

Method to Republican 'Madness'

From the Archive: Robert Draper's new book, *Do Not Ask What Good We Do*, describes Newt Gingrich and other Republicans plotting on Barack Obama's Inauguration Day how to sink his presidency. But that plot has been obvious for years in GOP obstruction of Obama's recovery plans, as Robert Parry noted in 2010.

By Robert Parry (Originally published March 31, 2010)

Washington's conventional wisdom for explaining the intensity of Republican obstructionism toward President Barack Obama breaks down one of two ways: either it's a philosophical disagreement over the role of government or a desperate need to stay in line with a radicalized right-wing base.

But there is another way to view the GOP political strategy, as neither principled nor reactive to the rantings of Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and the Tea Partiers. It is that the Republicans are following a playbook that has evolved over more than four decades, to regain power by sabotaging Democratic presidents.

In this analysis, the Republicans believe they can reclaim the lucrative levers of national authority by making the country as ungovernable as possible while a Democrat is in the White House, essentially holding governance hostage until they are restored to power. Then, the Democrats are expected to behave as a docile opposition "for the good of the country" (and usually do).

The "destroy Obama" game plan tracks most closely with Newt Gingrich's strategy for undermining Bill Clinton 16 years ago. But today's strategy also traces back to Richard Nixon's sabotage of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam peace talks in 1968 and Ronald Reagan's October Surprise gambit against President Jimmy Carter's Iran hostage negotiations in 1980.

In all four cases covering the last four Democratic presidencies the Republicans did not behave as a loyal opposition but rather as a single-minded political enemy that viewed the White House as its birthright and Democratic control of the Executive Branch as illegitimate.

During the first years of Clinton's presidency, leading Republicans, such as Sen. Bob Dole, actually denounced President Clinton as a "pretender." They noted that Clinton gained the White House with less than a majority of the popular vote (because of the third-party run of Ross Perot).

Rather than accept Clinton as a legitimate president, the Republicans unleashed

their newly minted right-wing media machine (much of it having been assembled during the Reagan-Bush-41 years with the help of conservative foundations and right-wing media moguls).

Magazines, such as The American Spectator, and newspapers, like the Washington Times and the Wall Street Journal, spread ugly rumors about the Clintons, while radio talk show hosts, such as Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy, filled the airwaves with hours and hours of Clinton-bashing.

In Congress, House Republican firebrand Gingrich whipped his party into line against Clinton's top legislative goals. For the first time, every Republican voted against the federal budget, which included tax increases to rein in the deficit that had surged to unprecedented levels under Reagan and George H.W. Bush (41).

Meanwhile, the escalating anti-Clinton media assault drew in the Washington Post and the New York Times, which were determined to prove they could be tougher on a Democrat than any Republican and thus to shed once and for all the "liberal media" label.

By 1994, the Whitewater "scandal" about an obscure Clinton real-estate investment had become front-page news and a Republican-controlled judicial panel had picked former Reagan-Bush-41 appointee Kenneth Starr to head up an aggressive investigation into the Clintons' personal finances and later into their private life.

Back on Capitol Hill, Gingrich's "revolutionaries" rallied and railed against Hillary Clinton's ill-fated health-reform bill.

'Black Helicopters'

Across the countryside, the harsh language in Congress and the ugly accusations from talk radio fed into a right-wing paranoia. Armed militia groups began forming to resist the threat of "one-world government" and its "black helicopters" arriving from the United Nations to strip away American liberties.

Every day, Americans were confronted with a level of disorder in their political system that they had not seen in decades and President Clinton took most of the blame for the government disarray.

Having covered CIA destabilization campaigns in Third World countries, particularly Nicaragua, I was struck by the similarities. In the 1980s, the Reagan-Bush-41 administrations destroyed Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista revolution by systematically making the country ungovernable via a combination of economic dislocations, political/media propaganda, and paramilitary

activities.

Finally, in 1990, Nicaraguan voters faced with a choice of electing the U.S.-financed candidate Violeta Chamorro or suffering a continued U.S. economic embargo and a resumption of attacks by U.S.-supported contra rebels opted to accede to Washington's desires and voted for Chamorro.

By the second year of the Clinton administration, it seemed something similar was occurring in the United States, in part, because the Reagan-Bush-41 administrations had left behind not only a capacity for "information warfare" in the Third World but a domestic version of that propaganda infrastructure.

Documentary evidence from Reagan's presidential library now shows that the overseas and domestic propaganda machines were built simultaneously as Reagan's CIA Director William Casey recruited conservative foundation executives like Richard Mellon Scaife to help finance these activities. Casey also put a senior CIA propagandist, Walter Raymond Jr., into Reagan's National Security Council to create an inter-agency propaganda bureaucracy and to oversee its operation. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["How Reagan's Propaganda Succeeded."](#)]

Another major accomplishment of the Reagan administration was the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy, which on the surface was intended to finance pro-U.S. political/media entities around the globe. But NED had another side. Since many of the NED-funded organizations were based in Washington and since the NED bureaucracy was dominated by neoconservatives NED, in effect, became a permanent funding mechanism for the neocon community in the U.S. capital.

