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Purple Nation

June 17, 2010

President Obama's Opportunity for a "Sister Souljah Moment"
 By Lanny J. Davis

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Two events last week involving elements of the Democratic Party who call themselves the "true progressives" show a danger they represent to the progressive change they say they want to effect. Together they offer President Barack Obama an opportunity for a "Sister Souljah moment" — perhaps to save the Democratic Party majority in both houses of Congress, as well as his progressive agenda in the last two years of his administration.

First was the success of Sen. Blanche Lincoln in June 8's Arkansas Democratic primary, despite a campaign organized by these self-described progressives, along with certain labor unions. Lincoln won the primary, despite the confident predictions of these liberal-left groups at the "netroots." Labor unions spent nearly \$10 million trying to defeat Lincoln, primarily, they said, because she opposed the "card-check" method of organizing a union. Yet labor supported her opponent, Lt. Gov. Bill Halter, who also opposed card-check. Go figure.

But the negative TV ads against Lincoln paid for by labor and the netroots were often long on innuendo and personal attacks and short on substance (since she actually supported Obama's stimulus bill and national healthcare measure). Now she faces a general election in the red state of Arkansas, which voted for John McCain over Obama by a margin of 20 percentage points in 2008. Isn't this an example of a self-destructive political strategy by people who call themselves "progressives"?

The second event was a conference on that June 8 primary day, held in Washington and organized by the Campaign for America's Future, a self-described "progressive" organization, which cheered denunciations of Obama for "retreat on Guantánamo [and] no movement on worker rights or comprehensive immigration reform," according to The Washington Post's Dana Milbank, and shouted down and nearly prevented liberal House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) from speaking. "Progressives have grown ever more dissatisfied [with Obama's policies] for good reason," Robert Borosage, the organizer of the conference, said.

What's going on here? Can anyone doubt that Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi are progressives, responsible for enacting the first national healthcare program — insuring 33 million previously uninsured and requiring all Americans to be covered by health insurance, regardless of age or pre-existing condition?

A close friend of mine and an early Obama/anti-war liberal e-mailed me this message after reading about attacks on Obama and Pelosi by these self-anointed "progressives":

"Did you see the way Pelosi was shouted at and heckled at that [liberal] political rally last week? All that blood that she spilled to get [national] health [care legislation] passed and they're pissed there was no public option. Where exactly are you on the political spectrum when they criticize Nancy Pelosi from the left? Are you even on the political spectrum?"

But this "eating your own children" syndrome by these so-called progressives also offers Obama an opportunity for a "Sister Souljah moment" — i.e., challenging the base of his own party that engages in these self-destructive tactics.

He can challenge those who prefer the perfect over the good, who seem to prefer to defeat Blue Dog House Democrats and Senate moderates from Republican or marginal districts and states, even if that means setting back the progressive cause substantially with the Republicans winning back the House and narrowing the margin in the Senate way below the current filibuster-proof 60 votes.

That would be the right thing to do for President Obama — and it would be the right politics. By doing so, he will have a chance of winning back those political independents and moderates who supported him for president in 2008 but, polls show, have now become less supportive of him and the Democratic Party.

President Obama can confirm that the Democratic Party still stands for the centrist, Clintonian combination of fiscal conservatism, cultural moderation and progressive social programs that favor the middle class over the extremely wealthy — the best chance the Democrats have to hold their majorities in both houses of Congress and to enact the progressive changes that the critics on the left say they truly want.

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This piece appears today, June 17, 2010, in Mr. Davis's regular weekly column in The Hill "Purple Nation" and "The Daily Caller" an online political website.

Mr. Davis, with his own Washington firm, Lanny J. Davis & Associates PLLC, served as special counsel to President Bill Clinton from 1996-98 and was a member of President George W. Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board in 2006-07. He is the author of Scandal: How "Gotcha" Politics Is Destroying America (Palgrave MacMillan 2006).

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