

Is Liberalism Dead?

By Mel Lavine

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Is liberalism dead? One might think so after last week's deal to avoid a government shutdown. President Obama left it to the Republicans to define the role of government in hard times. But, as Paul Krugman wrote in the New York Times, even if \$38 billion in spending cuts was the best of all possible deals, why did the president have to praise Congress for passing, "the largest annual spending cut in our history," as Obama declared.

It was as if, said Krugman, "shortsighted budget cuts in the face of unemployment – cuts that will slow growth and increase unemployment – are actually a good idea?"

The dogma dominating Washington is cruel. The poor, he pointed out, must accept big cuts in Medicaid and food stamps; the middle class must accept big cuts in Medicare (actually a dismantling of the whole program); and corporations and the rich must accept big cuts in the

taxes have to pay. Shared sacrifice!”

It's clear that no matter what the president does, the Republicans and the Tea Party have been out to wreck the Obama presidency since day one. And yet, as of this writing, the president persists in projecting an image of conciliation and compromise, as if he is above the fray, too proud to fight.

It may be, as he and his strategists seem to believe, that the road to re-election is winning the independent vote. Maybe, but the president would be wise not to take his liberal base for granted. Many of those folks are uneasy, confused about who really is the brilliant young man they helped make president? They thought they knew – he'd made it so poetically clear in '08 – but they are uncertain now.

The presidential historian Robert Dallek has described Obama's unenviable situation:

“How does he define himself against this wave of conservative rhetoric and ideology? It's hard for him to say I'm an old-fashioned New Deal, Great Society liberal. He can't say that and expect to win re-election. So you fudge. It's like what they said about Roosevelt being a chameleon on plaid, changing coloration and shifting forms. But it's much more difficult now because of the 24/7 news cycle.”

More difficult but hardly out of the question. Democrats are all the more hungry for leadership, and change that was promised. So a question. If the president is not going to stand up and fight for the things the country needs, could he find himself with company on the road to next year's convention?

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