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March 16, 2010

LBJ, Obama and Hiding Sausage Recipes

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Reformers might want to keep the sausage recipe quiet.

Barack Obama promised to do so much. He also pledged to change how things are done.

The two ambitions were always at odds.

Obama sought to be a liberal reformer like no president since Lyndon Johnson. But Obama quickly realized the rub. There is a tension between idealized strategy and idealized tactics.

It's a reformer's paradox: cooking the big change and opening up the kitchen. Effective governance can be the price of good governance. And this is one key reason, among a handful of key reasons, that Obama has proven no Johnson.

Now the long slog to health care reform might soon end. We'll see. Democrats want to close the deal and not look back. They want to avoid thoughts of why it was this hard and whether it was worth the cost to the rest of Obama's domestic agenda. And it was so hard, in part, because Obama sought to carry on Johnson's liberalism while denying Johnson's methods.

No recent president can get away with the extreme backroom deal-making of yesteryear. One reason, the giant media squid. Another, the public has little trust in government today. But Obama exacerbated his problem with his own Pollyannaish promises to change Washington's machinery. And this is to say nothing of the other obvious tension between Obama's promises to build bridges and get things done. The hyper-partisan era has only worsened on his watch.

So Obama was held to account. There was the pledge to publicly hold health care negotiations. But sausage cooking on C-SPAN was like a New York hot dog vendor showing you the ingredients. Impossible and indigestible. By January 2009, the two chambers were bartering backroom. Even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took a jab at the president, "There are a number of things he was for on the campaign trail."

The sunshine that Obama "was for" soon met the \$100 million deals. Casual observers learned of the "Louisiana Purchase" and the "Cornhusker Kickback" for two recalcitrant red state Democrats, Sens. Mary Landrieu and Ben Nelson.

By month's end, Obama said mea culpa. "The health care debate as it unfolded legitimately raised concerns," Obama told ABC News. "It's an ugly process and it looks like there are a bunch of backroom deals." Obama soon pledged the backroom deals would be gone. Again, we'll see. Those promises have made Obama's final push that much harder.

Ironically, the backroom deals spurred even more pledges of good governance. And that reform, for all its good, may weaken the capacity for deal-making or eventually re-centralize it. Last week, the parties began competing with promises to end earmarks – lawmakers' pet projects.

Reform is not a pretty business. Campaign Obama fed a Disney-esque narrative of how the big things get done. But audacious presidents have long relied on the dark art of politics to turn hope to change.

"The nature of public scrutiny is to avoid public scrutiny and that does make for a much more cautious legislative environment today," said presidential historian Kent Germany, an expert on Johnson.

Rewind back to one evening with Johnson. It's Tuesday, June 23, 1964. Only four days ago the Senate passed the Civil Rights Act. Lyndon Johnson had long courted Republican Senate leader Everett Dirksen. Dirksen corralled Republicans to compensate for the southern Democratic bloc. It landed Dirksen on the cover of Time magazine the week before.

6:00 p.m. Dirksen and Johnson are on the phone. Dirksen tells Johnson about his concern over moving ahead on the Kaskaskia River Navigation Project, a \$30-million public works development in his home state. "Now, you're not going to beat me on excise taxes and ruin my



David Paul Kuhn
Author Archive

budget this year," Johnson says, soon adding, "You're going to let me win by one vote in there, and I'll call you back in a little bit on this [Kaskaskia project]."

6:18 p.m. Johnson calls the key man at the Army Corps of Engineers. He gets the project to generally move forward.

6:22 p.m. Johnson back on the phone with Dirksen. Johnson passes along the news. "Don't you tell anybody now that you've got a backdoor to the White House, but you go up there and don't you kill my goddamn tax bill tomorrow," Johnson says. They carry on. And Dirksen adds, "You're a hard bargainer."

Johnson soon reiterates: "Hell, I just got you straightened out. Thirty million dollars worth."

"You let me [be] upset for a hundred days on our damn civil rights bill," Dirksen says.

"Thirty million dollars," Johnson repeats, moving on to how the Civil Rights vote made Dirksen "the hero of the hour."


Washington was famously born of a horse trade. Southern legislators' agreed to the federal government's assumption of state debt only as a condition of the capital's placement in the South. In short, Washington was created and empowered due to deal-making.

And Johnson was indeed the don of making deals. One story before he was president. There was a liberal Oregon senator who went against Johnson on a key vote, Richard Neuberger. The next day Johnson began working on Neuberger's pet project, the Hells Canyon Dam. It passed. Neuberger became a Johnson man.

It was ugly stuff. But it worked. Johnson won historic legislation at a pace Obama can only envy.

As Kent Germany put it, "The problem with watching the sausage making process is rarely do you focus on the good part."

David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at david@realclearpolitics.com and his writing followed via [RSS](#).

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