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Obama: Don't Bash the Chamber of Commerce

It's bad history and bad politics.

Terry Michael | October 15, 2010

As a former press spokesman for the Democratic National Committee now teaching college journalists about politics, I find shameless, maybe even shameful, my party's tarring of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce - a Washington, D.C. neighbor of President Barack Obama, a block from The White House across Lafayette Park. That's saying a lot in a cabble-babble and net-nutty environment, where shame no longer seems to inhibit even the worst behavior. But trying to paint the business lobby as a Chamber of Horrors that's using dirty money from foreigners, is worse than shameful for this former operative. It's stupid politics.

Ever since the Republican-inspired Progressive Era morphed into Wilsonian Democrat social-engineering progressivism 100 years ago, the Democratic Party has tried to portray itself as a little bit holier than the party of Mammon. We have liked to think of ourselves as the tribune of the "little guy," standing against those fat cat Republicans who live on George Babbitt's Main Street or reside on that greedy, seedy Wall Street.

So it's not surprising Obama's political advisors would attempt to boost the spirits of a sagging Democratic base with a little pre-Halloween, pre-election demonizing of the lobby that President William Howard Taft inspired. A human symbol for detractors of big business, the elephant-sized Taft used his annual message to Congress in December 1911 to encourage creation of what became the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, so business could speak to him in a single voice.

With a little help from Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* in the 1920s, the negative image of the Chamber is almost in the DNA of liberal Democrats. In the fictional Zenith, Ohio Chamber of Commerce bulletin, Lewis' George Babbitt writes:

...and as it's the best way of fighting the unions, every business man ought to belong to....the Chamber of Commerce. So any selfish hog who doesn't join the Chamber of Commerce ought to be forced to."

In the Republican genome, Big Labor is encoded as their *bête noire*, and they periodically try to pump up the GOP base with images of cigar-chomping labor goons at the AFL-CIO, the umbrella group of international unions headquartered just a block down the street from the Chamber and White House in the Capital.

When you see vilification of Big Labor or Big Business, with the Chamber and the AFL-CIO as icons, you can pretty much guess a political party is admitting, like a stand-up comedian, "I got nuthin'." And with that historical context in mind, let me

explain why Democrats have nothing with this attack on Main Street.

The simplest way to understand why demonizing the Chamber is a fruitless tactic might be to think of the 2006 mid-term election. The Republican base was demoralized with an increasingly unpopular president, who had embraced a budget-busting, big government piece of health legislation - more pharmaceuticals for old people. Democrats hated Bush and abhorred his war. And independents leaned left, also hating on Bush and the war.

Does any of that sound familiar in 2010? Now Democrats are demoralized with an increasingly unpopular president, who has burdened our psyches with more endless war to replace the one we elected Obama to end. Republicans hate Obama and his budget-busting piece of health legislation - corporate welfare for insurance and drug companies. And independents now lean right, also hating on Obama and his health care "reform."

The old lawyer joke applies. If you don't have the law, pound away at the facts. If you don't have the facts, pound away at the law. If you have neither, pound on the table.

But no amount of pounding on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is going to save Democrats from the self-inflicted wounds of endless war and over-reaching social legislation. As a libertarian Democrat (about six of us), I have a formula that might help Barack Obama and other Democratic leaders re-connect with our base and reach out to independents of the 21st Century, to replace the spent ideology of progressivism. The short version goes something like this:

The government should assure liberty by staying as far away as possible from our bank accounts, our bedrooms, and our bodies. Spread pluralistic democracy and free markets by example, understanding that neither can be planted by force on political real estate lacking indigenous cultivators for their growth. Restore the moral authority of mid-20th century civil rights, fashioning public policy around individuals, not tribal identity groups.

You can read the full version of [the formula here](#).

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