Is There Thunder on the Left?

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

I've been wondering. It's no secret that President Obama has alienated many on the left. His capitulation on the infamous deal raising the federal debt ceiling seems like the last straw. Talk of chutzpah. After signing the legislation, Obama said we can now move on to getting Americans back to work, even as the Democrats abandoned their demand for extended unemployment benefits as part of the deal.

It isn't that Obama hasn't had opportunities to demonstrate bold leadership. As Paul Krugman pointed out in the New York Times, the president should have held his ground last December and insisted on an increase in the debt ceiling. He gave way on extending the Bush tax cuts, and blinked when the Republicans threatened to close down the government.

Since the Republican feint to shut down the government over the debt limit in recent months, one would think the Tea Party wing of the G.O.P. controlled all branches of government, not just one of the two houses of Congress.

It's still very early – but, I wonder – if the president continues in blind pursue of a strategy to win over independents and moderates – might he not risk the loss of many liberals – the folks who toiled for his election?

Right now it is most unlikely the president would be challenged for re-nomination. But there are precedents. The last time a sitting Democratic president faced a serious challenge was in 1980 when Ted Kennedy failed to unseat Jimmy Carter. It wasn't what cost Carter re-election – Ronald Reagan was responsible for that – but the split in Democratic ranks took a toll

More costly have been challenges in the general election in more recent years. In 1992 Ross Perot won 19 percent of the vote to deny re-election to the first President Bush, his nemesis, and send Bill Clinton, with only 43% to the White House. In 2000, Ralph Nader got only 2.74% of the popular vote but it was enough to make the outcome between Al Gore and George W. Bush so close that election was ultimately decided by a 5-4 vote of the Supreme Court.

President Obama has plenty of time to mend fences and get his act together. I just hope he

takes time to read letters like the one I came across in Tuesday's Times. It is from a woman in New York reflecting upon the despair among so many Democrats.

She writes, "I try to hang on to that magical evening in Chicago in November 2008 when there was much hope for the future but it is getting more and more difficult to find hope today. It's true that the Republicans are set on bringing this president down, but perhaps he could at least go down fighting. Please President Obama, make us believe again!"

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