

OUTLOOK

Obama needs to show he still believes in hope



E.J. Dionne Jr. says the president should shake off the doldrums and show us he's fighting for our future with an optimistic plan of action.

If a president finds himself in the role of a political scientist, he has a problem — even when his political science lesson is 100 percent accurate.

When President Barack Obama was asked by Jonathan Karl of ABC News at his Tuesday news conference whether he still had “the juice” to get his agenda through Congress, I wish he had replied, “Lighten up. This is the country where hope lives.”

He could have used the flow of the news to make this case. For example, many of the senators who sided with the gun lobby against the vast majority of Americans who favor background checks — particularly Kelly Ayotte, Jeff Flake and Rob Portman — are taking enormous grief from their constituents.

This shows that one defeat on one vote is not a permanent setback when the tally in question reflects an old reality (that only hard-core gun owners care about the issue) and ignores a new reality (that supporters of gun safety are finally mobilized — and angry). On guns, the times are changing.

They are changing on other issues, too. Obama's warm praise for the decision of the NBA's Jason Collins to come out as gay was uncontroversial. If you think back just a decade or two, this is astonishing. And if immigration reform is no slam-dunk, the politics have shifted sharply toward action.

Add to this a New York Times/CBS News poll released Wednesday showing that while 46 percent of Americans believe the sequester cuts will hurt the economy, only one in 10 thinks they will help it. The austerity Republicans champion has few takers.

Obama lightly touched on some of these themes, but in answering Karl's question, he seemed more impatient and analytical than optimistic.

“We understand that we're in divided government right now,” the president said. “Republicans control the House of Representatives. In the Senate, this habit of requiring 60 votes for even the most modest piece of legislation has gummed up the works there... Things are pretty dysfunctional up on Capitol Hill.” He went on to note that the base of the Republican Party “thinks that compromise with me is somehow a betrayal. They're worried about primaries.”

What Obama said is true to every detail. He really is dealing with a novel

situation. The GOP has moved far to the right. The Senate no longer operates on the basis of majority rule. The strong presidents with whom Obama is often compared, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, did not face these obstacles. In his heyday, LBJ had huge Democratic congressional majorities. The Tipper could always count on winning votes from conservative Southern Democrats who had joined Republicans regularly for many years before he took office. Obama has every right to be frustrated: When Republicans obstruct, he takes the blame.

But getting an “A” for analysis is not the goal here. In the areas he does control, Obama has to talk less about the hurdles he faces and more forcefully about what he's doing to get over them. No matter how much Congress may have tied his hands, he should not have let Guantanamo fester. His cautious gradualism on Syria is actually popular because most Americans do not want to be pulled into another Middle East conflict. But once Obama drew a “red line” against Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, the president created an obligation to take at least some action — as the administration now seems to be doing. And he needed to get out front in explaining himself.

In light of how important the Affordable Care Act is to his legacy, you wonder why he didn't bring his news conference by announcing the steps the administration is taking to make it work. Instead, he had to wax defensive in response to a question.

Obama is right that Republicans aren't going to make anything easy for him. But he has let them suck him into a debate about budget cuts when his task is to talk about growth. In the process, he has allowed congressional paralysis to become the dominant story in Washington. Maybe, to use his phrase, the president needs to provide himself a “permission structure” to show that he still enjoys his job, has plans for the country's future, and is still fighting for the people who re-elected him.

Obama's calling card was hope. There is more to be hopeful about right now than his own public weariness would suggest.

Dionne's email address is edj@washingtonpost.com.



J. Scott Applewhite / Associated Press file
Former Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords sits with her husband, Mark Kelly, before a Senate hearing on what lawmakers should do to curb gun violence.

NRA leadership should refocus its priorities

Background checks and gun safety need to be part of platform

By Mark Kelly

As a former Houstonian, I'm glad to see the National Rifle Association is holding its annual convention in Space City. I lived and worked not far from the George R. Brown Convention Center and I am confident that the thousands of NRA members who attend this year's meeting will find a friendly and welcoming city. I am certain you will have a fabulous time.

I have often considered joining the NRA myself, and if I had, maybe I would be there with all of you this weekend. Unfortunately, today there are many important issues that your leadership and I no longer agree upon.

But first, let's try to find some common ground. Here's something we can agree on: We should thank the majority of the NRA's 4 million members who are law-abiding citizens who use their guns responsibly. Now, I want to speak to the 74 percent of those people — more than 3 million — who supported expanded background checks. Some of those people probably joined the NRA before 1990 — you know, the year that Executive Vice President and CEO Wayne LaPierre testified in favor of background checks.

Let me set the record straight: Gun rights and gun safety go hand in hand. Gabby and I respect the right of Americans to own guns; we own guns ourselves and we use them. NRA members know this about gun rights and gun safety. That's why so many of you support expanding background checks.

I grew up around guns. My mom and dad were cops and then I joined the military, where I saw combat in Iraq and Kuwait. Gabby owns an gun that we would often shoot. She has even used the range at the NRA's headquarters in Virginia. So have I. Gabby supported a lot of “pro gun” federal legislation, such as upholding Second Amendment rights for citizens who live in our nation's capital.

