

# Obama Gets Tough, Finally

**Exclusive:** President Obama looks ready for a political fight, telling his supporters “Let’s go get ‘em. It’s game time.” But is the U.S. political/media system ready for a Democrat turning the tables on the Republicans in terms of toughness after decades of Republicans playing the bullies asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Over the past four-plus decades, one of the biggest differences between the two major American parties has been how they have approached the practice of politics. Democrats have mostly played nice and Republicans have played rough, which is why the pugnacious style of Barack Obama’s reelection campaign is so striking.

In big ways and small, the President has made clear he is not going to take what deputy campaign manager Stephanie Cutter bluntly called “their BS.” On Saturday at the official start of his reelection bid, Obama offered a rousing backstage pitch to his supporters before, seamlessly, heading out to give his stump speech.

“Let’s go get ‘em,” Obama said as he turned to head onstage. “It’s game time.”

Over the past couple of weeks, Obama has shown this readiness to take risks and “go for the throat,” in political parlance, whether that meant “slow jammin’ the news” about college loan rates with late-night host Jimmy Fallon or citing a 2007 comment by Republican candidate Mitt Romney that “it’s not worth moving heaven and earth and spending billions of dollars just trying to catch” Osama bin Laden.

On the anniversary of the U.S. Special Forces operation that killed the al-Qaeda leader, Obama even invited NBC News into the White House Situation Room to film interviews with the President and other senior officials who participated in the decision.

Obama’s aggressive style has left Republicans and the Right’s media sputtering with rage about the unfairness of it all, the lack of presidential decorum, “politicizing” the Situation Room. And, without doubt, there is something strange about watching a Democrat take it to the Republicans when the process has usually been the reverse in recent political history.

One can trace the current era of Republican hardball politics at least back to 1968 when Richard Nixon was so determined not to suffer another narrow defeat that his campaign secretly schemed with South Vietnamese leaders to sabotage

President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks. Nixon's "October Surprise" operation made the safety of a half million U.S. soldiers then in the war zone secondary to his winning an election.

Even though Johnson learned of Nixon's "treason" before the election, LBJ and his top advisers agreed to stay silent for "the good of the country," fearing that disclosure might tear the nation's political fabric apart. Nixon narrowly defeated Hubert Humphrey and the war continued for four more years at the cost of 20,000 additional American lives and countless Vietnamese. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[LBJ's 'X' File on Nixon's 'Treason.'](#)"]

In Campaign 1972, Nixon was back at it with a clandestine operation to undermine and spy on his Democratic rivals, all the better to win a second term. Whether it was "rat-fucking" the most formidable Democratic contenders or bugging the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate, Nixon and his team were ready to do what was necessary to win and they did.

Even the setback of the Watergate scandal did not alter the Republican commitment to win at all costs. After Nixon's resignation in 1974, the Republicans and the Right simply redoubled their efforts to build a political/media infrastructure that would prevent a Republican president from suffering "another Watergate." This well-funded apparatus also served as a platform for bombarding Democrats and liberals.

To regain the White House for Republicans in 1980, operatives for Ronald Reagan's campaign apparently conducted their own "October Surprise" operation by undercutting President Jimmy Carter's efforts to negotiate freedom for 52 American hostages then held in Iran, according to the evidence now available. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[New October Surprise Series.](#)"]

### **Investing in Media**

In the decade that followed Reagan's victory, the Right invested even more heavily in media outlets, think tanks and attack groups that, collectively, changed the American political landscape. Because of Reagan's sweeping tax cuts favoring the rich, wealthy executives, like the Koch Brothers and Richard Mellon Scaife, also had much more money to reinvest in the political/media process.

That advantage was further exaggerated by the Left's parallel failure to invest in its own media. Thus, the Right's outreach to average Americans won millions of middle-class voters to the Republican banner, even as the GOP enacted policies that devastated the middle class and concentrated the nation's wealth at the top.

Whenever power was at stake, the Republicans bolstered by these media

capabilities got tough while the Democrats mostly fell back on the defensive and took it in the chops. The 1988 race was particularly instructive as George H.W. Bush in what he called "campaign mode" pummeled Michael Dukakis as soft on crime, unpatriotic and vaguely foreign.

During this era, the Republicans also put vast sums toward negative campaign commercials, a development that convinced Democrats that they needed their own corporate funding and thus should adopt more corporate-friendly positions.

Still, the Right continued to build on its political/media advantages. So, even as American workers struggled in the face of globalization and suffered under GOP hostility toward unions, the Right convinced many middle-class whites, in particular, that their real enemy was "big gov-mint."

