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## Obama must govern from the center

**A**S the Obama Administration embarks on its first 100 days of leadership before the anxious eyes of the watching world, it is useful to compare President Obama with President Bush, and to consider what it means to govern from the center. What can be learned about their respective leadership styles, and what does that portend for the challenging years to come?

President Bush campaigned as a "uniter" in 2000 and indeed had the reputation in Texas as a governor who had appealed to the center of the political spectrum - working with legislators from both sides of the aisle. Yet somehow, once inside the Washington beltway, that leadership style changed. After a brief bipartisan honeymoon that included capital hill lawmakers' initial response to 9/11, as well as collaboration with Sen. Ted Kennedy on "No Child Left Behind" legislation, it seemed as if the Bush administration decided to go it alone if need be.

Bipartisan concerns about Iraq were regularly brushed aside by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, including the need for a troop surge, yet President Bush refused to bow to increasing calls for Rumsfeld to step aside until after the disastrous 2006 midterm elections. This is but one example of what appears to have become a stubborn and arrogant approach to leader-

### GUEST VIEW



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ship - governing from the isolated extreme rather than from the collaborative center. The result? Washington is more divided than ever, and the party represented by President Bush is now greatly diminished.

Why did the centrist-leaning Bush swing to the right and batten down the hatches? Was it a lethal combination of catastrophic events (e.g., 9/11) and autocratic advisors (e.g., Cheney), sharpened by a lack of communication skills and an increasingly hostile media? Historians will no-doubt shed light on this in the years to come, but what is clear is that there was a shift away from the center, and it was disastrous.

President Obama, by contrast, began his 2008 run for the presidency as one whose voting record was fairly extreme. He was one of the few who voted against the

Iraq war, and was known not as a centrist but as a skilled partisan ideologue. Yet in his acceptance speech in Chicago, knowing he had won the election and now had to govern, he appealed to Americans from every part of the political spectrum to come together in order to overcome the challenges of the day. It is as if President Obama senses that he must listen to and do business with those who disagree with him most if he is to succeed. On this point he is exactly right.

Centrism is the need for our time. Extreme voices from the left and the right poison the waters of public discourse and fan the flames of hatred toward any who dare to disagree. What is desperately needed is principled and courageous policymakers who are willing to move toward the center and collaborate for the sake of the public good.

Centrism alone means trying to reconcile divergent views by splitting the difference. What is needed today is better called "principled centrism," which begins with core principles as a framework within which to evaluate various perspectives. This might include for instance a high view of human rights, personal responsibility, freedom, equality, national security, and faith. The principled centrist wants to hear from all parties, even those who strongly disagree, and values civility and dialogue

over combative unilateralism.

Is President Obama a principled centrist, or will he eventually succumb to the ideologues and extremists vying for his ear? Only time will tell. Given all that America is facing - terrorism, worldwide economic meltdown, international alliances in tatters, rising unemployment, healthcare crisis, and more - now is the time not for partisan grandstanding but for principled centrism.

President Obama likes to appeal to the memory of our greatest President - President Lincoln - as a model and inspiration for our time. Lincoln persisted in his insistence on having a bipartisan cabinet despite strong resistance from his own advisors. After the war, he made it clear that the nation's duty was not to punish but to bind up the wounds of those on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. Lincoln's ability to govern from the center is indeed what is called for today.

The Obama administration and the Congress - Republicans, Democrats and Independents alike - must find a way toward the center in these perilous times. That is the leadership style that is desperately needed, and that is required to overcome our many daunting challenges.

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