Like so many of you, we know that preventing dangerous people from getting guns doesn't affect our ability to buy or use our guns responsibly. And that's why the NRA leadership throws out a lot of doomsday scenarios, fear-mongering and yelling in order to distract people from a critical distinction: What most members of the NRA want from the organization and what the leadership is actually doing are not the same.

The NRA used to be a great organization, and you can still get practical value out of it as a member — everything from insurance to gun safety courses. But those services are small potatoes compared to where the NRA's leadership makes the really big money. The

NRA leadership's top priority is to make sure the corporations that make guns and ammunition continue to turn huge profits. Their top priority isn't you, the NRA member.

The NRA's two best fundraising months of the past year came immediately following the shootings in Aurora, Colo., and Newtown, Conn. Guns fly off the shelves after tragedies because LaPierre and the gun manufacturers he represents exploit people's fears. In return, gun manufacturers gave LaPierre and the NRA tens of millions of dollars last year alone — and he spent almost \$1 million of it on his own salary. Everyone in the gun lobby gets rich when the gun manufacturers sell the most guns.

And that's why LaPierre and the rest of the leadership of the NRA and other gun organizations are spending so much of their time wild-eyed, preaching possible government confiscations. It's because they don't want the membership to notice they've turned their backs on the very safety measures, like background checks, that the organization used to stand for — in exchange for cold hard cash.

So, to the millions of responsible gun owners who are members of the NRA, I offer two thoughts: First, we, at Americans for Responsible Solutions, would be proud to stand with you. You can keep your NRA membership because we're a place for responsible gun owners who want to make sure our laws apply equally to everyone, and who don't want to let criminals run wild with firearms. We'd love to have you and we will protect your Second Amendment rights in a reasonable and responsible manner.

Second: Those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it, right? The current NRA leadership came to power when the membership felt the old leadership had lost touch with the organization's values and no longer was reflecting the wishes of the members.

When LaPierre and his crew of highly paid Beltway insider staff reversed their earlier support of common-sense measures like expanded background checks, they sent a strong message that instead of standing with the 3 million of your members who supported background checks, they were working on behalf of the manufacturers' profit margins instead.

It seems to me that the time is right for a new generation of leaders within the NRA. Maybe some of you are here this weekend in Houston. We can't wait to work with you to protect our Second Amendment rights and keep our kids safer.

Kelly, a 25-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, lived and raised a family in Houston while serving as the commander of the space shuttle Discovery, but it will try. With his wife, former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, D-Ariz., Kelly is co-founder of Americans for Responsible Solutions, which seeks to reduce gun violence.



Mexican politics could constrain U.S. influence on security

Countries' leaders should work together for more cooperation

By Tony Payan

With President Barack Obama's visit to Mexico this week, the White House has two main issues on its agenda: security and the economy. Obama hopes to reaffirm the unprecedented level of cooperation on security, particularly against drug trafficking, that the two countries had under the Calderón administration and to reassure Mexico that the economic relationship continues to be of great importance to the U.S. But he is likely to find a much more complicated environment south of the border.

On the surface, both countries agree that security and the economy are the central issues of the binational relationship. The agreement, however, ends there. The two governments no longer

see eye-to-eye on the order and the level of importance, or even how to approach, to either of these issues. More diplomacy and political skill will be required from Washington if the binational partnership is to work.

The underlying disagreements are the result of important shifts in Mexico's political landscape. At one level, the Institutional Revolutionary Party is back in power after 12 years out of office. Naturally, a different party in power implies a different approach to the binational agenda. At a more complex level, the PRI's return entails two important shifts that Washington may not like but will have to face.

First, the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto has set out to once again centralize power in the federal government. The era of multiple entry points and a plurality of voices in the binational relationship, which characterized the previous PAN administrations, is over. Mexico's foreign ministry has made it clear that the only window open for

business for Washington, D.C., is the Interior Ministry, a unique Mexican federal department whose most significant mandate is political control. This does not mean that security conditions have changed on the ground in Mexico; but it does indicate that the binational security agenda is no longer about justice reform or law enforcement cooperation — both important pillars of the Mérida Initiative — but about political and image control.

Washington may be unhappy about this new limited and controlled access and its potential inability to push its priorities on Mexico, but it will have to recognize and adjust to the new political orientation in Mexico's security agenda.

Second, the PRI is historically a much more nationalistic political party and considerably more suspicious and distrustful of U.S. interests and intentions than the National Action Party (PAN) ever was. This means that the Mexican government will actively seek to put some distance between itself and U.S. interests.

Mexico's government may not be able to control every interaction with the United States, but it will try. This may frustrate the American government and its many agencies, which had grown accustomed to open access and high-level influence under the Calderón administration. President Peña Nieto has already indicated that U.S. agencies have to leave all Mexican law enforcement and security facilities and will not have access to Mexican intelligence or information on law enforcement operations. This new attitude has already irked many in Washington.

If the U.S. and Mexico fail to find a way to reconcile their diverging visions and priorities in the next four years, the binational relationship will suffer. What is worse, many Mexicans and Americans stand to lose because their prosperity and safety increasingly depend on a well-functioning working relationship.

Payan is a visiting fellow at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.