

Blue Dogs Bite

Can Bush Democrats and progressives get along?

By Jordan Michael Smith

DESPITE A BRUISING primary, Democrats swiftly resolved their differences. On the eve of the Denver convention, *Time* magazine called the party “more united than perhaps at any other point in the last 30 years.” After Barack Obama’s election and the party’s decisive wins in House and Senate, which followed 2006 midterm victories, the Democrats appear to have overcome the internecine battles that so bedeviled them in the past.

But multiple divisions lurk below the surface. Far from being a model of partisan single-mindedness, the party of Obama suffers deep differences. It is only a matter of time before a contentious issue or antagonistic caucus member punctures the superficial harmony. The economic stimulus package, unions’ mandatory card checks, Iraq withdrawal—these matters could reveal the fissures that divide Democrat from Democrat.

No split is more striking than the one between Blue Dogs and liberals. The former are the offspring of the “Yellow Dog Democrats,” conservative Southern Democrats in the first half of the 20th century who were so devoted to the party, it was said, they would sooner vote for a yellow dog than for a Republican.

As the party gradually embraced civil rights following World War II, however, many of these conservative Democrats became Republicans. By the 1994 midterm elections, said former Texas Democratic Rep. Pete Geren, the remaining yellow dogs had been “choked blue” by the left wing of the party, gradually abandoning their moderation. Conservative

Democrats seized on Geren’s quip and formed the Congressional Blue Dog Caucus in 1995.

The group forms the moderate to conservative wing of the party, often voting with Republicans. (Liberals deride them as “Bush Dogs” for this reason.) Members often come from swing districts where being classified as a liberal is electoral suicide. Blue Dogs frequently defy Democratic orthodoxy on abortion, stem-cell research, national security and gay marriage. The only policy the coalition is unanimously committed to is fiscal responsibility.

The year of the Blue Dogs’ formation, not coincidentally, was the year after the midterm election in which a stunning 54 seats swung from Democratic to Republican hands, giving the GOP a House majority for the first time in 40 years. Depending on whom you ask, the Blue Dog coalition was founded either opportunistically in opposition to an unpopular Democratic president or nobly in opposition to the party’s liberal wing, which had forced a centrist Clinton into unwise battles on gays in the military and universal health-care. In either case, the 1994 loss was the catalyst for centrist House Democrats to band together. As University of California political scientist Martin Wattenberg put it, “One of the great constraints on any president is the short political memory of members of the House of Representatives. Facing election every two years, their time perspective is necessarily different from the president’s. To them, each election result must be compared to that of just two years before.”

The Blue Dogs grew in influence, emerging after the Democratic victories in 2006 as arguably the most important faction in the House. And with many coalition members having campaigned explicitly against the party in November, they are not indebted to Barack Obama in traditional coattail-riding ways. Former co-chair Mike Ross (Ark.), sounded downright combative when he told *USA Today* that he hopes that Obama “recognizes the clout and the voting power of the Blue Dog coalition.”

Ross didn’t exaggerate his caucus’ influence. In the beginning of October, Obama phoned him personally, as well as his fellow Blue Dogs John Tanner (Tenn.) and Allen Boyd (Fla.). “He wanted to work with us,” Ross said. “He also recognized that we had the numbers to block or clear legislation.” Jason Furman, Obama’s economic policy adviser, held his own talks with the Blue Dogs and pledged that Obama would seek to establish “a government unified around the concept of fiscal discipline and centered around the pay-go rule. Insisting on paying for things will lead to better economic policy.” (The pay-as-you-go rule—which requires new mandatory spending and tax cuts to be fully offset in an effort not to increase the deficit—was adopted by the House and Senate in early 2007, though it can easily be waived, as it has been several times over the past two years.)

But the demands of the economic crisis will probably intrude on the Obama-Blue Dog love-in. Paul Krugman, who is in communication with the

Obama administration regarding the economy, told the National Press Club in December that a stimulus package of \$850 billion over two years—a price tag the Obama administration has reportedly been considering—would be inadequate. Krugman instead argued for more than \$1 trillion in less than two years.

