

Obama courts the Republican right

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The 90-minute televised meeting between President Barack Obama and the House Republican caucus, broadcast over the cable networks Friday, was an extraordinary exposure of the right-wing consensus within American bourgeois politics.

It was a demonstration of the administration's decision, in the wake of the Republican victory in last month's Senate election in Massachusetts and other signs of mounting popular opposition to Obama's right-wing agenda, to shift even further to the right.

While the commentary afterwards, particularly from liberal and pro-administration pundits, portrayed the encounter as a political tour-de-force by Obama, a sort of "Daniel in the lion's den" performance, what was remarkable was the wide area of convergence, on both specific policy measures and overall perspective, between Obama and the Republicans.

Obama cajoled and pleaded with his audience of Republican congressmen, reminding them that they had provided him political support on escalating the war in Afghanistan, adding, in a typical piece of patriotic boilerplate, "I know that we're all united in our admiration of our troops."

He featured in his opening remarks the announcement of a tax credit for small business "job creation," as well as the elimination of capital gains taxes for investment in small business. "Join me," he appealed, "there's nothing in that proposal that runs contrary to the ideological predispositions of this caucus."

There was no hint in his approach that his audience represented a party and a previous administration that were decisively repudiated by the American people in successive elections, or that the Republican Party's policies and personnel are deeply unpopular, currently drawing the support of less than 25 percent in opinion polls. Watching the event, one would hardly have guessed that Obama's party not only controlled the

White House, but also held large majorities in both houses of Congress.

As he has since taking office little more than a year ago, Obama sought to politically rehabilitate the Republicans and find a means of winning their collaboration in his policies of war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights. As he and everyone else in the room well knew, the source of the erosion in public support for the administration was not its non-existent liberal reform agenda or popular hostility to "big government," but disillusionment and anger over Obama's repudiation of campaign promises that tapped into the popular demand for progressive change.

For their part, the Republicans made clear both at the meeting and in news interview programs on Sunday that they have no intention of budging from their policy of obstructing the administration's domestic initiatives. They calculate that they can exploit growing disillusionment with Obama and make major gains in congressional elections in November.

Obama's main reproach was that the House Republican caucus, while agreeing with significant portions of such initiatives as the economic stimulus bill and the health care restructuring plan, had provided zero votes in favor of the legislation. "If there's uniform opposition because the Republican caucus doesn't get 100 percent or 80 percent of what you want, then it's going to be hard to get a deal done," he complained.

Obama took eight questions from leading Republican House members, most of them calling for cuts in taxes and in federal spending. Not a single Republican suggested that any action be taken by the federal government to actually assist the unemployed—no benefits, no training programs, no jobs—nor did Obama point out their failure to do so.

Instead, the Democratic president promised to consider the Republican proposals seriously, and

pointed to his support for an expansion of nuclear power plants and so-called clean coal technology as an area of agreement with Republican proposals on energy policy.

The most revealing exchange came when Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee raised the issue of Obama's health care plan. Obama said that his policy, combining across-the-board cost-cutting with a modest expansion of health care coverage for the uninsured, was very similar to measures proposed jointly by former Republican Senate leaders Howard Baker and Robert Dole and former Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle last year.

"That's not a radical bunch," he said. "But if you were to listen to the debate and, frankly, how some of you went after this bill, you'd think that this thing was some Bolshevik plot." He went on to emphasize the conservative character of the health plan, saying, "if you look at the facts of this bill, most independent observers would say this is actually what many Republicans—is similar to what many Republicans proposed to Bill Clinton when he was doing his debate on health care."

Toward the end of the session, Obama declared: "We've got to be careful about what we say about each other sometimes, because it boxes us in, in ways that make it difficult for us to work together, because our constituents start believing us. They don't know sometimes this is just politics what you guys or folks on my side do sometimes."

The bluntness of this political cynicism is staggering. Obama in effect admits that the supposed conflict between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, which comprises the whole of official American politics, is largely a political show, a con game aimed at victimizing the vast majority of the American people.

He was warning his Republican counterparts that they were overdoing the anti-administration rhetoric in a way that was politically dangerous. They were going beyond the "just politics" mudslinging that is standard practice for the two big business parties, in a way that threatened to discredit the political system and make the usual congressional horse-trading impossible.

In response to the final question of the session, by ultra-right Texas Congressman Jeb Hensarling, about the rising federal budget deficit, Obama warned that the

Republicans should not posture as defenders of the elderly against cuts in Medicare (as they have in the health care debate) or against cuts in Social Security, because that would make impossible a bipartisan approach to entitlement "reform."

Obama's main concern is not so much the health care plan per se, but the larger project of which it is part, i.e., gutting the basic federally funded social programs—Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security—in order to pay for the enormous budget deficits produced by the financial crisis, tax cuts for the wealthy, the bank bailout and two imperialist wars.

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