

The Loneliest President Since Nixon

Facing adversity, Obama has no idea how to respond

Peggy Noonan, WSJ Nov. 13, 2014

Seven years ago I was talking to a long time Democratic operative on Capitol Hill about a politician who was in trouble. The pol was likely finished, he said. I was surprised. Can't he change things and dig himself out? No. "People do what they know how to do."

Politicians don't have a vast repertoire. When they get in a jam they just do what they've always done, even if it's not working anymore.

This came to mind when contemplating President Obama. After a devastating election, he is presenting himself as if he won. The people were not saying no to his policies, he explained, they would in fact like it if Republicans do what he tells them.

You don't begin a new relationship with a threat, but that is what he gave Congress: Get me an immigration bill I like or I'll change U.S. immigration law on my own.

Mr. Obama is doing what he knows how to do—stare them down and face them off. But his circumstances have changed. He used to be a conquering hero, now he's not. On the other hand he used to have to worry about public support. Now, with no more elections before him, he has the special power of the man who doesn't care.

I have never seen a president in exactly the position Mr. Obama is, which is essentially alone. He's got no one with him now. The Republicans don't like him, for reasons both usual and particular: They have had no good experiences with him. The Democrats don't like him, for their own reasons plus the election loss. Before his post-election lunch with congressional leaders, he told the press that he will judiciously consider any legislation, whoever sends it to him, Republicans or Democrats. His words implied that in this he was less partisan and more public-spirited than the hacks arrayed around him. It is for these grace notes that he is loved. No one at the table looked at him with colder, beadier eyes than outgoing Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#), who clearly doesn't like him at all. The press doesn't especially like the president; in conversation they evince no residual warmth.

This week at the Beijing summit there was no sign the leaders of the world had any particular regard for him. They can read election returns. They respect power and see it leaking out of him. If Mr. Obama had won the election they would have faked respect and affection.

[Vladimir Putin](#) delivered the unkindest cut, patting Mr. Obama's shoulder reassuringly. Normally that's Mr. Obama's move, putting his hand on your back or shoulder as if to bestow gracious encouragement, needy little shrimp that you are. It's a dominance move. He's been doing it six years. This time it was Mr. Putin doing it to him. The president didn't like it

From Reuters: “‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ Putin was overheard saying in English in Obama’s general direction, referring to the ornate conference room. ‘Yes,’ Obama replied, coldly, according to journalists who witnessed the scene.”

The last time we saw a president so alone it was Richard Nixon, at the end of his presidency, when the Democrats had turned on him, the press hated him, and the Republicans were fleeing. It was Sen. Barry Goldwater, the GOP’s standard-bearer in 1964, and House Minority Leader John Rhodes, also of Arizona, who went to the White House to tell Nixon his support in Congress had collapsed, they would vote to impeach. Years later Goldwater called Nixon “The world’s biggest liar.”

But Nixon had one advantage Obama does not: the high regard of the world’s leaders, who found his downfall tragic (such ruin over such a trifling matter) and befuddling (he didn’t keep political prisoners chained up in dungeons, as they did. Why such a fuss?).

Nixon’s isolation didn’t end well.

Last Sunday Mr. Obama, in an interview with [CBS](#)’s Bob Schieffer, spoke of his motivation, how he’s always for the little guy. “I love just being with the American people. . . . You know how passionate I am about trying to help them.” He said what is important is “a guy who’s lost his job or lost his home or . . . is trying to send a kid to college.” When he talks like that, as he does a lot, you get the impression his romantic vision of himself is Tom Joad in the movie version of “The Grapes of Wrath.” “I’ll be all around . . . wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there.”

I mentioned last week that the president has taken to filibustering, to long, rambling answers in planned sit-down settings—no questions on the fly walking from here to there, as other presidents have always faced. The press generally allows him to ramble on, rarely fighting back as they did with Nixon. But I have noticed Mr. Obama uses a lot of words as padding. He always has, but now he does it more. There’s a sense of indirection and obfuscation. You can say, “I love you,” or you can say, “You know, feelings will develop, that happens among humans and it’s good it happens, and I have always said, and I said it again just last week, that you are a good friend, I care about you, and it’s fair to say in terms of emotional responses that mine has escalated or increased somewhat, and ‘love’ would not be a wholly inappropriate word to use to describe where I’m coming from.”

When politicians do this they’re trying to mush words up so nothing breaks through. They’re leaving you dazed and trying to make it harder for you to understand what’s truly being said.

It is possible the president is responding to changed circumstances with a certain rigidity because no one ever stood in his way before. Most of his adult life has been a smooth glide. He had family challenges and an unusual childhood, but as an adult and a professional he never faced fierce, concentrated resistance. He was always magic. Life never came in and gave it to him hard on the jaw. So he really doesn’t know how to get up from the mat. He doesn’t know how to struggle to his feet and regain his balance. He only knows how to throw punches. But you can’t punch from the mat.

He only knows how to do what he's doing.

In the meantime he is killing his party. Gallup this week found that the Republicans for the first time in three years beat the Democrats on favorability, and also that respondents would rather have Congress lead the White House than the White House lead Congress.

A few weeks ago a conservative intellectual asked me: "How are we going to get through the next two years?" It was a rhetorical question; he was just sharing his anxiety. We have a president who actually can't work with Congress, operating in a capital in which he is resented and disliked and a world increasingly unimpressed by him, and so increasingly predatory.

Anyway, for those who are young and not sure if what they are seeing is wholly unusual: Yes, it is wholly unusual.