It is difficult to imagine the Blue Dogs agreeing to such a sum without extracting concessions. While progressive lawmakers toss around staggering figures, these conservative Democrats continue to make the case for fiscal austerity. Co-chair for policy Baron Hill (Ind.) said that the Blue Dogs recognize that there will be some deficit spending, but “along with that we have to chart a course that makes us fiscally responsible somewhere down the line.”

His caucus holds many cards. “The Blue Dogs without a doubt are the strongest faction in Congress,” says Steven Nider, an adjunct fellow at the American Security Project and a former staffer at the Democratic Leadership Council. “And in this election they were strengthened. Simply put, more of them were elected.” The coalition grew by 10 members to 59 in November, just under 15 percent of House membership.

Indeed, the Democratic caucus expanded by 21 in November, meaning nearly half of the new party membership is Blue Dog. Many “blue pups,” as new coalition members are called, campaigned in direct opposition to Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. Maryland’s Frank Cratovil, for instance, running in a longtime Republican seat, emphasized his independence and Republican friends. “What’s the worst that can happen if you vote against the majority of your party? What’s the worst that can happen?” he asked constituents.

One of Cratovil’s television ads even avoided mentioning that he was a Democrat, touting him twice as “independent,” obviously hoping voters

would think of him as an independent. Cratovil promised to “cut wasteful spending, free us from Mideastern oil, crack down on illegal immigration, and always protect the bay.” Not exactly a liberal wishlist. Another ad called “Stand Up” echoed John McCain’s tagline from his convention speech. As the *New Republic’s* Eve Fairbanks wrote in October, “[T]he Democrats are poised to expand their House majority—but by electing conservative Democrats who, in some cases, have ideologically more in common with John McCain than with Nancy Pelosi. These conservative Democrats—many of whose districts will vote McCain—won’t feel that they owe Obama, will be well-organized as a faction under the ‘Blue Dog’ banner, and, if their actions in the 110th are any indicator, won’t shirk from bucking their party’s leadership.”

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Moreover, it’s difficult to see how coalitions can be built to bypass the Blue Dogs. House Republican leadership is more conservative in the 111th Congress, according to analysis by Duke University political scientist Michael C. Brady. Moderates like House GOP Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.) and Conference Chairman Adam Putnam (Fla.) were replaced by Eric Cantor (Va.) and Mike Pence (Ind.), the latter among the most conservative politicians in the country. This leadership will pressure Republican members to avoid any compromises that would further strengthen the Obama-Pelosi agenda.

The Blue Dogs are not in a position to craft their own agenda based on fiscal discipline, but they may not have to. “The Blue Dogs can stop any bill they want to,” says Jeff Greene, a former House subcommittee staff director. “They have the numbers to be as

obstructionist as they want, and it makes sense for them to come out full strength and then be more conciliatory later if they want to.”

After a Treasury report released in December showed the government’s unfunded liabilities at roughly \$56 trillion, up \$3 trillion from 2007, Blue Dog Jim Cooper (Tenn.), senior Democrat on the all-important House Budget Committee, said he wanted a commission to address the nation’s long-term insolvency. Blue Dog-friendly Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) endorsed the idea, but Pelosi remained conspicuously silent. Cooper is sure that will change: “Once she sees this report and sees that, at a minimum, the deficit last year was \$1 trillion, and if you take a broader measure it’s closer to \$3 trillion, I think that would make it more likely that she would endorse a commission or summit approach.”