It became harder and harder for liberals to make the case for an economic role for government, as they were marginalized in the national debates. Many Democrats repackaged themselves as pro-business centrists, triangulating toward some "third way," an approach that had some superficial appeal even as it further alienated and isolated the party's liberal "base."

For Democrats to win in this hostile political/media climate, they needed a number of outside factors to break their way. In 1992, for instance, Bush-41 was staggered by a severe recession, burdened by a record federal debt and undercut by independent candidate Ross Perot, who siphoned off a share of conservative votes.

Still, Bush-41 ran a competitive reelection race largely by smearing Democrat Bill Clinton with innuendos suggesting Clinton may have tried to renounce his citizenship as a young man or may have betrayed his country during a student trip to Moscow. [For details, see Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#).]

### **The War on Clinton**

Despite Bush's loss, the Republicans and the Right recognized that there was still a promising future in taking advantage of their lead in media outlets and attack groups.

Rush Limbaugh and dozens of other right-wing radio voices demonstrated their new muscle during Clinton's first term, escalating the personal attacks on Bill and Hillary Clinton, while Rep. Newt Gingrich and his hyper-partisan Republican allies savaged the ethics of the Democrats in Congress.

By 1994, these assaults had broken down the walls of the Democratic Congress, leading to Republican control and leaving Clinton to insist that he was still "relevant." Though the President managed to win reelection in 1996, the GOP war

against him led to the impeachment battles of 1998-1999.

Though Clinton survived that humiliation, the Republicans and the Right applied similar tactics in Campaign 2000 against Al Gore, who was mocked as “Lyin’ Al.” To prove the point, apocryphal quotes were put into his mouth, such as his supposed claim to have “invented the Internet.” The mainstream media merrily went along.

By this stage in the Republican evolution toward being the party of nasty, many U.S. media figures had shifted to the GOP side, partly for survival against right-wing attacks on “liberal” journalists and partly because there were so many lucrative career opportunities in the Right’s burgeoning news media, which now included Fox News.

So, joining in bashing Gore was a win-win for many reporters, including those at the New York Times and the Washington Post. You could shed the career-threatening tag of “liberal” journalist and you could position yourself for monetary gain as a TV pundit.

Still, Gore benefited from the booming economy in 2000 and managed to eke out a narrow victory in the national popular vote. But Bush held a tiny lead in Florida, whose electoral votes would decide the outcome. Gore pressed for an examination of votes that had been rejected by counting machines. He asked the state courts to enforce Florida’s laws allowing for recounts in close elections.

At this key juncture, the two parties again showed their contrasting approaches to winning. Gore urged his supporters to stay out of the streets and trust the rule of law, while Bush’s campaign recruited political operatives in Washington and flew them to Florida, where they rioted in Miami to prevent the counting of votes.

Ultimately, five Republican partisans on the U.S. Supreme Court handed Bush the victory, while suggesting that their ruling was influenced by the need to keep the political peace. After all, Republicans had shown a readiness to resort to violence and hooliganism if they weren’t pacified by being given the White House. Democrats politely accepted Bush’s “legitimacy.” [For details, see [Neck Deep](#).]

### **Bush’s Hardball**

While in office, President George W. Bush continued to play hardball, especially after the 9/11 attacks. He exploited the nation’s fears during the 2002 elections by portraying the Democrats as soft on terror. Then, on May 1, 2003, after the initial U.S. victory in Iraq, Bush flew onto the aircraft carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln, in a flight suit and spoke under a giant banner reading

“Mission Accomplished.”

In 2004, the Republicans again showed their audacity when they and their right-wing allies smeared Vietnam War hero John Kerry as a coward for allegedly exaggerating his bravery and faking his wounds. The right-wing-funded Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacked Kerry as a phony, while at the Republican Convention in New York GOP operatives passed out purple-heart band-aids to make fun of Kerry’s war wounds.

Rather than confront these smears directly, Kerry maintained a polite silence during the Republican convention. (By contrast to the GOP Convention, Kerry had ordered the Democratic Convention to mute any criticism of Bush and assigned the keynote address to a young Illinois state senator, Barack Obama, who talked about national unity and didn’t mention Bush at all.)

As Kerry played nice, the U.S. media gave him no credit, even mocking him for wind-surfing as if that were a less manly activity than Bush’s mountain-biking. Mainstream journalists also gave the Republicans a pass on the purple-heart band-aids; allowed the Swift Boat smears to circulate for weeks before addressing them; and went easy on Bush’s own dubious National Guard record during the Vietnam War.

