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Waiting for Obama to grab the liberal torch

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SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON POST

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On Aug. 25 last year, Sen. Edward Kennedy strode onto the stage at the Democratic National Convention in Denver and announced to a roaring crowd of party followers the beginning of a new generation in American politics.

"I have come here tonight to stand with you, to change America, to restore its future, to rise to our best ideals and to elect Barack Obama president of the United States," he said. Comparing Obama to his slain brother, John F. Kennedy, the senator shouted: "This November, the torch will be passed again to a new generation of Americans. ... Our country will be committed to his cause. The work begins anew. The hope rises again. And the dream lives on."

Eight months into the Obama administration, many of us retain the hope, but we are wondering what happened to the audacity that is needed to move the country in a new direction. In recent weeks, many progressives have expressed concern that Obama's bold plan to reform health care may be at risk. A defeat on this key issue could undermine other elements of his agenda. We don't believe that the president has changed his goals, but we wonder whether he underestimated the power necessary to bring about real change.

Throughout the campaign, Obama cautioned that enacting his ambitious plans would take a fight. In a speech in Milwaukee, he said: "I know how hard it will be to bring about change. ...Exxon Mobil made \$11 billion this past quarter. They don't want to give up their profits easily."

He explained what it would take to overcome the power of entrenched interests to pass historic legislation. Change comes about, candidate Obama said, by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."

Obama observed: "That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom's cause."

But in the battle for health-care reform, the president and his allies are ignoring his own warning. The struggle for universal medical insurance -- one that Kennedy began pushing more than 40 years ago, and that looked winnable only a few months ago -- is in trouble.

For months the president insisted that any significant reform of the health-care

system include a "public option" -- an expanded version of Medicare that would compete with private insurance companies, pressuring them to reduce costs and providing Americans with greater choice. Republicans have made it clear that they won't support any plan that competes with the insurance industry or challenges its runaway costs and irresponsible practices.

Obama would like, but doesn't need, Republican votes to achieve his goal. But seven conservative Democratic senators -- led by Max Baucus, Mont., and including Blanche Lincoln, Ark., Kent Conrad, N.D., Jeff Bingaman, N.M., Ben Nelson, Neb., Mary Landrieu, La., and Arlen Specter, Pa. -- oppose the public option as well. So by shilling for the insurance industry, they've made it thus far impossible for Obama to take advantage of the Democrats' majority in the Senate.

In the past few weeks, Obama has hinted that he might settle for reform without a public option, thus assuaging the Baucus caucus and the insurance industry but angering many of his progressive supporters.

At the same time, Obama's readiness to compromise hasn't mollified members of the small but vocal right-wing Republican network who, egged on by the conservative echo chamber, have disrupted town hall meetings across the country, warning of "socialized medicine" and other impending catastrophes. This has made it harder for Obama to argue for his proposals and has hurt his standing in public opinion polls.

If the unholy alliance of insurance industry muscle, conservative Democrats' obfuscation and right-wing mob tactics is able to defeat Obama's health-care proposal, it will write the conservative playbook for blocking other key components of the president's agenda -- including action on climate change, immigration reform and updates to the nation's labor laws.

What went wrong?

The White House and its allies forgot that success requires more than proposing legislation, negotiating with Congress and polite lobbying. It demands movement-building of the kind that propelled Obama's long-shot candidacy to an almost landslide victory. And it must be rooted in the moral energy that can transform people's anger, frustrations and hopes into focused public action, creating a sense of urgency equal to the crises facing the country.

Remember that the Obama campaign inspired an unprecedented grass-roots electoral movement, including experienced activists and political neophytes. It deployed 3,000 organizers to recruit thousands of local volunteer leadership teams (1,100 in Ohio alone). They, in turn, mobilized 1.5 million volunteers and 13.5 million contributors. And throughout the campaign, Obama reminded supporters that the real work of making change would only begin on Election Day.

Once in office, the president moved quickly, announcing one ambitious legislative objective after another. But instead of launching a parallel strategy to mobilize supporters, most progressive organizations and Organizing for America -- the group created to shepherd Obama's former campaign volunteers -- failed to keep up. The president is not solely responsible for his current predicament; many progressives have not acknowledged their role.

