

Republican Tradition of Hostage-Taking

Special Report: Since the days of Richard Nixon, Republicans have pursued an anything-goes brand of politics that often has the look of hostage-taking, with Democrats usually caving in. But, Robert Parry asks, has President Obama finally learned that the only way to stop bullying is to stand up to it?

By Robert Parry

There is a reason why governments refuse to give in to demands from hostage-takers: because otherwise it encourages more hostage-taking. That is an obvious lesson, but it seems it has taken Democrats many years to learn it, as they have faced Republican strategies of grabbing hostages for decades and have quietly given in, paying ransom again and again.

Yet on those rare occasions when Democrats do stand up such as against House Speaker Newt Gingrich's government shutdowns in 1995-1996 and against House Speaker John Boehner's blockage of a payroll tax cut extension this week the Democrats usually prevail politically.

Still, that hasn't stopped the Democrats from sliding back into submission the next time the Republicans do it. That's because standing up to hostage-takers often involves absorbing some short-term pain, like seeing more Americans thrown out of work or watching the U.S. credit rating damaged.

Knowing that the Democrats are hesitant to take those hits, Republicans have held the U.S. economy hostage to extract concessions from President Barack Obama on GOP priorities. Indeed, the practice began immediately after the Republicans won the House majority in 2010.

The Republicans vowed to block extension of long-term unemployment insurance and other recession-related programs unless Obama agreed to continue George W. Bush's tax cuts for the rich for two more years. Obama gave in, but he also failed to insist on including a rise in the debt ceiling for government borrowing.

Obama explained that he left the debt ceiling out of the 2010 deal because he didn't believe anyone would be so reckless as to risk forcing the U.S. government into default. However, in summer 2011, Republicans did just that, holding the debt-ceiling bill hostage unless they got more concessions, which Obama again agreed to grant.

The Republicans understood that by holding the U.S. economy hostage, it's pretty much a win-win for them. Either they extract more political ransom from Obama or

they allow unemployment to stay high in which case they can count on the U.S. news media and the public blaming Obama. That, in turn, improves their chances of winning the White House and Congress in November 2012.

So, it shouldn't have come as a surprise this past week when House Republicans balked at a short-term extension of payroll tax cuts for 160 million working Americans and long-term unemployment insurance for those looking for work. This was just one more opportunity to grab hostages, demand more concessions and make the economy scream.

Yet, by taking his jobs plan to the public a strategy that Obama has been pursuing since the debt-limit fiasco last summer Obama has finally been able to make the Republicans pay for their hostage-taking strategy. Faced with national outrage, Speaker Boehner sounded retreat on Thursday, although more hostage-taking can be expected early in the New Year when a longer term extension is negotiated.

The Nixon Legacy

After all, this hardball Republican approach to politics did not begin in 2010. The pattern can be traced back to Richard Nixon's presidential campaign of 1968 when his political team, in essence, took the half-million American soldiers in Vietnam hostage.

According to documents and audio recordings that have surfaced over the intervening decades, it is clear that Nixon's campaign sabotaged President Lyndon Johnson's Paris peace talks by getting the South Vietnamese leadership to boycott the negotiations in exchange for Nixon's promises of a better deal once he was in the White House.

In October 1968, the peace talks were on the verge of ending the conflict which had already claimed more than 30,000 U.S. lives and a million or so Vietnamese. However, Nixon feared that a last-minute settlement of the war would likely give Vice President Hubert Humphrey the boost he needed to win the election. So, Nixon's operatives made sure that didn't happen.

Johnson learned of Nixon's gambit, which the President called "treason" in one phone conversation. Johnson even confronted Nixon over the phone about the sabotage, but Nixon simply denied the accusations, leaving Johnson with the choice of whether to release the evidence before the 1968 election.

Johnson consulted with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford on Nov. 4, 1968. Both advised against going public out of fear that the evidence of Nixon's treachery might reflect badly on the United States.

“Some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I’m wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual [Nixon] elected,” Clifford said in a conference call. “It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country’s interests.”

So, Johnson relented, agreeing to stay silent for the “good of the country,” while Nixon exploited the stalemated peace talks for the edge that ensured his narrow victory.

However, since Nixon’s side had promised South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu a better deal than Johnson was offering, Nixon had little choice but to continue the war for four more years, with the deaths of 20,000 more U.S. soldiers and a million or so more Vietnamese. [See [“The Significance of Nixon’s ‘Treason’.”](#)]

Madman and Watergate

Desperate to show some results from the additional years of war, Nixon also tried out a version of his hostage-taking strategy on the North Vietnamese, devising what was called the “madman” theory of letting Hanoi think that he was crazy enough to use nuclear weapons unless they gave in. In effect, he was taking their whole country hostage.

