

Coming Back from the Health-Care Debacle

Mr. Trump is far from a lame duck.

by Conrad Black



The health-care-reform fiasco illustrates perfectly why the United States has been an ineffectual, gridlocked failure at legislative self-government for over 20 years. It is not only not a system with two parties ready to govern; it is not a system with one party ready to govern. The Cruz Right took 30 percent of the vote in the Republican primaries and the Sanders Left took almost 50 percent of the vote in the Democratic primaries. The Clinton-Obama Democrats are chasing pathetically after the itinerant base of their party as it has scurried to the left like a frightened lobster, and the Republican Right has cooled down to some degree, but shows no disposition to take one for the team. There is little point in assessing blame for how the Trump administration and the Democratic congressional leadership have reached such a lamentable state of vituperative hostility, but deescalating

it will take time, work, and a will that is not now visible.

This crisis has been a long time ripening. George H. W. Bush inherited from Ronald Reagan a strong party, a reasonably serene Congress, and a happy country victorious in the Cold War, but he raised taxes and allowed the charlatan Ross Perot to steal enough Republicans to elect Bill Clinton. Clinton was adequately competent (as Bush had been), but lost the Congress after the first health-care fiasco, and was amused the rest of his term being a naughty, southern, corn-fed boy; and there was no consensus for anything except welfare reform. George W. Bush counter-attacked international terrorism well but mired the country in ill-considered wars and compounded Clinton's inflation of the housing bubble until the worst international financial crisis since the 1930s erupted underneath him. Barack Obama came in on a wave of goodwill and national (well-deserved) self-congratulation for having elected a non-white president, but he was far to the left of the country, lost control of the Congress after the second health-care fiasco, and the rest was an anti-climax of chronic deficits, militant political correctness, and feckless foreign policy. The media soft-pedaled the president's ineptitude and the country wanted to like him for esoteric reasons, but two-thirds of the people thought the country was headed in the wrong direction. It was.

Donald Trump ran against all those whom he held responsible for the terrible policy failures of 20 years. The litany is familiar, including the matters just cited along with increasing domestic violence, a shrinking work force, inaction in the face of about 12 million illegal immigrants, and a syncopated lurching in foreign policy that never elaborated a consistent objective apart from opposition to terrorism, though with fluctuating determination. Since he ran against all factions of both parties and almost all the national media, only a mighty landslide of personal support such as FDR received in 1932 or LBJ in 1964, and to a degree Ronald Reagan in 1980, was going to enable him to put his whole radical and

overloaded agenda through. The country has a regime pledged to change course radically in many policy areas and a mandate to do that, but the replacement policies are a matter of sharp debate between Republican factions. In the climate created by the nastiest campaign in recent history, and one in which the honesty of the media was a legitimate issue, followed by the greatest electoral upset at least since 1948, coalitions will have to be assembled gradually and from different pieces, issue by issue. Most of us who do not know the congressional personalities had no alternative but to assume and hope that Speaker Ryan and the president's congressional liaison and the able Health and Human Services secretary, former congressman Tom Price, could count the noses correctly in putting their bill together, to get it to the Senate, where the greater contest was expected. Our confidence was misplaced.

There must be a consensus, even within the U.S. Capitol, that the United States simply has to get its system working and become governable again. Everyone there knows that the Republicans won and that the Clinton, Obama, and Bush eminences were rejected amid widespread public discontent with decades of misgovernment. The argument in democratic politics is always whether the center is a position of strength or weakness, and that depends on whether it can push the Right and Left off to the shoulders, which in these circumstances means crowding over 40 percent of last year's primary voters off to the sides, unless large numbers can be induced to succumb to the grace of conversion. Donald Trump is not everyone's idea of a centrist, but in this crowded scene, he is the only prominent candidate for that honor that we have. Logically, the Clinton faction of Democrats could be amenable to join forces with the administration on some issues, especially if the tendency to criminalize policy differences, a deadly contagion that began with Watergate and is now more rabidly transmitted than ever, does not lead to a resurrection of the legal soft points of the Clintons. The FBI director, James Comey, is severely compromised and has no credibility

with anyone, but getting rid of him now would be more trouble than it's worth.

The president is right not to condemn the Freedom Caucus, but not because their conduct is very distinguished. They are mainly invulnerable electorally and evince the same irreconcilable, mindless dogmatism of many otherwise-intelligent conservative commentators now reduced to declaring the president unfit, for psychiatric reasons, to hold the office to which the country has elected him. But Trump will need the Freedom Caucus and can tailor some projects to attract their support, starting with the confirmation of Judge Gorsuch. That development should assure the eventual reassertion of the president's constitutional right to control immigration. Eventually, the Democrats will have to abandon their effort to pretend they can impeach Trump over relations with Russia that never existed, and the president can rely on public opinion to pressure all but the lunatics (who are numerous and vocal) to try to get something useful done. (Roger Stone had it right when he said, "The Democrats are full of Schiff," referring to the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee. Congressman Adam Schiff, appropriately, an ex-prosecutor, representative for the giant infestation of political idiocy in Hollywood, and a Benghazi whitewasher, is desperately trying to keep this fake Russian controversy going.)

Bringing on the tax program like fast food could produce another debacle; the administration can certainly sustain one of these and shake it off, but it will have to show that it has learned something. The president's apparent fear of altering entitlements is disappointing. Even a minor tweak would send a useful message, and presumably the debt bomb is such that he could get support for such a move. That would give him some negotiating room for tax cuts, which everyone likes if they are affordable. He could use the now traditional Art Laffer et seq. argument, which LBJ, and up to a point

Ronald Reagan, proved to be accurate, that tax reductions do largely pay for themselves in economic growth. Incentivizing the repatriation of \$2 trillion in profits being held out of country by U.S. corporations would produce a nice pop that could be used to fund a substantial start of infrastructure renovation. Even the Democrats might crawl out of their foxholes and rejoin the civilized world on that one.

There will be no repeal of Obamacare, and the Freedom Caucus should understand that they booted that one. But just allowing it to “explode” (the president’s word) is not leadership, and deliberately reducing funding and accelerating its collapse would backfire. Presumably, transitional cost-reducing reforms could be negotiated within the Republican congressional delegations and put through piecemeal, cleaning up the worst failings and further reducing the deficit. It is not my place to write the script, but if the administration can get a record going of steady legislative successes, all in pursuit of fulfillment of its campaign promises, and with as little pyrotechnics and schoolyard posturing as possible, it will quickly acquire the prestige and aura of success of distinguished administrations of the now-distant past. Reagan had it for the middle half of his time; Eisenhower for most of his tenure, but with a relatively unambitious legislative agenda; Johnson and Nixon briefly; and FDR for practically all of his twelve years.

This will require Trump to perform a role for which he has not yet been known: the patient conciliator speaking in measured terms from the center of controversies and carefully putting shared interests together. Stranger things have happened, including his nomination and election. The present shrieks of joy by Pelosi and Schumer, that Trump is already a lame duck, are amusing and will assist the president in regrouping. But the Republican leadership evacuated the field on Friday and, as Mr. Churchill remarked (after Dunkirk), “Wars are not won by evacuations.” This is war.

First published in [Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom, Flight of the Eagle: The Grand Strategies That Brought America from Colonial Dependence to World Leadership.](#)