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Off on the Wrong Feet

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Distinctly Catholic

The incoming House Republican Majority is getting off on the wrong foot. They wrong feet actually. Already, the tug-of-war has begun between the Tea Party extremists and the need to actually govern, as seen in the debate about extending the debt ceiling. And, another tug-of-war is already manifesting itself between rival interpretations of the November election results: Did voters send the signal that they wanted Democrats and Republicans to work together, or did they simply reject the Obama program? And, as ever, there is the equivalent of hazing as newcomers get used to the ways of Washington.

Last night, on Tom Ashbrook's "On Point," two veteran Capitol Hill reporters discussed the GOP freshmen. The conversation was interesting in its entirety, but one thing really jumped out at me. Major Garrett of National Journal (and formerly of Fox News) indicated that at the two orientation sessions, one sponsored by Harvard and one sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, the incoming House freshman asked a lot of questions about raising the debt ceiling, and they seemed not to grasp why it was such a big deal. Now, the debt ceiling is not a difficult concept to grasp. Nor is its importance difficult to grasp? unless, of course, you think that what is wrong with America is that the 17th Amendment robbed federalism of its strength, or that Obama is a socialist, or that elites in Washington (and Cambridge) are frustrating the popular will.

Speaker-to-be Boehner has said the debt ceiling vote will be the new members' "first adult" moment, so he understands the necessity of passing the measure. We will see if he can do so. Erin Billings of Roll Call said that Boehner will have a series of votes on other important issues, such as repealing health care and putting caps on spending, before the debt ceiling vote. But, I wonder if those votes will appease the Tea Partiers. Those votes will be largely symbolic, after all. The health care law will not be repealed. One does not get the feeling listening to the Tea Partiers that they are in this for symbolic victories.

The announcement that the GOP intends to pass a measure, before the State of the Union, repealing the health care law, is a clear sop to the Tea Party base. But, the vote will repeat a mistake the Democrats made: At a time when the voters want Congress focusing on jobs and the economy, the GOP is leading with health care. They will blather on about how the health care law will kill jobs, but that is a very abstract argument to make. The White House needs to avoid taking the bait, and answer every question about health care with a brushback pitch on jobs, e.g., "We handled health care last year, right now the President is focused on creating jobs and wishes the Republicans would join him."

It remains to be seen whether and different polls yield different results whether the voters in November were disgusted with Obama or disgusted with Washington. This is a distinction with a difference. The bipartisan achievements of the lame duck seem to have been wildly popular, giving a boost to the President's job approval rating. But, if the GOP Congress follows its base, believing that working with Obama is itself a kind of venial sin, and support a rejectionist stance, I suspect that moderate, independent voters will flee them as they fled the Democrats this past November.

And, this story in Politico about a fundraiser - \$2,500 a ticket, performance by country music star LeAnn Rimes the night before the new Congress gets sworn in, shows how quickly some of the incoming GOP congressmen are learning the ways of Washington. Ms. Grimes, who recently did a "sexy Santa" number with a gay men's chorus and revealed she had an extra-marital affair, may not be that popular with social conservatives. And, hitting up lobbyists for cash before you are even sworn in is bold even by Washington standards.

So, in three areas, the GOP appears to be getting off on the wrong feet. Or, demonstrating that they have three left feet. Pick your metaphor. One prediction is safe to make: John Boehner is going to be chain-smoking and taking lots of Tums.

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