However, the North Vietnamese called his bluff and ultimately negotiated a peace accord in Paris in 1972, along the lines of what Johnson had hammered out four years earlier. (In 1975, the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies routed Thieu’s South Vietnamese army, with him going into exile in the United States.)

Still, Nixon’s political success in 1968 encouraged him to continue pushing the envelope of what he could get away with, apparently trusting that when push came to shove the Democrats would retreat as Johnson did. Nixon’s political hubris finally undid him in the Watergate political spying scandal.

Yet, despite Nixon’s resignation in 1974, the Republicans were not inclined to change their ways. The imprint of Nixon’s “scorched-earth” brand of politics had been burned deeply into their psyches, evidenced in their harsh rhetoric, their questioning of other people’s patriotism and a readiness to coerce adversaries.

As longtime Democratic congressional aide Spencer Oliver observed years later: “What [the Republicans] learned from Watergate was not ‘don’t do it,’ but ‘cover it up more effectively.’ They have learned that they have to frustrate congressional oversight and press scrutiny in a way that will avoid another major scandal.”

In other words, the Republicans got to work building their own media infrastructure and expanding their activist organizations to make sure that if the Democrats called the Republicans out on a future political scandal, it would be the Democrats who suffered more, that the Republicans would have their flanks covered.

It's also important to realize that even though Nixon left the White House in disgrace, he remained an important adviser to Republican politicians, including a young "bomb-thrower" from Georgia named Newt Gingrich. Nixon often urged Republicans to play the sort of hardball games that he had perfected.

Sinking Carter

In 1980, Nixon and some of his key aides, such as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, were background figures in what looked like a reprise of Nixon's 1968 gambit, when President Jimmy Carter's reelection was held hostage by Iranian radicals holding 52 Americans hostage.

Over the past three decades, some two dozen witnesses including senior Iranian officials, top French intelligence officers, U.S. and Israeli intelligence operatives, the Russian government and even Palestine leader Yasir Arafat have confirmed the existence of a Republican initiative to interfere with Carter's efforts to free the hostages.

In 1996, for instance, during a meeting in Gaza, Arafat personally told former President Carter that senior Republican emissaries approached the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1980 with a request that Arafat help broker a delay in the hostage release.

"You should know that in 1980 the Republicans approached me with an arms deal if I could arrange to keep the hostages in Iran until after the elections," Arafat told Carter, according to historian Douglas Brinkley who was present.

[Diplomatic History, Fall 1996]

Arafat's spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif said the GOP gambit pursued other channels, too. In an interview with me in Tunis in 1990, Bassam indicated that Arafat learned upon reaching Iran in 1980 that the Republicans and the Iranians had made other arrangements for a delay in the hostage release.

"The offer [to Arafat] was, 'if you block the release of hostages, then the White House would be open for the PLO'," Bassam said. "I guess the same offer was given to others, and I believe that some accepted to do it and managed to block the release of hostages."

In a little-noticed letter to the U.S. Congress, dated Dec. 17, 1992, former

Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr said he first learned of the Republican hostage initiative in July 1980. Bani-Sadr said a nephew of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then Iran's supreme leader, returned from a meeting with an Iranian banker and CIA asset, Cyrus Hashemi, who had close ties to Reagan's campaign chief William Casey and to Casey's business associate, John Shaheen.

Bani-Sadr said the message from the Khomeini emissary was clear: Republicans were in league with elements of the CIA in an effort to undermine Carter and were demanding Iran's help.

Bani-Sadr said the emissary "told me that if I do not accept this proposal they [the Republicans] would make the same offer to my rivals." The emissary added that the Republicans "have enormous influence in the CIA," Bani-Sadr wrote. "Lastly, he told me my refusal of their offer would result in my elimination."

Bani-Sadr said he resisted the GOP scheme, but the plan was accepted by the hard-line Khomeini faction. The American hostages remained captive through the Nov. 4, 1980, election which Reagan won handily. They were released immediately after Reagan was sworn in on Jan. 20, 1981. [For more details, see Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

Though some Carter advisers suspected Republican manipulation of the hostage crisis, the Democrats again kept silent. Only after the Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986 and witnesses began talking about its origins did the 1980 story, known as the October Surprise case, get fleshed out enough to compel Congress to take a closer look in 1991-1992.

Again, however the Democrats feared that the evidence could endanger the fragile political relationships of Washington that enable governing to go forward. Once more, they chose to ignore the GOP machinations and, in some cases, literally hid the evidence. [For instance, see Consortiumnews.com's "Key October Surprise Evidence Hidden."]

Teaching Gingrich

By caving in on the October Surprise investigation in early 1993 out of a desire for political comity and bipartisanship Democrats, in effect, set the stage for more Republican hardball strategies directed against President Bill Clinton.

