More Truman than Harvard

By Mel Lavine

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As he prepares for his address to Congress and the nation on Thursday President Obama can take his cue from an Op-Ed piece by Robert Reich, labor secretary under Bill Clinton and a UC Berkeley professor. In Sunday's New York Times, Reich cites research from Moody's Analytics which reports that "the highest incomes now account for 37 percent of all consumer purchases." In other words, American society is becoming more unequal, less democratic, and more plutocratic.

Thus, Reich says, "Reviving the middle class requires that we reverse the generations' decades-long trend toward widening inequality." He believes that this is possible notwithstanding "the political power of the executive class."

“So many people,” he points out, “are now being hit by job losses, sagging income, and declining home values that Americans could be mobilized.”

“Mobilized” – that’s the word that leapt off the page for me: a moment to be seized and a teetering middle class to be rescued.

Let the Republicans be the Party of No. They have made no secret of their goal to make Obama a one-term president. Obama, however, still owns the bully pulpit, if only he would use it. Instead of citing Ronald Reagan as he has been prone to do, he would be better served by Harry Truman. Truman campaigned against a Republican “Do Nothing Congress” and to the country’s astonishment won.

Obama’s poll numbers may be dropping but Truman’s were virtually an asterisk. His spunk and persistence carried the day. The Democratic party was split three ways in 1948 – on the ultra left led by Henry Wallace and on the far right by segregationist Strom Thurmond. Truman occupied the liberal New Deal middle. It did no harm that the unexciting Republicans candidate, Thomas Dewey, the governor of New York, reminded people of the man on the wedding cake.

“Give ‘em hell, Harry!” people cheered when Truman addressed crowds from the rear of his campaign train. Republicans complained that he didn’t campaign on the issues, just gave their party hell. Truman is supposed to have replied, “I give people the facts and the Republicans just think it’s hell.” The story may be apocryphal but I like it anyway.

One hopes that on Thursday the president will assert himself boldly and capture the imagination with a program for jobs and economic recovery to help the middle class get back on its feet. If not now, when? If not the president, who?

In 1961 when John Kennedy was sworn in as president, it is said Robert Frost advised the new president to be more Irish than Harvard. In a somewhat different vein, may the president today be advised to be more Truman than Harvard.

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