Ironically, NED, which currently has a \$100 million annual budget, may have done more to influence the course of the United States than any of the countries it has targeted for "democratization." NED funding explains why Washington's neocons have remained so influential despite their involvement in so many policy disasters, such as the Iraq War.

Even when the neocons find themselves adrift during brief periods out of power, many of them remain afloat with the help of NED grant money. They can hang onto a financial life-preserver tossed from some institute that benefits from the federal funding. That way, the neocons can continue writing op-eds and books, while weighing in on TV talk shows and at conferences that shape U.S. government policies.

These various political/media mechanisms, dating back to the Reagan years, may have been originally designed to protect the political flanks of a Republican administration, but it turned out they could be put to use just as effectively

for offense as for defense. When Clinton managed to wrest the White House from the Republicans after 12 years of Reagan and Bush-41, the GOP realized that it could well shorten its time out of power by savaging the new President and creating chaos to undermine his political power and his popularity.

Clinton-Hating

In February 1994, I attended the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington and was stunned to see the array of Clinton-hating paraphernalia, including slick videos suggesting that Bill Clinton was a murderer and semi-nude photo-shopped images of Hillary Clinton. (Some of the anti-Clinton propaganda was being financed by the same right-wing foundations that had collaborated with Reagan and Casey.)

By early fall 1994, the anti-Clinton hysteria was sweeping the country, though Democrats were mostly oblivious to its ferocity. Shortly before the 1994 elections, I had dinner with a savvy Democratic operative at the Monocle restaurant on Capitol Hill and told him that it looked to me like the Democrats would lose both the House and the Senate. He responded that I might be right about the Senate but that there was no way the House would fall to the Republicans. A few days later, however, that was exactly what happened.

While the Democrats were slow on the uptake, the Republicans definitely “got” what was happening and why. In celebration, the Gingrich “revolutionaries” made Rush Limbaugh an honorary member of the new Republican congressional majority, hailing him as their “national precinct captain.”

Though today’s conventional wisdom holds that a big difference between 1994 and 2010 is that Gingrich had a positive message in his “Contract for America,” that analysis misses the point that it was the tearing down of the Clintons represented by Limbaugh’s daily tirades and the impression of national disarray under Clinton that were key to the GOP victory in 1994.

In the years that followed, the anti-Clinton hysteria would have other consequences. On April 19, 1995, right-wing militia fanatic Timothy McVeigh detonated a bomb at the Oklahoma City federal building killing 168 people. Limbaugh and others who had stoked the fires of paranoia would angrily deny any suggestion that they had contributed to the catastrophe.

Despite Clinton’s reelection in 1996, the Republicans did not give up their determination to destroy him. In 1998-99, they instituted impeachment proceedings that sought to oust him from office for lying about his extramarital sex life. Though Clinton survived a Senate trial, he and his family were humiliated and Republicans were energized to restore the Reagan-Bush dynasty by

putting George W. Bush into the White House, even if he did lose the popular vote to Al Gore.

The same two elements tearing down a Democratic president and creating a sense of political havoc are again at the center of Republican strategy, except that today the GOP is even better placed to carry out a repeat than the party was in 1994. Then, there was no Fox News dominating the cable TV ratings and the right-wing media was far less developed than it is today.

Though the Republicans can't say that Obama wasn't legitimately elected (he won with 53 percent of the vote and a record 66.8 million ballots), the Right has questioned his legitimacy in other ways, such as the spurious claims that he was born in Kenya despite his Hawaii birth certificate. The Tea Party crowd also has decried him as some Islamic-terrorist-loving, America-hating communist, socialist or Nazi if not the anti-Christ. A popular Tea Party poster shows Obama as a white-faced Joker, the sociopathic character from the latest Batman movie.

With funding from corporate and other right-wing interests, the Tea Partiers also have done their best to create political chaos. Last summer, Tea Party activists disrupted "town hall" meetings on health care, and this spring, they forced Democratic members of Congress to run a gauntlet of insults and other abuse as they walked to the Capitol to vote on health-care reform scenes reminiscent of white racists shouting at black students at Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

High-Level Encouragement

The organized chaos even entered the Congress itself, as Republican lawmakers cheered protesters on and at times acted like them. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-South Carolina, shouted "you lie" at Obama during a presidential address. During the health-care vote, Rep. Randy Neugebauer, R-Texas, yelled "baby killer" while Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Michigan, was speaking against a Republican motion to stop the bill by requiring revised anti-abortion language.

Republican leaders also engaged in apocalyptic rhetoric, with House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio declaring that passage of health-care reform would lead to "Armageddon," a religious reference to the end-times battle between a warrior Jesus and the anti-Christ. In the days after the health-care vote, the disruptions did spill over into violence, with bricks thrown through the windows of Democratic offices and death threats made against members of Congress. Some militant Tea Partiers vowed to stage an armed rally near Washington.