The Republicans showed that their growing media machine though built for defense against Democratic investigations could play offense equally well. The machine could manufacture "scandals" about Clinton as easily as it could disassemble threats to Ronald Reagan or George H.W. Bush.

Indeed, the strategy to undo Clinton was egged on by Nixon himself. On April 13,

1994, just four days before the stroke that would lead to his death, Nixon spoke to biographer Monica Crowley about how Clinton's Whitewater real-estate deal could be used to take the Democratic president down.

"Clinton should pay the price," Nixon said. "Our people shouldn't let this issue go down. They mustn't let it sink." [See Monica Crowley's *Nixon Off the Record*.]

Of all Nixon's protégés perhaps none took his teachings more to heart than did Newt Gingrich who was determined to apply Nixon's lessons in overturning long-term Democratic control of the House of Representatives.

Gingrich, who won a seat in Congress in 1978, already was inclined to use whatever means necessary to achieve his goal. In a speech to the College Republicans, he said, "I think that one of the great problems we have in the Republican Party is that we don't encourage you to be nasty." Nasty would soon become Gingrich's trademark.

Four years later, in 1982, Gingrich turned to the grand master of "nasty" for advice. Over dinner, Nixon advised Gingrich that the press could ignore the House Republicans because they were "so boring," according to an account in Gingrich's book, *Lessons Learned the Hard Way*.

Embracing Nixon's advice, Gingrich set off to ensure that the House Republicans would no longer be "boring." Led by Gingrich, the hard-line GOP faction dubbed the Conservative Opportunity Society became famous for over-the-top attacks on adversaries: questioning people's patriotism, challenging their ethics and making inflammatory remarks.

The Nixon/Gingrich no-holds-barred tactics became the M.O. of the modern Republican Party. Republicans in the Nixon/Gingrich mold would say or do whatever was necessary to advance their causes, especially the goal of tearing down Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

The Democrats often found themselves in a defensive crouch, trying to protect the functioning of government, even as the Republicans followed Reagan's credo that "government is the problem." Thus, Republicans were inclined to take the government itself hostage as Democrats pleaded for its survival.

After using a minor ethics scandal to destroy Democratic House Speaker Jim Wright's career and benefiting from a rash of "Clinton scandals," Gingrich engineered the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, leaving President Clinton to insist that he was still "relevant."

The Clinton Wars

Gingrich's megalomania knew no bounds, however. So, he continued to press his political advantage, taking the Congress into showdowns with Clinton that led to government shutdowns in 1995 and 1996, with Clinton finally standing his ground and sticking the blame on the Republicans. Clinton's success enabled him to win reelection in 1996.

However, Gingrich and the Republicans had not changed their ways. They simply escalated the political wars, collaborating with right-wing special prosecutors to hound Clinton and many of his senior aides. Finally, Clinton's lying to protect an extramarital affair with former intern Monica Lewinsky became the opening the Republicans seized to destroy and disgrace him.

In a lame-duck session in late 1998, the House voted to impeach a U.S. president for only the second time in history. Clinton was forced into a humiliating Senate trial in 1999. The entire process had the appearance of taking the dignity of the U.S. government hostage.

Though Clinton managed to survive the trial and serve out his term, his impeachment stained Vice President Al Gore, who sought to succeed Clinton in Election 2000. A hostile news media (both mainstream and right-wing) made Gore into Clinton's whipping boy, giving him a public beating as a kind of stand-in for the media-disliked President. [For details, see [Neck Deep](#).]

The harsh media treatment of Gore tamped down his election numbers, though he still out-pollled George W. Bush by a half-million votes nationally and would have carried the key state of Florida if all legally cast votes had been counted.

However, the Republicans were not about to accept defeat, even if that required taking the U.S. political process hostage. So, they staged ugly rallies in Florida to intimidate vote-counters and eventually turned to five Republican partisans on the U.S. Supreme Court to stop Florida's counting of votes.

Rather than go into the streets to battle for a full and honest vote tally, the Democrats again surrendered to the Republican hostage-takers. Just as with Nixon "treason" in 1968, there was much handwringing among Democratic leaders about the possibility that a public battle would somehow impinge on Bush's "legitimacy."

Now, the same pattern has come to dominate the Obama years. The Republicans use whatever means necessary from endless filibusters of jobs bills to obstruction of vital legislation like the debt-ceiling bill to achieve their political goals. And the Democrats usually succumb for "the good of the country."

The question now is whether President Obama and the Democrats have finally

internalized the folly of giving in to hostage-takers and will use Election 2012 to punish the GOP for these tactics or whether they will return to form when the short-term payroll tax cut extension expires in two months and agree to pay another Republican ransom.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here](#).]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
