

Obama versus Cheney, Center versus Right

On May 21, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama gave a major speech outlining his administration's views on national security. Minutes after he completed his talk, former Vice-President Richard Cheney gave a major speech that essentially denounced Obama's positions on national security. Both speeches were widely covered by the U.S. press, which termed this pair of speeches as a fundamental conflict of values.

In his speech, Obama set out what he presented as a "nuanced" (or "balanced") centrist position on all the most controversial issues, such as the closing of the Guantánamo prison, the use of waterboarding and other "enhanced interrogation procedures" on prisoners, and the degree of transparency about present and past decisions concerning the treatment of prisoners. Cheney charged basically that Obama's centrist positions endangered national security. He did this despite the fact, as many commentators noted and Obama himself noted a few days later, Obama was taking positions close to those that President Bush had embraced in his last two years in office.

So, what was going on? Both Obama and Cheney are highly intelligent people, and highly sophisticated political actors. They both knew exactly what they were doing. Politics, as the saying goes, is a tough game. Politicians normally do what they do with two considerations in mind: the search for continued support by the voters in future elections; and the achievement of specific policy objectives. I do not doubt that both Obama and Cheney had this twin pair of concerns in mind. Each obviously felt that his tactics were potentially winning ones. So, in order to understand what was going on, we have to try to discern how each of them analyzed the political situation.

Let us start with Obama, since he obviously has the most immediate power and authority. Obama won the election with the support of almost all voters on the left and a large majority of voters in the center. He won it because of his stand on two basic issues. In 2007, the prime concern of U.S. voters was the war in Iraq. Obama presented himself as a staunch opponent of that war. This was the issue that gained for him support on the left. In 2008, the prime concern of voters shifted to the serious economic downturn. Obama presented himself as a steady hand on the tiller who could restore the U.S. (and the world) economy to a new upturn. This was the main issue that attracted him support in the center.

Since his election, Obama has approached both the issues of foreign policy/national security and the issues of the economy in the same fashion. He has appointed key figures drawn from the center who have recommended centrist policies. He has exuded both prudence and involvement in all the major decisions. In the arena of social issues (the environment, health, education, labor), he has not invested (perhaps not yet invested) the necessary political energy to obtain the legislation that would make possible the major social change he promised his supporters on the left.

Obama seems to think this overall stance will win him (and the Democratic party) the congressional elections in 2010 and then his own re-election in 2012. He is counting on what seems to be Republican disarray and the continuing alienation from the Republican party of centrist voters (principally those who are called "moderate" Republicans). From this perspective, the unremitting far right positions of Cheney are thought to be a great plus for Obama.

As for achieving policy goals, Obama seems to believe that he can tilt U.S. policy in all arenas back from far right to center or even left of center incrementally. He seems to be saying to his voters and the world: Trust me and come back in eight years and look. You will see that things have changed (the mantra of his electoral campaign). My political tactics will obtain the maximum change that is politically possible in the United States at this time. He seems also to be saying that, in order to achieve this incremental change, he can never be brusque in anything he does because, if he is, he will alienate centrist voters and even more important centrist Democratic legislators, without whose support he cannot obtain his incremental goals.

Cheney reasons quite differently. The first thing to notice about Cheney is that, from 2001-2009, he was seldom in the forefront of public debate. The major public figures of the Bush era were Bush himself and Condoleezza Rice. (It is true that Cheney's ally, Donald Rumsfeld, was also a major voice, but Bush fired him in 2007 over Cheney's vociferous objections.)

Cheney preferred to work quietly, behind the scenes, in pushing very aggressively his policy objectives. Cheney's views largely prevailed within the Bush administration from 2001 to 2006. When the Republicans suffered a big defeat in the legislative elections of 2006, Bush shifted position and allowed Condoleezza Rice, aided by Robert Gates, to set the pace - much to the dismay and disgust of Cheney.

Since the election of 2008, both Bush and Rice have been extremely quiet, deliberately. So, to a remarkable degree, has been John McCain, the defeated presidential candidate. Cheney, on the other hand, has become a constant public speaker. He has assumed the role of the leading public voice of the Republican party. More than that, he has called upon the faint of heart to leave Republican ranks. He has applauded the decision of Sen. Arlen Specter to shift his affiliation from Republican to Democrat. He has publicly encouraged Colin Powell and even McCain to do the same. Perhaps George W. Bush will be on this list next.

Most commentators seem to think that, by doing this, Cheney is ensuring the permanent decline of the Republican party. Many Republican politicians, especially the "moderates," are saying so as well. Doesn't Cheney realize this? To think this is to miss the essence of his political strategy.

Cheney believes the odds are that Republicans are going to fare badly in elections for the next four to six years. He thinks the most urgent task is to stop Obama incrementalism from working. The way to do this, he thinks, is to turn U.S. public debate into a center versus (unremitting) right debate. Cheney reasons that, if he does this by shouting loudly and unreasonably, he can force policy outcomes to become a compromise between the already centrist position of Obama and his own. He thinks that this way if we come back in 2016 and look at the outcome, things won't have changed that much at all. He counts on the likelihood that, with a Republican victory in 2016, the country can then resume the ultra-right wing paths Cheney has long advocated and pushed during his years as Vice-President.

Who is right? Obama's incrementalist strategy depends on his continuing popularity. And that in turn depends on the wars and the economy. If the United States policy in the Middle East begins to seem to the American people like a losing quagmire, the left will abandon him. And if the U.S. and the world fall further into depression, and especially if unemployment figures go up considerably, centrist voters will begin to abandon him.

Both negative outcomes are possible, very possible. If either of them happens, and especially if both do, all of Obama's social change policies will go down the drain. And Cheney will have won, hands down. Of course, it is also possible that on the Middle East front and the economic front, results will be more ambiguous - neither great success nor obvious catastrophe. In that case, we may get the social change incrementally, but at best in a watered-down fashion. This is because, by situating himself in the center instead of on the left or at least on the center-left, Obama's tactics have given away a good part of the demands at the outset.

Politics is a tough business. It is also something else. His close political advisor, David Axelrod, recently acknowledged some of these possibilities of negative outcome. He told the *New York Times* that Obama is "willing to take his chances with the American people." And then he added, "I think he also knows that sometimes you prevail in your arguments and sometimes you don't." When it was suggested to Axelrod that the patience of Americans may not last, he admitted, "That may be. Politics is a fickle business."

by Immanuel Wallerstein