

Obama's defining moment

BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

A significant health reform bill as originally conceived by the President will not clear the Senate and an insignificant one may not clear the House. Health reform, the centerpiece of Obama's initial strategy to define his presidency,

will not be the vehicle for change in the United States. Worse than that, the President was chastised by the voters in Massachusetts, one of the most liberal electorates in the country. To fill the seat of Ted Kennedy, the legendary champion of health reform who was in Congress almost 50 years, Massachusetts voters elected Scott Brown, a conservative Republican who will deny the Democrats the vote necessary to surmount a filibuster and get a respectable health reform bill through the Senate.

His first initiative right after the Massachusetts rebuke was aggressive rhetoric against the banks' proprietary activities with a plan that would force them to choose between taking insured deposits and running their own trading operations. This initiative worried me. Not because of the substance but because of the timing and the rhetoric. In Spanish we have a name for this: "*se le ve la costura*". Perhaps in English it can be translated to "you see through it." It smacked of populism and that hurt because Obama is not a populist. He is a centrist liberal leaning to the left. Honesty is one of the principal traits of his character. His strength rests in his core beliefs.

Next came his speech in Ohio in which he promised to renew his battle against the lobby groups that he admitted had made an "ugly" spectacle of his healthcare reform and were opposing much of his Wall Street re-regulation package. This promise was not received with the same credibility that it had been received in his 2008 campaign. With regard to lobbying activities, the first year of his presidency had been business as usual in Washington.

So it was with trepidation that I turned on the television to watch his State of the Union address. This speech was to be his defining moment. He had spent a great deal of his political capital during his first year without appreciable results as to the concerns of the American people. He had spent billions to avert a depression and now had to call for a spending freeze. He did not have much room to maneuver. Yet his presidency was not dead. The people still believed in him as a leader. He had to reset his presidency by defining economic and social goals that were not only politically attractive but which he could deliver as well. Populism was not the road to be taken. The answers to my deepest worries would come

in this decisive speech that would set his new course for his presidency.

As he began to speak, it seemed to me that the members of the House and Senate were also apprehensive though not necessarily for my own reasons. The Democrats knew that this was the defining moment regarding the upcoming mid-term elections. The speech had to set the direction for the President's and their own political recovery to avoid heavy losses in November. The Republicans exuded the killer instinct. At the beginning of the speech all of them, Democrats and Republicans, appeared somber and straight faced. The President, on the other hand, was cool, calm and collected. He appeared confident and even radiant. It was my impression that he instinctively knew that the speech he was about to deliver would achieve the desired result.

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The speech—content and delivery—accomplished its purpose. This purpose however could not have been erasing the political effects of past mistakes and recapturing the position that the President and the Democrats in Congress had in January 2009. This was beyond Obama's powers or of any orator.

What the speech had to do, and I think it did, was to make economic recovery—jobs—the centerpiece of his agenda and energize the Democrats in Congress and public opinion towards the accomplishment of this goal. Populism was minimal. He focused on job creation and growth boosting hiring in the short term and setting the environment for sustainable job growth and wage increases over the longer term. This of course is only the beginning of an effort he has to sustain day in and day out until the American people perceive the results of his endeavors.

Yet, I think the speech may contain a strategic mistake depending on how the White House goes about pushing the full agenda that it contained. If they set out to push in every direction to which the speech pointed there will be trouble ahead; trouble with a capital T. The President again laid out his full agenda before Congress: education reform, investment in clean-energy technologies,

a cap-and-trade bill to tackle global warming, a spending freeze, reduction of earmarks, financial-sector reform, healthcare reform: "...do not walk away from reform...Not now. Not when we are so close," he urged lawmakers.

In order to achieve all of this, he pointed out that a transformation is necessary in America's deleterious political culture. However, to that end he only proposed two concrete measures: "It is time to require lobbyists to disclose each contract they make on behalf of a client with my Administration or Congress. And it is time to put strict limits on the contributions that lobbyists give to candidates for federal office."

Reaffirming or advancing his positions in all of these matters in the speech was courageous and provided a vision as to where he wants to take the country, but getting these things done with the entrenched opposition that some of them present in Congress and from special interests is another matter. In government, as in politics, it is not wise to take on all your enemies at the same time.

Yet the President feels compelled to do so. "I campaigned on the promise of change—change—change we can believe in, the slogan went. And right now, I know there are many Americans who aren't sure if they still believe we can change—or at least that I can deliver it."

So he harked back to the spirit of the American people, quoting a letter from a woman that had written to him saying, "we are strained but hopeful, struggling but encouraged." He went on to say that, "it is because of this spirit—this great decency and great strength—that I have never been more hopeful about America's future than I am tonight. Despite our hardships, our union is strong. We do not allow fear or division to break our spirit. In this new decade, it's time the American people get a government that matches their decency; that embodies their strength; and tonight ...We do not quit. I do not quit. Let's seize this moment to start anew."

The setbacks of the first year have not discouraged Obama's intention to define his presidency with a broad agenda for change. It is still possible that he may achieve this through a deft management of Congress and the timing of his proposals, feisty confrontation of his adversaries and innovative proposals to get the country moving gain. But time is running out on him. The clock is ticking. ■

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