

LESSON FROM OBAMA

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For more than 100 years, American presidents have urged a variety of comprehensive alterations of the nation's health care insurance arrangements. None succeeded. From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, including Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, their proposals met everything from resistance to catastrophe. Barack Obama got the job done.

It is years too soon to discern fully the social, political and financial effects of what has just been enacted. As in all matters such as this, perfection will not have been achieved even if implementation is unexpectedly efficient and effective. However, there is a lesson to be learned about Obama from the fact of enactment.

President Obama came to office with the expressed intent of moving beyond bipartisanship to post-partisanship. He sought to achieve agreements among opponents, in a reflection of his earlier experience as a community organizer. Their role is to understand opposing views, earn trust from all parties, and help them work out compromises that are mutually beneficial.

This approach meant that the achievement of compromise denoted his success. Perversely, this also meant that failure to compromise was a failure for him. Those who sought to diminish him could do so merely by being obdurate. The approach of the community organizer induced intransigence.

As this became painfully obvious, Obama with the aid of others of skill (particularly including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi) proved to be a wily and willing and finally winning participant in old fashioned partisanship to achieve principles.

This is a lesson about him that may well be applicable to American foreign policy.

Again, President Obama began his term in office seeking conversation, trust, understanding in a realm in which unilateralism had been the hallmark of the perception and behavior of the U.S. He sought engagement. He spoke directly to the trusting, the suspicious and the distrustful. He acknowledged the need for a change in American policy, he exemplified the change and sought reciprocal changes.

So far, he must be disappointed by the response. In some cases, Japan and Israel are examples, national elections produced leaders whose policies were less congenial than those of their predecessors. In others, North Korea and Iran may be examples, engagement as a policy abetted their previous strategy of delay. In still others, numerous countries in the Western Hemisphere are

examples, the foundation of political power is opposition to the United States so participating cheerfully in engagement is tantamount to heresy.

However, we may be witnessing the same flexibility in the conduct of foreign affairs that characterized the changed approach to health care insurance reform. Last December, Obama used his very presence, personal prestige and persuasive powers to get something from the climate change conference that was on the verge of producing less than nothing. Very recently, agreement with Russia on nuclear arms has borne fruit.

A striking demonstration of change from this has been the continuing private and public displeasure with Israel over its building of housing. Responding to the opportunity that Israel crudely provided, the U.S. has left no doubt that it questions the sincerity of promises for substantive deliberations ultimately leading to two neighboring states, the goal of Obama's policy.

As with health care insurance, the outcome is uncertain. But in both, Obama is showing that a steely resolve underpins post-partisanship and engagement.