

Obama and leadership



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

To Puerto Rico's good fortune, President Barack Obama got health reform through Congress. Forty million Americans without healthcare will be indebted to him for his relentless drive to get this bill through Congress. But they were not all behind him.

Nor did he have the support of the majority of the country when he pushed ahead against all the doubters in order to get this done. At times it looked as if he was alone in his battle against the Republicans and the insurance companies. But he held steadfast to his principles and values that told him that it was unconscionable that 40 million citizens of the richest and most powerful nation in the world should go without healthcare. And he prevailed.

His leadership in this matter harks back to Lincoln and the leadership he exercised facing a divided nation on the issue of slavery. We have not had much of this in recent times. Candidates and elected officials look to the opinion polls for guidance rather than to principles, values or conscience. Obama has changed the rules. And in doing so he has set the stage for the pursuit of his other initiatives on regulating the financial institutions, on climate change and energy, etc.

Just weeks ago, one could say that the Republican strategy of "just say no" against any and all initiatives coming from Obama was working. They played their cards well and given such a complex matter as healthcare reform, they managed to demagogue public opinion to their side. They thought that they had cornered Obama and that he would have to settle for a weak bill just to say he got something or no bill at all.

Well, it didn't happen that way. Obama did not play by the rules of conventional political wisdom. He went for broke, and won: at least for the time being. He still faces the litmus test next November with the congressional elections. The profile in courage that he projected in going against majority public opinion must now be translated into voter support for the November elections because he cannot lose his majority in Congress.

So he must now go, and he is going, to his constituents to convince them that his decision was the right one; that the reform will be good for all Americans in order to obtain the mandate he needs to continue with his agenda. He has his party behind him, an enthusiastic and purposeful party. But they have a big task ahead of them between now and November.

If they succeed, and I hope they will, they will have written a page in the history books on democratic leadership. For all too long the U.S. has had presidents abandoning major initiatives when they have tested the waters and found public opinion wanting. The political battleground has been the center. This is what begins to break when the going gets tough with an initiative. Submission to the polls indicating the defection of the center has been the order of the day in U.S. governance. Obama did not submit. But now he has to recover that center in order for Democrats to prevail in the November elections. If he shows he can move and recapture the center opinion then we are going to see bold steps being taken in Washington next year. If he fails in this endeavor he will have lost the momentum and perhaps his presidency.

Obama's exercise in leadership brought to my mind a piece by William Deresiewicz in "The American Scholar," titled "Solitude and Leadership" which was a lecture delivered to the plebe class at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in October. His concluding remarks were as follows:

"How will you find the strength and wisdom to challenge an unwise order or question a wrongheaded policy? What will you do the first time you have to write a letter to the mother of a slain soldier? How will you find words of comfort that are more than just empty formulas?"

"These are truly formidable dilemmas, more so than most other people will ever have to face in their lives, let alone when they're 23. The time to start preparing yourself for them is now. And the way to do it is by thinking through these issues for yourself—morality, mortality, honor—so you will have the strength to deal with them when they arise. Waiting until you have to confront them in practice would be like waiting for your first firefight to learn how to shoot your weapon. Once the situation is upon you, it's too late. You have to be prepared in advance. You need to know, already, who you are and what you believe: not what the Army believes, not what your peers believe (that may be exactly the problem), but what you believe.

"How can you know that unless you've taken counsel with yourself in solitude? I started by noting that solitude and leadership would seem to be contradictory things. But it seems to me that solitude is the very essence of leadership. The position of the leader is ultimately and intensely solitary, even an intensely lonely one. However many people you may consult, you are the one who has to make the hard decisions. And at such moments, all you really have is yourself."

In our local scene the same panorama prevails as in Washington regarding candidates and

elective office holders. There is, in general, a lack of commitment to principle and to deeper values in decision-making, political strategy and discourse. Only a handful of players can be excepted. One is sometimes tempted to think that policy is being made in the myriad radio programs that blast away off-the-cuff, ideologically tainted opinions, about our local "problematique." Public opinion in Puerto Rico is incessantly battered through the media in such a way that ideological prejudices are reinforced and as to other matters it flows in whatever direction the wind blows.

Our leadership deficit is reflected in the policy decisions taken by elected officials premised on the direction the wind is blowing at a given time: witness the decision of the Rosselló administration regarding the coal-generation plant in Mayagüez, the Acevedo Vilá administration decisions regarding Paseo Caribe, and the current administration's decision turning the pipeline to transport natural gas to Guayama into a tube for pumping water.

Obama's performance in healthcare is a shining example as to what we are missing in Puerto Rico. His actions, better than his words, gave life to the best and nobler principles of representative government as explained by Edmund Burke in his "Speech to the Electors of Bristol at the Conclusion of the Poll":

"...it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; or from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

This is the stuff that leadership is made of. ■

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