

Negotiating the presidency

From the Editors in the [December 28, 2010](#) issue

By conviction and temperament, President Obama seeks the middle ground. Though many of his opponents see him as a wild radical, intent on expanding the reach of government at all costs, his actions reveal something quite different: a pragmatist interested in striking a bargain.

For example, he began his health-care reform effort by making deals with the insurance and pharmaceutical companies, and he signaled early in the debate that he was willing to sign a bill without a public option—a provision liberals regarded as key to the entire plan. Early in 2010 he started congressional debate on an energy bill by offering conservatives an unexpected gift—expanded offshore drilling for oil and gas. This past month he initiated negotiations on tax cuts, and he made an unexpected deficit-chopping move that should have won him points with Republicans: he proposed a two-year salary freeze for federal employees.

The irony is that this approach has turned out to be a liability. By publicly signaling a willingness to compromise, he emboldens his opponents. His eagerness to negotiate is the sign of a bad negotiator. His distaste for political posturing turns out to be a weak political posture.

Jeswald Salacuse, who teaches international negotiations at Tufts University, says Obama's approach is to assume that his opponents will see his gesture toward compromise and say, "Yeah, you did the right thing, so we're going to do the right thing." Such an assumption is naive, Salacuse argues. In political negotiations, you never give up something without getting something in return.

It is ironic that Obama should be judged naive, since he has named Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian of Christian realism, as one of his favorite thinkers. It was Niebuhr who rebuked the moral leaders of the Social Gospel for putting too much faith in intelligence and good will and for failing to understand the persistence of self-interest and coercion in politics. "Social intelligence and moral goodwill may . . . mitigate the brutalities of social conflict, but they cannot abolish the conflict itself," Niebuhr wrote. "That could be accomplished only if human groups, whether racial,

national or economic, could achieve a degree of reason and sympathy which would permit them to understand the interests of others as vividly as they understand their own, and a moral goodwill which would prompt them to affirm the rights of others as vigorously as they affirm their own."

Obama is understandably drawn to the idea that policy can be made by getting smart people of good will in the same room and hammering out the best possible agreement. But as Niebuhr should have taught him, politics is not primarily about the exercise of intelligence and good will. It is about the exercise of power and self-interest. The strange art of politics involves using the levers of power and mutual self-interest to get things done. The success of Obama's presidency may hinge on his learning how to take Niebuhrian realism from theory into practice.