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August 18, 2011

Obama, be a Sharp-Elbowed Centrist

by Lanny J. Davis

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/la_nny-davis/obama-be-a-sharpelbowed-c_b_929879.html

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UNCLASSIFIED U.S. Department of State Case No. F-2016-07895 Doc No. C06131305 Date: 11/02/2016

http://www.newsmax.com/LannyDavi s/Obama-Centrist-Cl inton-Reagan/2011/08/18/id/40779 9

(This appeared in USA Today on August 17, 2011)

The time is now: Barack Obama needs to demonstrate a new style of leadership.

The president is a basketball player. He knows that sharp elbows can hurt people when they are swung. But they also open up scoring opportunities.

America faces two major problems that have shaken the country's confidence: debt and high unemployment. To lead on both issues, Obama needs to emulate two presidents from opposite parties who provided needed leadership by sometimes throwing an elbow or two at their own political bases.

Anti-tax conservatives who now revere Ronald Reagan forget that back in 1982, Reagan infuriated them by supporting the <u>largest peacetime tax increase</u> in U.S. history and cutting a deal with Democratic Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill to protect the solvency of Social Security, in part by raising taxes.

Bill Clinton, known for the hatred he inspired by the far right of the Republican Party, also infuriated many in the left base of the Democratic Party by working with Republicans to balance the budget, enact welfare reform and approve NAFTA.

This could be President Obama's moment to show that kind of fighting centrist leadership. Not tacking to the far left to shore up his base, but becoming a president of the people, politics be damned.

By being proactive, for example, on the national debt and jobs creation issues, he can manage a triangulation message that isolates the extremes on the left and the right: those Democrats who say "no way" on entitlement reform, and those Republicans who say "not a chance" on tax increases. In doing so, he'd place himself — as Reagan and Clinton did so well — in the great center, where the majority of the American people are.

On the debt and deficit issue, he should endorse, at long last, all the specific recommendations of the Simpson-Bowles Commission on fiscal responsibility. Call it the Obama Mulligan, since he ignored the commission last time around. As <u>the 65-page report</u> states at the outset, the recommendations were meant to be taken all together or not at all, and they included substantial cuts, new revenue and tax changes to spur economic growth. It also tackled Social Security and Medicare. If enacted, the result would be a \$4 trillion debt reduction over 10 years, not just the \$1.2 trillion that the upcoming "supercommittee" of Congress is supposed to achieve. On job creation, if John Kennedy can get America from the ground to the moon in less than eight years, then Obama can exercise all the powers of the presidency to get shovels in the ground and millions of Americans in new jobs within eight months. How? He can use executive orders to suspend regulations, award contracts and ultimately put men and women to work.

Franklin Roosevelt stretched the power of the executive to help the country escape the Great Depression, and most recently George W. Bush did so in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Not ideal, but over the course of our nation's history, presidents have flexed executive muscle in times of crisis in order to get the job done. The times call for no less by Obama.

There is much to be done — building and fixing bridges, highways, railway lines, airports, office building energy retrofits, environmental cleanup, you name it. But these projects don't have to be debt-drivers. The money invested could be repaid from user-based fees, tolls and cash savings from reduced energy costs.

Such bold and decisive moves by this president would be criticized as brash by some, reckless by others. But the American people would see the strength in a man standing up to the extremes of both parties to simply do what is best for this country. At a time when many Americans doubt the ability of the federal government to even function, these optics matter greatly. A decisive president — a leader leading — cannot be underestimated.

Thus, Obama can no longer afford, as has often been his custom, to wait for Congress to act and then step in as a final mediator. He needs to take the risk to put a stake in the ground and lead, if necessary to get out in front of congressional and party leadership, even of public opinion. He needs to simply do what he thinks is right.

By doing so, President Obama can show that he represents all the American people and is willing to fight for the national interest, that he is willing to strive to be Teddy Roosevelt's "man in the arena who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worse, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly."

If anyone on the left or the right objects to Obama throwing a few elbows in the process, he can offer them simple advice, as he would in a basketball game: Get out of the way.

That would be good politics for 2012. It would also be good for the nation.

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Lanny J. Davis is a Washington attorney specializing in legal crisis management. He served as President Clinton's special counsel in 1996-98 and as a member of President Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board in 2005-06. His weekly

column, called "Purple Nation," has appeared in The Hill newspaper and other newspapers and major websites on the left and right over the last several years.

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