

Charting a Course to Reelection

By Mel Lavine

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By now it is abundantly clear that President Obama is charting a course to re-election by appealing to independent and moderate voters. This has disturbed many liberals but the fact is the U.S. electorate is generally conservative, and almost always has been.

There have been notable exceptions: FDR's New Deal nearly 80 years ago in the Great Depression and LBJ's Great Society thirty years later. LBJ became president after Kennedy's assassination. He made the most of the tragedy and demonstrations for equal rights by bullying Congress into passing historic civil rights legislation and Medicare.

If anyone still doubts Obama's strategy they have only to note that he passed over Elizabeth Warren to head the new consumer agency this week. Warren, a Harvard law professor, was the animating spirit behind its creation. As the New York Times noted, the decision to nominate someone other than Warren "reflects political realities." Although she was the enthusiastic choice of liberals and consumer advocacy groups, she was too outspoken on behalf of consumers and "never won the full support of the president or his senior advisers." Not to mention Republicans and bankers.

As chairwoman of F.D.I.C, the federal agency that insures bank deposits and shuts failing banks, Sheila Bair has earned the reputation of a no-nonsense but impartial financial regulator. But she served at the displeasure of treasury secretary Timothy Geithner in particular and Wall Street in general, and as we've learned she's gone from the administration. In an article in the New York Times magazine in June, the columnist Joe Nocera told us that Bair found that the Obama administration wasn't doing much better on modifying loan mortgages than the Bush administration did.

Nocera writes, "Early on the president told his staff to talk to the F.D.I.C. about how to set up a loan modification plan," since it had a wealth of information.

Bair told Nocera, with reference to the Obama staff: "They did talk to us," but she "always had the sense they were talking to us because the president wanted them to."

Abroad, the president defied the War Powers Act in intervening in Libya in a manner reminiscent of George W. Bush. It requires the president to seek approval by Congress within 60 days of committing U.S. forces anywhere in the world. Obama contends the law does not apply because NATO is calling the shots in Libya.

These and other moves may upset liberals, but there is a strategy behind them, given the conservative, if not reactionary, state of American politics, as his defenders point out.. Obama's job is to win in 2012. If he can't, all the noble intentions in the world would be in vain.

In the meantime, in a piece in Sunday's San Francisco Chronicle, Robert Reich, the former labor secretary under Clinton, proposed a jobs strategy to fill the "void in Obama's phantom plan."

"Unless we get this economy moving now," Reich said in the article, "the long-term deficit problem will only grow worse."

And if the job situation doesn't improve all the reelection strategy in the world will be in vain.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.