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Obama's Problem

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Distinctly Catholic

President Obama has a problem: According to a Washington Post poll released this morning, 78% of all Americans approved of his handling of the Tucson shooting, compared to only 12% who disapproved. Why should that be a problem? 78% is a pretty high number, no?

The problem is that President Obama earned those high marks because in the wake of the killings in Tucson, he was called upon to play the role of a head of state, to appear not as the spokesman for a partisan position or a political point of view, but to speak for the nation. And, he did it masterfully. The difficulty is that the modern presidency does not offer that many opportunities for Obama to act exclusively as head of state. Most times, he is also called upon to be the head of government as well, the leader of a political party involved in an often bitter struggle with political opponents.

Next week's State of the Union is a perfect example. If he gives the kind of speech he gave in Tucson, calling all Americans to answer the call of the better angels of their nature, people will applaud, his numbers may spike a bit more, but he will have lost the chance to explain his policies and proposals to the American people. If he focuses on those policies, then he is in the land of controversy and contention, the political world, in which sharp elbows count more than tender words. Instead, he will do what all modern State of the Union speeches do ? he will combine the two roles.

The difficulty in combining the two roles is that, so far, the President's high personal approval ratings have not filtered down to an endorsement of his policies. In the same poll released this morning that gave him an overall 54% approval rating for handling his job as president, his handling of the economy won him only a 46% approval rating, and on health care he garnered only 43% approval.

The key, I believe, in bridging the two roles in next week's speech is a simple one: people. President Obama needs to describe and defend his political policies not in the abstract language of policy wonks,

which is fine for discussions in the Roosevelt Room. He can't be talking about out-year deficit projections, or long-term health care costs. He needs to talk about real people whose lives have already been impacted positively by his health care bill. Better yet ? one person. This administration, filled with smart wonks, needs to find a poster child, literally, for its health care program and it needs to have that child sitting in the House Gallery next to the First Lady next week for the State of the Union.

The problem for the President can be put differently. In the last half of the twentieth century, most historians would concur that the most intellectually gifted man to sit in the Oval Office was Jimmy Carter and the least intellectually gifted was Ronald Reagan. I do not doubt that President Obama is as smart as Carter, but if he wants to be as successful as Reagan, he needs to grasp and emulate Reagan's gift, the ability to communicate complex problems and policies by using personal anecdotes.

Many commentators have noted that last week's speech in Tucson reminded them of the Obama they saw on the campaign trail. This is true, but they have not noted the difficulty that comparison reveals. Obama's campaign speeches, like his speech in Tucson last week, were largely devoid of actual politics. During the campaign, he spoke of hope and change and a bunch of contentless nouns that Americans are trained to embrace with Pavlovian enthusiasm. Anyone opposed to hope? But, the problem is that when the President got down to specifics, his political opponents have done a much better job describing and characterizing his proposals than he has. What is the Democratic equivalent of "death panels"?

Putting a face on his health care reform will not convince many Americans to support it. Antipathy to government's role in health care goes back a long way. Think of the debate over Medicare and Medicaid. Think of the cries of "socialized medicine" that greeted Bill Clinton's attempt to enact universal health insurance in 1993. But, for those people smack dab in the center of American politics, people who almost by definition are not very partisan or even political by nature, putting a face on a policy is the sine qua non of political persuasion.

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