

Obama's Slow Learning Curve

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 20, 2013



Controversy continues to rage about President Obama's announcement at a Nov. 14 press conference that his administration would not compel insurance companies to cancel policies they had changed since passage of the Affordable Care Act and which did not conform to its numerous, costly, and multi-layered requirements.

Much of the controversy concerns the propriety of the president's declining to enforce a duly enacted law (bearing his signature) whose constitutionality he does not doubt, and whether insurance companies will be able to abruptly change course after three years of preparing to comply with their elaborate and interwoven legal obligations under Obamacare.

But perhaps the president's most astonishing statement involved an insouciant confession of ignorance. Returning to a common but under-appreciated motif of his presidency, Obama remarked: "What we're also discovering is that insurance is complicated to buy."

What deficiency of Obama's education and of the education of those who surround him accounts for administration officials not knowing what is perfectly well-known to most ordinary Americans?

This discovery that purchasing health insurance is complex is just the most recent of the rather stunning lessons that Obama professes to have learned on the job about how the world really works.

In January 2010, in a Time magazine interview in which he was asked about the setbacks to his ambitious attempt to reach a final peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, he remarked, “I think that we overestimated our ability to persuade them to do so when their politics ran contrary to that.”

The problem, the president acknowledged, was that he and his team had failed to understand the domestic challenges faced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas: “I think it is absolutely true that what we did this year didn't produce the kind of breakthrough that we wanted, and if we had anticipated some of these political problems on both sides earlier, we might not have raised expectations as high.”

In June 2011, Obama again acknowledged that he had based a defining policy -- the \$830 billion stimulus package that he sold to the nation in the first month of his presidency as designed to take advantage of “shovel-ready” jobs -- on false expectations. With unemployment at 9.1 percent and in the 27th consecutive month in which it had not fallen below 8.9 percent, he told his Jobs and Competitiveness Council meeting in Durham, N.C., that “shovel-ready was not as shovel-ready as we expected.”

On Nov. 4 of this year -- five weeks after the calamitous online launch of the Affordable Care Act's insurance marketplaces, almost five years into his presidency and less than two weeks before he would reveal that the loss of insurance coverage by millions of Americans taught him that buying coverage was complicated -- Obama said to the Affordable Care Act Coalition Partners and Supporters in Washington, D.C., “Now, let's face it, a lot of us didn't realize that passing the law was the easy part.”

Contrary to the president's breezy attitude suggesting that these drastic miscalculations were not knowable in advance, we know that all were foreseeable because all were perspicaciously foreseen by critics from the beginning. (The only possible exception is the staggeringly inept rollout of the HealthCare.gov website, the magnitude of which caught even the president's toughest critics off guard.)

It's a cliché that democracy is messy and difficult; it's a truism that politics demands the cutting of deals and the hammering out of trade-offs; it's common knowledge that implementing public policy and conducting diplomacy involve unforeseen obstacles and intricate maneuvering that are hard to grasp from the outside.

Yet all this keeps catching Obama and his aides by surprise. Team Obama's surprise, however, is really not all that surprising.

The president and the officials around him are the product of the same progressive version of higher education that simultaneously excises politics from the study of government and public policy while politicizing education. This higher education denigrates experience; exalts rational administration; reveres abstract moral reasoning; confidently counts on the mainstream press to play for the progressive political team; accords to words fabulous abilities to remake reality; and believes itself to speak for the people while haughtily despising their way of life.

The education President Obama received at Columbia University and Harvard Law School -- and delivered to others as a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School -- encourages the fantasy of a political world subject to almost limitless manipulation by clever and well-orchestrated images. This explains why the harsh exigencies and intractable forces of politics keep stunning the president, each new time as if it were the very first.

How might higher education be reformed to produce political leaders more familiar with how the world really works, more alive to the realities of social and political life and better able to discuss them honestly with the American people?

Our colleges and universities should offer, and requires students to take, more courses in political, diplomatic, and military history. They should shift the emphasis in moral education from abstract reasoning and arcane hypothetical dilemmas to the study of the virtues necessary to exercise rights and fulfill responsibilities. They should cease to teach that left-liberalism is the only political orientation a decent person could embrace. And they should give pride of place in the curriculum to study of the American constitutional tradition, which teaches, among other things, that government's competence and purview are limited and that nothing in politics can succeed without adjustment, balancing, and calibration.

Old-fashioned liberal education cannot prevent the forming of delusions about a world beyond politics. But it is vastly to be preferred to the new-fangled version that encourages those delusions.

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.