Though Boehner and a few other Republican leaders finally criticized acts of violence, others continued to wink at the unruly behavior or shift the blame

onto the Democrats for talking about it. "It is reckless to use these incidents as media vehicles for political gain," said House Minority Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia, criticizing Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Maryland, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and Democratic National Chairman Tim Kaine for "dangerously fanning the flames by suggesting that these incidents be used as a political weapon."

For her part, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin defended her advice that her backers should "reload" and her decision to put crosshairs on the districts of endangered Democrats, saying the references had nothing to do with violence.

She blamed the controversy on "this BS coming from the lame-stream media, lately, about us inciting violence."

Amid these mixed messages, right-wing extremists now appear to be shifting from aggressive words and disruptive protests to going operational. FBI agents arrested nine alleged members of a Michigan-based Christian militia group, called Hutaree, charging them with a plot to kill a police officer, bomb the funeral and touch off an armed uprising against the U.S. government. The Hutaree see themselves as at war with the anti-Christ.

Despite the growing specter of political violence, the Republicans appear set in their determination to foment as much disruption as possible between now and the November 2010 elections, and thus reap expected gains, with hopes that they can win back the House and Senate and then further neutralize Obama.

(In 2010, the Republicans did succeed in regaining the House and reduced the Democratic majority in the Senate. Since then, they have blocked much of Obama's jobs program and disrupted the economy with a 2011 showdown over a possible national debt default, while bashing the President for failing to generate more jobs.)

Inside-Outside

While some Washington pundits see the Republicans as captives of the extremism on the Right unable to dismount a dangerous tiger the counter-analysis would be that the GOP and the Tea Party/militia crowd are just two parts of the same political movement, one inside the system and the other outside, but both working toward the same goal, a restoration of Republican/Right control of government.

In their view, only then would political comity and governmental normalcy be restored, because the Democrats always seem eager to get along and do what's necessary to make government work.

To refer back to the Nicaragua comparison, the GOP's inside-outside game is like

Nicaragua's pro-U.S. "internal opposition" operating as a non-violent political arm while the U.S.-funded paramilitary contras wreaked havoc in the countryside, both working toward the same goal of removing the Sandinistas from power.

And as long as this "make-the-political-system-scream" strategy continues to work, it is probably unrealistic to expect the Republicans to disavow it. Washington power and the money that comes with it are so intoxicating that the political risks appear well worth it, especially if Democrats and the American Left don't have the means or the courage to stand against abuses by Republicans and the Right.

That pattern of acquiescence by the Democrats and the Left dates back to the emergence of this Republican anything-goes strategy more than four decades ago. As evidence from LBJ's presidential library makes clear, Johnson was aware of Nixon's pre-election sabotaging of the Paris peace talks in 1968, but remained silent to avoid risking damage to Nixon's presidential legitimacy.

Similarly, Jimmy Carter and other leading Democrats, such as former Rep. Lee Hamilton, were aware of substantial evidence that Ronald Reagan's campaign secretly undercut Carter's efforts to win the release of 52 American hostages held in Iran in 1980, but the Democrats have chosen to look the other way.

Hamilton, who prides himself on his "bipartisanship," led a congressional investigation into the 1980 Iran-hostage "October Surprise" mystery in 1992, but refused to pursue late-developing evidence pointing to Republican guilt even after his chief counsel, Lawrence Barcella, asked for an extension because so much new information was pouring in by the end of 1992.

Barcella told me later that Hamilton simply ordered the inquiry brought to a close with its finding of Republican innocence. Much of the new evidence implicating the Republicans was then stored away, including a Russian intelligence report confirming secret meetings between Republicans and Iranians. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "New 'October Surprise' Series" or Robert Parry's Secrecy & Privilege]

For his part, ex-President Carter appeared more concerned about the danger of being accused of sour grapes than learning anything new about how the Republicans sank his presidency. In 1996, while meeting with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat, Carter reportedly raised his hands into a physical stop position when Arafat tried to confess to his role in the Republican maneuvering to block Carter's Iran-hostage negotiations.

"There is something I want to tell you," Arafat said, addressing Carter at a meeting in Arafat's bunker in Gaza City. "You should know that in 1980 the

Republicans approached me with an arms deal [for the PLO] if I could arrange to keep the hostages in Iran until after the [U.S. presidential] election.” Arafat was apparently prepared to provide additional details and evidence, but Carter raised his hands, indicating that he didn’t want to hear anymore.

The Pattern Continues

So, the Republicans have never been made to pay a political price for their scheming to undercut sitting Democratic presidents – and to grease the GOP’s route back to power. Whenever a Democrat is in the White House, the Republicans believe they are free to do whatever they want to block him from solving national problems, making him look weak and ineffectual. That was true of Johnson, Carter, Clinton and now Obama.

This GOP strategy is pursued even if it tarnishes the international image of the United States or if it undermines national security, even if it means more than 20,000 additional U.S. soldiers dying in Vietnam, or 52 American hostages facing longer captivity in Iran, or the likes of Timothy McVeigh feeling empowered to blow up a federal building.

The strategy continues even if it raises the current threat level against President Obama and Democratic lawmakers. The strategy continues because it works.

[To read more of Robert Parry’s writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [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.
