



GREG SCHNEIDERS

Obama's actions up to this point speak even louder than his words

Barack Obama might become the most eloquent US president in at least a generation. He knows that power words help to educate, inspire, and motivate. But if actions truly speak louder than words, it is important also to evaluate Obama as a non-verbal communicator. What do his actions during the campaign and the transition tell us about his political message? Consider two examples.

During the campaign, he was pressured to repudiate his longtime Chicago pastor, Jeremiah Wright, because of inflammatory sermons Wright had delivered over the years. Obama's first instinct was to take the high road – separate himself from the offending remarks, but use the incident as a “teachable moment” to talk candidly about race relations in America. He famously declared, “I can no more disown [Wright] than I can my white grandmother.” A month later, after Wright made further offensive comments, Obama not only disowned him, but also threw him under the proverbial bus.

Fast forward to the transition. In one of his first political acts as president-elect, Obama told Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) that he didn't want apostate Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) politically punished for endorsing John McCain and campaigning harshly against Obama. He then announced the selection of Rep. Rahm Emanuel, one of the toughest Democratic partisans in the House, as his chief of staff.

What do these actions tell us? That Obama is, in words John F. Kennedy used to describe himself, “an idealist without illusions.” That he wants to appeal to “the better

angels of our nature,” but knows “the devil is in the details.” That he has the idealism of a community organizer and the political instincts of a Chicago politician.

Our most successful presidents have been “idealists without illusions.” George Washington actually went to Congress to seek their “advice and consent” on several Indian treaties, but, when the session turned into procedural bickering, left “with a discontented air... of sullen dignity” never to return (nor did any of his successors). Take the high road if you can, but do what you must.

Abraham Lincoln may have harbored “malice toward none,” but he fired a half-dozen generals before finding two (Grant and Sherman) tough enough to match his own fierce prosecution of the war. And Franklin Roosevelt supposedly summed up his “idealism without illusions” when he condemned President Somoza of Nicaragua as a “son of a bitch” for his repression of his countrymen before acknowledging that the US would continue to support Somoza because “he's our son of a bitch.”

Obama chooses his actions at least as carefully and skillfully as he chooses his words. And, so far, what he has communicated by those actions is that he wants his administration to embody the values and ideals that have made America great, but in pursuit of those lofty goals he will do whatever it takes to succeed in the rough and tumble world of politics. ■

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