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Purple Nation

September 21, 2012

The Obama-Clinton Center Rejoined

By Lanny J. Davis

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/lanny-davis/250553-obama-clinton-center-rejoined>

<http://www.newsmax.com/Lanny%20Davis/Obama-Clinton-Center-triangulation/2012/09/20/id/456926>

The irony is too overwhelming to resist. After Bill Clinton's speech on Sept. 5, the same pundits on the left who were critical of Bill Clinton's "centrism" and "triangulation" in the 1990s and through the Obama primary campaign were gushing about Clinton on national TV. And many of the same conservative pundits who were critical of Clinton and supported the partisan impeachment process were also singing his praises after the speech.

Yes, the left and the right finally appeared to agree on at least one thing: They liked Bill Clinton. On July 22, 2010, I wrote a "Purple Nation" column in this space, titled "The Clinton-Obama progressive center: Returning to the winning formula." On Feb. 1, 2012, I wrote a "Purple Nation" column titled, "Get ready for the Obama-Reagan-Clinton pivot." On Wednesday and Thursday nights in the Clinton and Obama convention speeches, that happened.

In his keynote speech, Clinton restated his successful ideological hybrid of social progressivism, cultural moderation and fiscal responsibility. He proved, once again, that a progressive Democrat can also be pro-business, pro-growth and pro-free market. And in his acceptance speech, Barack Obama affirmed these same center-left themes. Let's compare the two speeches, which will prove this to be so:

Here are few Clintonian excerpts from Obama's acceptance speech:

"... not every problem can be remedied with another program or dictate from Washington." (Remember Bill Clinton saying: "The era of big government is over"?)

“I’ve signed trade agreements that are helping our companies sell more goods to millions of new customers ... ”
(Remember labor and the left attacking Clinton for supporting NAFTA and free-trade agreements?)

“We insist on personal responsibility and we celebrate individual initiative. We’re not entitled to success. We have to earn it. We honor the strivers, the dreamers, the risk-takers, the entrepreneurs who have always been the driving force behind our free enterprise system, the greatest engine of growth and prosperity the world’s ever known.” (Come on, people: These are words that could have been taken, verbatim, from the charter of the Democratic Leadership Council, or “DLC,” the Clinton-led centrist group denounced by the same liberal activists who now can’t say enough about how much they love Bill Clinton.)

And finally, although almost — “I’m still eager to reach an agreement based on the principles of my bipartisan debt commission.”

I added “although almost” because, as readers of this column know, I have consistently written and blogged and encouraged President Obama to support the substantive recommendations, not just the “principles,” of the Simpson-Bowles Deficit Reduction Commission — meaning substantial spending cuts, revenues raised by closing tax loopholes and entitlement reform in Social Security and Medicare — with at least \$4 trillion of actual reductions in our national debt.

I hope he does this at the first presidential debate in the next several weeks. If he does, I predict he will endorse the commission’s specific recommendations and strand Romney and Ryan on the far right, ironically left in the position of defending increased debt (which their proposals for tax cuts with no new tax revenues must do).

But President Obama is on a journey back to the center that hasn’t been completed yet. For example, he couldn’t resist including the red meat that appeals to his liberal base but is hollow substantively. Example: “I don’t believe ... another round of tax breaks for millionaires will ... pay down our deficit.” Well, we all know that President Obama’s proposal to increase taxes above \$250,000 won’t even scratch the surface of the \$16 trillion debt — and President Obama knows it.

I also believe, as I have written before, that President Obama needs to protect and preserve his well-justified positive impression of being a nice guy and avoid depleting this most valuable asset by nasty negative personal attack ads.

In the final analysis, I continue to support President Obama because I support most of his policies and do not believe that Mitt Romney’s answers to almost every problem in the economy — tax cuts — is sensible. But in my opinion, Barack Obama still needs to close the deal with the moderate-independent voter in the center who loves Bill Clinton. Endorsing specifically Simpson-Bowles, in my judgment, is most likely to do so, and would significantly enhance his reelection chances.

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Davis, the principal in the Washington law firm of Lanny J. Davis & Associates, which also specializes in legal crisis management, served as President Clinton’s special counsel from 1996-98 and as a member of President George W. Bush’s Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (2006-07). He currently serves as Special Counsel to Dilworth Paxson. He is the author of the book “Scandal: How ‘Gotcha’ Politics Is Destroying America” and the forthcoming book, “Crisis Tales – Five Rules for Handling Scandal in Business, Politics and Life,” to be published by Simon & Schuster.

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