Democrats have faith that Obama can overcome the progressive-Blue Dog divide. “Obama has a clearer mandate than Clinton—Clinton never got more than 50 percent of the vote,” says Scott Lilly, a longtime senior House aide, now with the Center for American Progress. “There is far better communication between the centrists and the liberals than there was, and Obama will be able to use that.” agrees Nider, who says Obama’s successful campaign will pressure Democrats to unite around the president. But if Obama dips in popularity, or the Blue Dogs decide they won’t budge on some legislation, then the Democrats might find majority status every bit as frustrating as being out of power. ■

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A Scholar & a Gentleman

Remembering Samuel Huntington

By Michael C. Desch

SAMUEL HUNTINGTON died on Christmas Eve at age 81 after a long and slow decline. We have lost not only an astute public intellectual but a fine man. Fortunately, he left a rich legacy: pathbreaking scholarship in all four subfields of political science and a community of scholars whose careers he generously nurtured.

A graduate of Yale at 18 who began a 58-year Harvard teaching career at just 23, he went on to write, co-write, or edit 17 books—the last of which was translated into 39 languages. Considering the peaks he reached, it is hard to believe that Sam ever suffered professional setbacks. But the controversy surrounding his first book, *The Soldier and the State*, now in its 15th printing, initially cost him tenure at Harvard.

When that work came out in 1957, the first notices were negative, largely because of the final few pages in which Huntington unflatteringly contrasted the ramshackle town of Highland Falls, New York with its scrubbed and orderly neighbor, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His admiration for the latter did not escape liberal reviewers, who thought they detected the odor of fascism. The young professor was convicted of one of the few capital offenses in Cambridge—being conservative—and temporarily exiled to Columbia. This pattern would characterize the rest of his career: initial rejection followed by grudging acceptance as the power of his ideas prevailed.

Sam was an unusual conservative by today's absolute standards, which tend toward doctrinaire defense of democ-

cracy and free markets. His conservatism was instead a presumption in favor of established political and economic orders. On the occasion of Sam's retirement as director of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, his friend Eric Nordlinger suggested that Sam's favorite philosopher was Edmund Burke. With characteristic modesty, Sam pooh-poohed any association with such a highfalutin thinker. When I subsequently read Huntington's 1957 essay "Conservatism as an Ideology," however, I realized that Nordlinger had identified the reason behind Sam's abiding concern for political order as an essential prerequisite to liberty.

Burkean as he was in his skepticism of radical change, Sam's greatest theoretical influence came from the Left: his Harvard colleague Louis Hartz. In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Hartz argued that the U.S. was a thoroughly liberal society, deeply committed to Lockean principles of democracy and individual freedom. But unlike Europe, where liberalism confronted real ideological challenges from both Left and Right and had to adapt in an ideologically diverse environment, in the New World liberalism had adopted a messianic strain that was at once utopian in its desire to remake the planet and paranoid in the face of nonliberal ideologies and institutions.

Sam's argument in "Conservatism as an Ideology" was that a conservative living in a liberal society would be compelled to defend its values and institutions. Following Hartz's argument

about the contradictions of American liberalism, part of this defense involves a candid recognition that America's liberal tradition is weak precisely because it lacks a real conservative alternative. Hence, to preserve the best of American liberalism, with which he always identified, Sam became a particular type of conservative—one committed to conserving but also to refining liberalism, checking its excesses by offering a conservative alternative.

It is true that during the 1970s Sam found common cause with some of the first-generation neoconservatives, particularly his old friend Daniel Patrick Moynihan. This association was consistent with his "positional conservatism," as his former student and coauthor Dick Betts characterizes it, in that these conservative Democrats were standing up for the New Deal against the challenge posed by the New Left and other radicals. Sam was nonetheless a lifelong Democrat (with only a few lapses), having met Nancy, his wife of 51 years, when the two were working for Adlai Stevenson in 1952.

He had less sympathy for today's neoconservatives, not just because they pushed for what he regarded as an ill-advised war with Iraq. As the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer, twice a fellow at Harvard, explains, "Sam was—above all else—an American nationalist who was deeply worried in his later years by both transnational elites and hyphenated Americans with a deep attachment to a foreign country. The neoconservatives, of course, have a pas-