



October 16, 2009

Letter from Washington

Just when things seemed to be going his way with health care finally, the International Olympic Committee handed President Obama a stinging defeat. The Obamas had traveled to Copenhagen to personally lobby for the selection of Chicago in 2016, and didn't make it through the first round of voting.

The strange part is that the Obama organization is really, really good at vote counting, so they either had a critical intelligence failure and actually believed that Chicago would be selected, or knew that the situation was dire but believed that the Obamas could pull it out through sheer personality. Either way, they invested the prestige of the Presidency and came up embarrassingly short.

In an even more bizarre twist, the president was awarded the Nobel Peace prize after 9 months in office and no significant achievement other than delivering some nice speeches. If they continue to follow that logic next year perhaps the Nobel committee will award the 2010 prize posthumously to John Lennon, since he isn't George Bush and wrote the lyrics to "Give Peace a Chance".

The peace prize award, which most Americans either viewed as somewhere between ludicrous at worst or premature at best, serves to confirm the opinion of many who believe that Obama is the object of some weird global personality cult in which achievement is immaterial.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, health care reform is approaching the endgame. The White House strategy has been to allow the Congress to craft competing versions of reform, and then to step in at the end and resolve the conflicts. While this attempt at reform has gotten farther than previous efforts, the real heavy lift will be in reconciling the different factions of the Democratic party and delivering a majority in the House and 60 votes in the Senate. The sticking point will be in the creation of the "public option" or government insurance program to compete with the commercial carriers.

In order to pass, the President will have to convince all of the Democrats to vote for the ultimate bill, since there will apparently be no Republican support.

The Republicans have decided that they don't have to participate in the process, and that just being against health care reform will give them a winning issue in the 2010 Congressional elections. In fairness, many of the Republicans are not so much against health care reform as they are against the idea of incurring another trillion dollars of public debt to enact it, fresh on the heels of the various multi-trillion dollar bailouts and stimulus bills. The version of reform voted out of the Senate Finance committee seems to have the best chance of attracting the necessary votes, and it has been scored by the Congressional Budget Office at \$900B over 10 years.

Meanwhile the President is in a hard spot regarding Afghanistan. During the campaign last year, Obama repeatedly beat up on the Bush administration for waging the "wrong war" in Iraq, while the "right war" in Afghanistan was being under funded and under resourced. This past March, the President himself took ownership of Afghanistan, added some 20,000 ground troops, and announced the adoption of a new strategy that would focus on providing security for the citizens, rather than killing the bad guys. Clearly stated in March, a return of the Taliban in Afghanistan would mean also the return of Al-Qaeda, and either outcome would be unacceptable. Recall also that the four-star American commander in Afghanistan was cashiered as part of the new focus, and replaced by General Stanley McChrystal, a protégé of General Petraeus.

McChrystal's first assignment was to provide a complete assessment of the situation on the ground. Bits of his report had been leaked, but the full unclassified report was made available two weeks ago, and it paints a very bleak picture of conditions on the ground. McChrystal's blunt assessment is that the war will be lost without the infusion of a significant number of additional troops --- at least 40,000. Clearly this was not the answer that the President was looking for, and he has embarked on an extensive "strategy review", presumably reviewing the "new" strategy announced with such enthusiasm last March.

Realistically, the McChrystal report has put the President in a tough box, and he has two choices. He can either follow his handpicked general's advice and supply the additional forces or fold his hand and start the withdrawal process, admitting that the new strategy was a mistake. Any half measure would leave him accountable for the military outcome, a place he not surprisingly does not want to be and will not allow happening.

So for the last month the administration has been conducting its review, despite the fact that the end result has been preordained, acting as if they are playing for time while hoping that some external game changer will occur.

Meanwhile, the NATO participants in the war are becoming increasingly concerned that the administration will actually do something irresponsible and leave them hanging out, much as Poland and the Czech Republic were hung out on missile defense earlier in the summer.

Just as in the health care reform debate, the President has demonstrated that he is willing to compromise fundamentals for the sake of a deal, which either makes him pragmatic or unprincipled, depending on where you sit.

From a military standpoint, within living memory, troops have been committed to die for a cause that the political leadership did not have the moral courage to reverse. The longer the administration equivocation goes on with Afghanistan the more difficult it will become for troop commanders to place their men in harm's way.

As John Kerry asked long ago " How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"