
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

President Obama, incoming Speaker Boehner don't need couple's therapy

Press Criticism | By Greg Marx | New York Times, Social Security

November 16, 2010 — There's a lot to worry about right now: high unemployment, tepid income growth, unchecked global warming, the list goes on. So readers of The New York Times could hardly have been surprised — and might even been a bit reassured — to see a Nov. 10 ["White House Memo"](#) reporting that Washington is worried, too.

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Or maybe not. Because, according to the article, what's causing consternation in the capital is not those eminently worry-worthy issues but the urgent question of whether our "new power couple" — President Obama and Republican leader John Boehner, the presumptive Speaker of the House in the next Congress — can "work together." In past eras of divided government, we learn, partisan differences gave way to personal connections. But there's reason to doubt that Obama and Boehner — the cosmopolitan intellectual and Midwestern businessman, who have "little connection other than a shared fondness for golf and a weakness for cigarettes" — can find that special spark:

The contrast between the men undercuts the popular comparison to the dynamic in 1994, when the Republicans swept to power and, led by the new speaker, Newt Gingrich, challenged the Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Despite their partisan differences, Mr. Clinton and Mr. Gingrich had much in common: both came from broken families in the South, grew up to be professors and ultimately became the political visionaries of their generation. Even as they clashed, Mr. Clinton and Mr. Gingrich understood each other in a way that defined the politics of the 1990s.

Mr. Clinton and Mr. Gingrich could spend hours in policy discussions. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan and Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. shared evening drinks and Irish storytelling. So far, at least, Mr. Obama and Mr. Boehner have spent virtually no time together and have made little effort to forge a bond. Aides said they could not recall a single one-on-one meeting or substantive phone call.

First things first: there is some highly selective memory going in that passage, which is a good marker of a bogus story. Maybe Clinton and Gingrich had some sort of Southern kinship, and they did find a way to work together while ending welfare as we knew it. But the episode that "defined the politics of

the 1990s” was that whole “impeachment” thing, which somehow goes unmentioned here. (Perhaps because it might suggest the limits of personal relationships in politics — but more on that in a minute.)

As for Reagan and Tip O’Neill, perhaps there’s a real scoop buried in this story, and it’ll turn out that the first draft of the 1986 tax reform bill, since lost to history, was scrawled on the back of a Jameson’s label. But the quick reference here doesn’t do anything more than suggest that the work of politics is about important men doing guy things — an implication perpetuated in the repeated suggestion that Obama and Boehner could forge a bond if only they’d play golf together. (If the Times ran stories after the 2006 election wondering when W. might invite Nancy Pelosi to Crawford for an afternoon of brush-clearing, a quick search of the paper’s archives didn’t turn them up.)

But setting aside those oddities, there are some deeper problems with this story, which reflect some persistent assumptions in much political journalism. The first is that rising partisan polarization is driven, to some meaningful degree, by personal discord, and that it could be remedied by a little more face time. As a robust research literature has demonstrated, it is not, and it cannot.

Here’s the quick summary of what [has actually happened](#): beginning in the 1970s, the two leading political parties began to realign along coherent ideological lines. Over the same period, institutional changes centralized power in Congress, especially in the House. These changes pulled America toward something like a parliamentary system — and both parties, but especially Republicans, have responded by adopting parliamentary tactics, which call for unified opposition rather than attempts at compromise.

Under this framework, success within the party is measured by how effective an individual politician can be in leading the opposition, a dynamic that only exaggerates ideological differences. In other words, there is a long-term trend toward less common ground and fewer incentives to find it. Against these structural shifts, the question of whether or not Boehner and Obama have personal chemistry, or how often they play golf, is very nearly irrelevant.

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In fact, the article itself ultimately offers evidence for just this point. We hear from a “Republican strategist” who says the president will pay a price for not doing more to woo the GOP leadership. But the story also notes, accurately, that Boehner came out against Obama’s stimulus proposal almost immediately upon the president taking office; that opposition wasn’t the product of hurt feelings. More to the point, it’s not clear what even a successful charm offensive would yield: when Boehner recently “hinted that he might go along with” Obama’s proposal for an extension of the Bush tax cuts, “he was pummeled by fellow Republicans.” Once party discipline is entrenched, it turns out, leaders are bound by it as much as they enforce it.

There's yet another powerful assumption at play, which is that agreement among political elites, when it is achieved, is a good thing. Certainly, "working together" and "forging bonds" sound good, in an "everything-I-need-to-know-I-learned-in-kindergarten" sort of way. But it's not necessarily the case that more comity will produce better outcomes — or, more to the point, who those outcomes will be good for. Another strand of political research, for example, has found a bipartisan consensus in the Senate in favor of not caring about what poor people think. That's a source of agreement that makes it easier for the geriatric millionaires in the world's greatest deliberative body to work together, but it's hardly reason for celebration.

As it happens, on the same day that this story appeared in print, the chairs of a blue-ribbon commission put forward a plan that called for "painful solutions" to address the budget deficit. Taken at face value, the proposal could, in the long run, prevent the government from fulfilling many of its current responsibilities, to say nothing of its ability to meet future challenges. It's the sort of plan that is intended to shape the debate and, one day, allow politicians to "work together." If it does, there may indeed be reason to worry.

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