

It's Time for President Obama to Have a Serious "Fireside Chat" with the American People

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At times like these I have to wonder if the United States is under divine protection. The fact that we're going through some of the most serious challenges of our generation with a leader as capable, pragmatic, and just plain "adult" as Obama, indicates that someone up there is looking out for us. The notion that a George W. Bush or John McCain or Sarah Palin potentially could have been in charge during these crises has to be frightening no matter what your political ideology might be.

But I am concerned that the Obama administration is making a mistake that any parent may recognize: attempting to shield their adult children from harsh realities. Perhaps some in the administration feel that Americans just cannot cope, so just like a parent who conceals a serious economic problem, illness, or marital breakup this administration won't confront the electorate with unpleasant facts about maintaining American power. It won't spell out the consequences of long-term domestic and international decisions that have been made over decades by Democratic and Republican presidents and the Congress. Some of those decisions are now coming back to haunt us and are going to require significant changes for all Americans, particularly those who have to work for a living.

The BP oil disaster is an obvious case in point. Just prior to the oil spill, the Obama administration had decided to reverse course and open East Coast waters to offshore oil drilling. This was an entirely pragmatic decision. Despite all the talk and limited action about the Green Economy and conservation, the nation was going to be forced, for the immediate future, to expand domestic oil production to maintain economic growth. It was also in recognition that continued reliance on Middle East oil, particularly from Iran and Iraq but also from monarchies like Saudi Arabia, was highly problematic. These problems have been taking shape over decades. Charlie Rangel was right to point out that the Iraq war was not about spreading democracy, or retaliating for 9/11, or fictitious weapons of mass destruction. It was all about ensuring strategic oil reserves for the United States' continued growth and prosperity.

We continue to feed the public a line about the Axis of Evil - particularly about Iran - but fail to inform Americans about what every Iranian schoolchild knows, that the U.S. started this whole process by directly intervening to overthrow the first democratically elected president of Iran and installing a puppet regime under the Shah in the 1950's in order to maintain control and access to oil vital to American interests. Or the fact that we provided virtually all the training and arms that have killed over 1,000 American men and women to date in Afghanistan as part of our proxy war

with the Soviet Union. Instead, we provide the electorate with bromides about our commitment to democracy and freedom and fight against radical terrorists.

It's time to at least come clean, that maintaining American economic power and growth requires us to push and elbow along with other world powers for scarce resources and strategic advantage. That's not to deny we've done some great things along the way - from the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after World War II, to establishing a democracy that still stands as a beacon to other nations in the developed and developing world, and to electing the first black president after hundreds of years of entrenched racial discrimination and abuse. The president has had this kind of discussion when confronted with the extremism of his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, presenting one of the most striking explanations on the issue of race ever by a national leader.

Now he has to do the same thing concerning our energy policy after the BP disaster because the nation is probably going to have to press on with offshore drilling and other efforts to increase domestic production. That's going to come with an increased likelihood of harming people and the environment, to be matched with a much more serious effort at voluntary and federally mandated conservation. So why am I blogging about matters plainly beyond my pay grade and area of competence? I'm worried about the impact on the constituencies I'm trying to represent - the working poor of New York City - if the administration doesn't begin to get its message out more effectively on this and other issues. President Obama has to have a serious conversation with the American people about what's at stake, what short and long-term sacrifices they'll be called on to make and what's his long-term vision. If he doesn't, the lack of straight talk about oil, education, health care, and the long-term impacts of the recession will allow the lunatic fringe of America to take control of the discourse. That would be bad for the country, but a disaster for working poor people in cities like New York, particularly for people of color and immigrants.

First, the "Tea Party" set hasn't a clue about how to make the U.S. more competitive, given a major role in shaping domestic and foreign policy. The real possibility of a recession turning into a prolonged economic slowdown which would put many more Americans permanently out of work becomes a real possibility.

Second, Tea Party adherents are beginning to show signs that they want to scapegoat certain groups in society to explain America's trouble. Rand Paul, the winner of the Republican Senate nomination in Kentucky, argues that laws against discrimination by private business were wrong. Arizona passes laws attacking immigrants and Latinos. Here in New York State, Republican gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino likes to send racist e-mails to his friends and then defends the practice. So my plea to our friends in the Obama White House is this: start talking directly to ordinary Americans about the harsh realities we're facing domestically and globally. The truths you convey aren't going to be pleasant, the reactions won't be scripted, but Americans are adult enough to make up their minds about what's good for them and their families and, as prior crises have shown, are willing to sacrifice if they feel the national leadership is leveling with them.

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