unable, or unwilling, to once again be the driving political force, it will be a defeat not just for an administration relegated to essentially observer status, but for a progressive movement that will meet the same fate. Obama's movement away from core progressive principles during the first two years of his presidency were damaging because opportunities were lost. Continued movement in this direction will be even more damaging because it will be difficult to avoid interpreting this not just as a concession of defeat by the president, but a as a recognition of the defeat of progressive ideas and goals.

The thought that much of the hope for immediate future for progressive America is linked to the hope that the Obama administration will proudly and forcefully assert a progressive agenda should, based on what we have seen the last two years, be daunting for most progressives, but to a great extent that is where progressive America finds itself after the shellacking.