Since January, most advocacy groups committed to Obama's reform objectives (labor unions, community organizations, environmentalists and netroots groups such as MoveOn) have pushed the pause button. Organizing for America, for example, encouraged Obama's supporters to work on local community service projects, such as helping homeless shelters and tutoring children. That's fine, but it's not the way to pass reform legislation.

One Obama campaign volunteer from Delaware County, Pa., put it this way soon after the election: "We're all fired up now, and twiddling our thumbs! ... Here, ALL the leader volunteers are getting bombarded by calls from volunteers essentially asking 'Nowwhatnowwhatnowwhat?'"

Meanwhile, as the president's agenda emerged, his former campaign volunteers and the advocacy groups turned to politics as usual: the insider tactics of e-mails, phone calls and meetings with members of Congress. Some groups -- hoping to go toe-to-toe with the well-funded business-backed opposition -- launched expensive TV and radio ad campaigns in key states to pressure conservative Democrats. Lobbying and advertising are necessary, but they have never been sufficient to defeat powerful corporate interests.

In short, the administration and its allies followed a strategy that blurred their goals, avoided polarization, confused marketing with movement-building and hoped for bipartisan compromise that was never in the cards. This approach replaced an "outsider" mobilizing strategy that not only got Obama into the White House but has also played a key role in every successful reform movement, including abolition, women's suffrage, workers' rights, civil rights and

environmental justice.

Grass-roots mobilization raises the stakes, identifies the obstacles to reform and puts the opposition on the defensive. The right-wing fringe understood this simple organizing lesson and seized the momentum. Its leaders used tactics that energized their base, challenged specific elected officials and told a national story, enacted in locality after locality.

It is time for real reformers to take back the momentum.

In the past two weeks, proponents of Obama's health-care reform finally woke up. They showed up in large numbers at town hall meetings sponsored by elected officials across the nation.

The president himself used his bully pulpit with more resolve, attending public events and addressing conference calls with religious groups, unions and others to urge them to mobilize on behalf of reform.

What's needed now is a campaign to shift the ground beneath Congress. First, it must concentrate on winning support for a specific bill that incorporates the key principles Obama has been advocating: universal insurance coverage, no denial of coverage for preexisting conditions, the public option and controls on exorbitant drug and insurance industry costs. The Limbaugh lunatics know what they are against. But Obama and his allies have to be clear about what they are for.

Challenging the right wing's framing of the issue, Organizing for America and the activist groups need to recruit volunteers to reach out to friends, neighbors and especially the "undecided" public with the same urgency, energy and creativity that they showed in the election.

Second, the campaign must focus attention on the insurance companies that are primarily responsible for the health-care mess. This means organizing public events across the country that can articulate Americans' frustrations with the current health insurance system and polarize public opinion against the insurance companies and their allies.

Americans who are paying the price of our failure to act -- people who lost family members because they were denied coverage for preexisting conditions, people who can't afford health insurance and fear that a medical emergency would wipe them out, families who went bankrupt and lost their homes because of out-of-pocket medical expenses, and businesses that suffer because of the high cost of insurance for employees -- need opportunities to publicly confront those responsible for their plight. It is time to put human faces on the crisis by contrasting their stories with the insurance companies' outrageous profits and top executives' exorbitant salaries and bonuses.

Third, the campaign must educate constituents of the Baucus caucus about their senators' political and financial dependence on the insurance industry and other opponents of reform. They need to ask these conservative Democrats: Which side are you on? If they won't support real reform, they should know that a primary challenge is likely.

This strategy could begin to restore the combination of hope and audacity that drives successful reform movements -- and that put Obama in the White House.

Kennedy understood that reforming health care is a moral obligation, and that the responsibility to heal the sick is at the heart of every faith tradition and is required for a civilized society. He was hoping to live long enough to see it happen. Obama and people of conscience cannot allow that victory -- and that tribute to the fallen senator -- to slip away.

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