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Amanda Foreman: Obama can take comfort from history

Two years from now, the Republican Party will be fighting the greatest internal threat since the Democrat split of 1860

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When is a defeat actually a victory? When it destroys the enemy's future capacity to fight. Barack Obama can take comfort from this maxim as he contemplates the new reality on Capitol Hill today.

The polls predicted a massive swing to the Republicans and were proven right: 10 governorships, six Senate seats and more than 60 House seats. There has not been such a seismic change in the House for the past 70 years. But it is important to put Obama's defeat in perspective: George Bush lost the House, the Senate, and the majority of state governorships in the 2006 mid-terms, and Bill Clinton suffered a similar drubbing in 1994. Bush was already on the way out, but Clinton went on to win a second term in 1996 – the first Democratic President to do so since Franklin Roosevelt.

So all is not lost for Obama simply because the US electorate has signalled its disapproval. Clinton allegedly declared the morning after the mid-terms: "This can be liberating." A natural conciliator and communicator, Clinton was able to move to the centre and re-fashion his message to suit the mood of the nation. Famously, he declared: "The era of big Government is over", touching on an American preoccupation that has its roots in the Civil War and beyond.

Obama, of course, cannot and would not ever make the same pronouncement because he believes in Big Government. His entire administrative agenda during the past two years has been about increasing government control. It is not just the arena of health care that has been the recipient of a whole raft of new regulations and restrictions. There are new regulations for the insurance industry, the mining and drilling industry, the accounting sector, the financial sector, the fishing sector, even the quarantine and animal control sector. The micro-managing hand of Washington is everywhere. The self-employed, for example, must now file a tax form for every purchase worth \$600 or more. This is the kind of Federal intrusion into ordinary life that makes Americans reach for their cheque books in the worst way – to fund opposition candidates.

Exit polls revealed that the overwhelming majority of the electorate fears that ideology (and the unions) is the primary force behind Obama rather than the needs of the country. According to CNN, 86 per cent said that they were still worried about the economy, and four in 10 claimed that they had become worse off financially since Obama came to power.

This well-spring of fear and despair has been entirely by-passed by the President. When challenged to explain or reformulate his message to reassure Americans, he has complained, in effect, that some people are just too stupid to understand what Washington is trying to achieve on their behalf. Naturally, this has gone down badly against a backdrop of 9.6 per cent unemployment and a US deficit that is set to reach 9.1 per cent of GDP by the end of the year.

With all this, apparently, in the Republicans' favour it may seem perverse to describe the mid-terms as a win for the Democrats. But the truth is, Obama does not need to imitate Bill Clinton to trounce his opponents in 2012. A passionate student of American history, and of the Civil War in particular, Obama knows that his situation is far closer to Abraham Lincoln's – a president he has repeatedly aligned himself with – than to Clinton's.

There is no such thing as a direct historical parallel, of course, but from the outset Obama has done his utmost to link his presidency with Lincoln's. (Team of Rivals by Doris Kearns Goodwin, a book on the Lincoln presidency, is apparently his favourite book.) Both were Washington outsiders with minuscule political experience at the time of their election. Both were reluctant war Presidents who had to lead a divided country that disagreed on the aims and the reasons for the war. Finally, both stuck to a controversial, even unpopular, message that threatened to derail their administration and turn them into one-term presidents. For Lincoln, the message was the abolition of slavery. For Obama, it is the belief that democratic socialism will produce a more just and equitable society for all.

What saved Lincoln with the electorate were not military victories – which did not begin to take shape until the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, two months before the end of his first term – but the divisions of his Democrat opponents. The Democratic Party then was split broadly between those who supported the war against the South but not because of slavery, and those who wanted peace on any condition. It was then further divided over economic issues, states' rights, tariffs, and

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immigration. Although the Democrats achieved significant gains in the 1862 mid-terms – they only served to highlight and exacerbate these contradictions, further weakening the Party in the run-up to the presidential election.

The Tea Party is going to relay the same favour to the Obama administration. The President does not have to change his rhetoric or his position. He can stay firm and let his opponents do the work for him. The third party movement led by Ross Perot against Clinton was nothing compared to the following garnered by the Tea Partiers. Yet Perot's movement, called the Reform Party, destroyed the Republicans' hopes of taking the White House in 1992. It won 19 per cent of the national vote on an inchoate and contradictory platform of populism and fiscal conservatism. Indeed, the only pledge of Perot's that voters could actually remember was his promise to reduce the federal budget deficit – hardly a cause to bring people out into the streets.

The Tea Party, by contrast, does have a platform. Its "Contract with America" lists 10 items or pledges that candidates must agree to support in order to receive an endorsement. They range from a promise to simplify the tax system to a renunciation of Obama's approach to carbon emissions. In effect, there is something for everyone which goes a long way to explain the movement's popularity. One recent poll suggested that a third of all voters were sympathetic to the upstart movement.

They may be sympathetic, but they are not convinced. All Obama has to do is watch while the Republican Party tears itself apart trying to accommodate two irreconcilable wings – one being the party of perpetual protest; the other, the party of perpetual conservatism.

Tea Party candidates unseated established Republican figures in the Alaska, Delaware and New York primaries – and in all three contests either lost or look likely to lose. This pattern is going to continue until a genuine leader emerges from the crowd of "headliners" in the Republican Party who can subvert the Tea Party back into the fold, or shove it into the hinterlands like the Green or Libertarian Parties.

Two years from now, the Republican Party will look back on the midterm election results as the beginning of the end. It will be fighting the greatest internal threat since the split of the Democratic Party in the 1860 election 150 years-ago this week. Obama, on the other hand, will look strong for having stuck to an unpopular message rather than stiff-necked and arrogant. And, if the economy turns around, he will be revered as the greatest visionary since Franklin Roosevelt.

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