

Republican nihilism: Version 2010 on display

By Kenneth Janda

"Just saying no to everything may be good short-term politics, but it's not leadership." So said President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address.

His evidence of Republican nihilism? There is more, but consider exhibits A and B. In November, the House health care bill passed with support from only 1 of 177 Republican representatives. In December, the Senate health care bill passed without support from any of the 40 Republican senators.

Republicans voted in keeping with their colleague from South Carolina, Sen. Jim DeMint, who said the previous summer, "If we're able to stop Obama on this, it will be his Waterloo. It will break him." Even before Obama's inauguration, Republican pundit Rush Limbaugh said more generally on his radio program, "I hope he fails."

We can thank Ivan Turgenev, the pre-Revolutionary Russian writer, for helping us understand the Republican strategy. In his novel, "Fathers and Sons," Turgenev coined the term "nihilism" to describe the philosophy held by many Russian revolutionists who opposed the czar's government in the late 1800s. Nihilists agreed on the need to destroy existing political institutions more than they agreed on anything constructive. In the words of Yevgeny Bazarov, the novel's protagonist, "At present the most useful thing of all is renunciation — we renounce!"

Looking toward the forthcoming congressional and presidential elections, Republicans are counting on government failure rather than its success to regain office.

Republicans have practiced this strategy before. In 1994, they unexpectedly gained 73 freshmen to the House, making Newt Gingrich speaker. Like a chorus of Bazarovs, Republicans renounced the government in Washington. Intent on destroying, not building, they cut programs, slashed funding and failed to pass a budget for government operations.

In consequence, government operations were shut down from Nov. 14 through Nov. 19, 1995 and from Dec. 16, 1995 to Jan. 6, 1996. According to the Congressional Reference Service, the shut-down caused interruptions in providing health services, settling bankruptcy cases, recruiting federal law enforcement officers, processing visa applications, and helping veterans — not to mention closing 368 National Park Service sites. Lacking popular support, Gingrich eventually gave in, funding was provided, and government resumed operations.

Concerning the 1996 presidential election, the Republican nihilistic strategy failed, for President Bill Clinton was re-elected. Still in control of Congress, Republicans realized that the public was not ready to renounce government. Nor were they. Under two terms of President George W. Bush, federal spending increased from 18 to 20 percent of gross domestic product and the budget went to a \$300-plus billion deficit in 2008 from a \$200-plus billion surplus in 2000.

Turgenev helps us understand that the 1995 freshman nihilists in Congress envisioned shutting down the government as their sublime achievement. They took as gospel Ronald Reagan's comment in his inaugural address: "Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem."

The Republican nihilists in Congress today may not subscribe completely to that gospel, but they are pressed by tea party activists who do. If the Republican Party should regain control of either chamber of Congress in 2010 (and certainly if it regains the presidency in 2012), it cannot continue saying no. Leading a government requires having it do things, as well as not do them.

Let's just hope that future Republican leadership will not be as costly as it was under George W. Bush

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