Late in the campaign when a CBS News report did raise questions about Bush ducking his Guard duty, the Right’s potent media made sure that it was the CBS personnel who paid the steepest price, with several producers and anchor Dan Rather losing their jobs.

Four years later, in Campaign 2008, the Republicans rolled out their usual artillery to blast away at Barack Obama, emphasizing his middle name “Hussein” and accusing him of “palling around with terrorists.” But Obama’s rhetorical skills and the financial collapse in September 2008 blunted the effectiveness of the personal smears.

### **Reprising the Anti-Clinton Strategy**

Obama won the election, but the Republicans didn’t change their long-running strategy. Essentially, they reprised the approach they had used against Bill Clinton in 1993-1994. They combined relentless media assaults on Obama’s legitimacy (spreading rumors that he was born in Kenya, he was a secret socialist, he was a Muslim, etc.) with a solid wall of Republican opposition to his key policies for addressing the national economic crisis.

Like previous Democrats, Obama initially responded by offering olive branches across the aisle, but again and again, they were slapped down. In mid-2009, Obama wasted valuable time trying to woo supposed Republican “moderates” like

Sen. Olympia Snowe to support health-care reform. Meanwhile, Republicans filibustered endlessly in the Senate and whipped their Tea Party “base” into angrier and angrier mobs.

In a twist on the historical examples of Nixon holding the Vietnam War hostage in 1968 and Reagan holding 52 American hostages in Iran hostage in 1980, the Republicans held the U.S. economy hostage in 2012. They realized that if they could sabotage Obama’s efforts to pull the country out of the Great Recession, his failure would be their political gain.

And, early indications are that the Republican strategy is working. The GOP won control of the House in 2010 and stomped on the “green shoots” of a recovery in 2011, in part, by creating a fiscal crisis over the debt limit and blocking Obama’s jobs plan.

Republican prospects also look reasonably bright for November 2012, with the House expected to stay in GOP hands and the Senate within reach. The Republican presumptive presidential nominee Mitt Romney looks to be in a tight race with Obama, even though the ex-Massachusetts governor is a lackluster campaigner and offers little more than more tax cuts for the rich and less regulation for banks and corporations.

Besides the economy’s slow growth, Romney’s prospects are also buoyed by pro-GOP “super PACs,” which will dominate the nation’s airwaves with tens of millions of dollars in anti-Democratic attack ads. On another front, Republican state legislatures are working to suppress the votes of minorities, the poor and the elderly by imposing new requirements for voter identification. Hardball is still the name of the game.

The U.S. news media is also slipping back into predictable patterns. The Right maintains strong advantages with talk radio, cable TV and print publications, while also gaining ground in the Internet. Meanwhile, the mainstream press keeps trying not to offend the Right.

Facing this difficult political/media environment, President Obama has decided to play the Democratic “role” differently. Instead of displays of passivity and appeals to bipartisanship, he is taking the fight to Romney and the Republicans. Obama is framing his campaign as a last-ditch battle to save the Great American Middle Class.

Already, Obama’s audacity has drawn howls of protest from the Republicans and the Right, which have accused him of partisanship and show-boating. They also have revived a 2008 theme that Obama is essentially a celebrity with no substance. Romney even dismissed Obama’s decision to authorize the May 2, 2011,

raid that killed Osama bin Laden as an easy call that “even Jimmy Carter” would have made.

Then, when Obama’s campaign hit back, citing earlier quotes from Romney minimizing the importance of getting bin Laden, the Right’s influential news media started a debate about Obama’s “politicizing” the anniversary of bin Laden’s death. Soon, both right-wing and mainstream pundits were slapping down Obama for undermining national “unity.”

Romney also has scored points by saying that Obama has “failed” on the economy because job growth is not more robust. Many Americans seem to be responding favorably to Romney’s calls for more tax cuts and more cuts in government regulations and social programs.

The right-wing themes appear to be resonating especially well with independent voters whose early support for Obama seems to be switching to Romney, explaining why the Republican candidate has inched into a virtual dead heat with Obama in the latest polls.

But Obama is placing his bet on activating the Democratic “base” by finally taking the fight to the Republicans, as was clear in the tone of his early campaign appearances. After three-plus years of unrequited bipartisan wooing of congressional Republicans, Obama is demonstrating a pugnacious style unusual for Democrats in recent decades.

Whether Obama’s more aggressive approach can work in the existing media climate whether pundits who have grown accustomed to Republican bullying for a generation will rise up in anger against a Democrat for being “too tough” is another question.

**[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](http://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.**

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