

Let Bartlet Be Bartlet by Dan Jacoby

Fans of the television series “The West Wing” will recognize the title of this column. In a first-season episode, the Bartlet administration is one year old and flopping around, seemingly unwilling to dive into any issue, preferring instead to “dangle our feet in the water.” After one year of the Obama administration, life seems to be imitating art.

The last ten minutes of that episode should be instructive to President Obama.

In the wake of the loss of the Senate seat held for almost 60 years by Kennedys (Ted and John), especially in one of the bluest states in the country, Democrats are now reportedly doing some soul searching.

Again.

Why is it that every time Democrats lose they go searching for their collective soul, but when Republicans use they go on offense (and get offensive)? The time for soul searching is when we have time to search; right now is the time for action. What President Obama and other Democratic leaders don't seem to understand is that they are not in power because they converted moderates to their cause.

There were three reasons for the rise of the Democratic majority in Congress. The first was the string of moral failures on the part of three Republicans (or Republican supporters), Randy “Duke” Cunningham, Jack Abramoff, and Mark Foley. If any of the scandals surrounding those three people had not occurred, at least three senate seats would have remained Republican in 2006, and Democrats would not have come close to the 60-seat majority they “enjoyed” for most of 2009.

The second reason was the economic meltdown of 2008. Even though John McCain's spurt into the lead in the polls was waning prior to the meltdown, he might still have won if his assessment that the “fundamentals of the economy are sound” had been correct.

The third reason was the energy poured into the elections of 2006 and 2008 by progressive Democrats, the people Howard Dean referred to in 2003 as the “Democratic wing of the Democratic Party.” Progressive, not moderate, Democrats turned out in droves at various campaign headquarters around the country; they are the ones who got the message of change into the heads of voters, and they are the ones who gave Democrats the majority in Congress and possession of the White House.

The continuing scandals involving Mark Sanford and John Ensign (and David Vitter) don't seem to be making much of a difference, probably because people realize that a sex scandal doesn't mean that an elected official can't do his job. The economy is in the doldrums, but there are signs that it is turning around. Neither of these areas of interest is going to make much difference in the 2010 election cycle.

What can make a difference, however, is how well President Obama and other Democratic leaders can convince progressives to stay involved and energized. So far, they have failed even to make the attempt.

(Gee, what do you know? A little soul searching can go a long way!)

Next Wednesday (as I write this), President Obama gives his State of the Union address (SOTU). At that time, he can either reenergize the progressives and begin to turn around the fortunes of the country and of the Democratic Party (they do go hand in hand), or he can continue to drift, supporting only halfheartedly the half-measures that he thinks will win bipartisan support – and won't.

President Obama has failed to outline what he wants on healthcare reform, and failed to get anything done. He needs to a specific list to Congress, and the American public, at the SOTU. He should then do what presidents do after delivering specific lists; travel the country, energizing the progressive base to push Congress to pass that list, one item at a time if necessary.

The beauty of this approach is that almost all of the individual elements that President Obama has listed at one time or another are already wildly popular, even among those who voted for Scott Brown in Massachusetts. Voting against those elements, which many Republicans, blinded by their unthinking hatred for anything not firmly rooted in right-wing dogma, will almost certainly do, is bad politics. The measures will pass, and pass with bipartisan support.

Next, President Obama should outline a far more aggressive clean energy plan, including real support for clean, renewable energy sources as well as a massive buildup in passenger and freight rail. He should also call for measures to lower our use of fossil fuels in farming (most fertilizers and pesticides are made from fossil fuels instead of natural compounds).

Speaking of farming, President Obama should then shift to a price-support structure that focuses less on large, corporate farms and more on smaller, family-run farms. He should shift from supporting grain to supporting produce. There are several benefits from such a shift. Produce is healthier than grain, especially in America where grain is plentiful and overproduced. By supporting produce, which requires a lot more hard labor to plant, tend and harvest, some of the lowest-paid workers in America will benefit. By reducing grain output, we can export far less subsidized grain to underdeveloped countries, allowing them to grow their economies, starting with farming – literally from the ground up.

Turning to foreign policy, President Obama must fight back against Dick Cheney and his brood, throwing Cheney's own words, spoken when he was Vice President, in his face. Back when Cheney was Vice President, he commented many times on the need for the President to make foreign policy and for the American people to back him; the time has come for Cheney to be held to his own standard.

Then President Obama must talk about his decisions to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay and transfer some prisoners to Illinois, bring those accused of terrorism to trial in civilian courts, send more troops to Afghanistan, and draw down forces in Iraq. He must explain, in clear terms, why he is right and his detractors are wrong. He must convince moderate Americans why the Bush administration, led by Dick Cheney, made America less safe, and why he is turning that around.

Then he needs to call on Congress to repeal "Don't ask, don't tell."

Finally, President Obama needs to demand of the mass media that they stop thinking that "fair reporting" consists merely of parroting both sides' press releases and start reporting the truth. He needs to be specific about right-wing lies that the press reported without comment and without question.

Once he has made his points on national television, he needs a victory tour. But other Democrats must step up as well. Progressive Democrats, like Chuck Schumer and Sheldon Whitehouse, must stand side-by-side with moderate Democrats, like Claire McCaskill and Jim Webb, going before the press every day. Democrats have to flood the airwaves with appearance after appearance, giving full-throated support to the administration's agenda.

In other words, we need to present a united front, with key members publicly following the same script. If this sounds like a tactic the Republicans have pursued for years with a lot of success, there's a reason for that.

Before giving his State of the Union address, President Obama needs to herd the leading cats in the Democratic Party into a room and read them the riot act (perhaps Rahm Emanuel can write his speech). He needs to hammer home the need for Democrats to be united publicly, no matter how divided they are in the back room. He needs to make sure everyone understands that this is the only chance the party, and our country, has to make progress after the November election.

Because it is the only chance we have. If Republicans build on their success in Massachusetts and make major gains this fall, they will only ensure that what is now being called the "Great Recession" will pale in comparison with the economic disaster that hits us within the next decade. If Republicans regain control of foreign policy, they will only ensure that the military-industrial complex President Eisenhower warned us about will foster endless wars and endless misery. If Republicans renew their push to place right-wing extremists on the various federal benches, our freedom will be at stake.

That's the message that President Obama and Democratic leaders need to take from the Massachusetts surprise, and that's why it is imperative that they work together to reenergize progressives across America.

The time has come to let Obama be Obama. We need it.

Copyright 2010, Dan Jacoby