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The Fierce Urgency of Pork

By Charles Krauthammer
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"A failure to act, and act now, will turn crisis into a catastrophe."

-- President Obama, Feb. 4.

Catastrophe, mind you. So much for the president who in his inaugural address two weeks earlier declared "we have chosen hope over fear." Until, that is, you need fear to pass a bill.

And so much for the promise to banish the money changers and influence peddlers from the temple. An ostentatious executive order banning lobbyists was immediately followed by the nomination of at least a dozen current or former lobbyists to high position. Followed by a Treasury secretary who allegedly couldn't understand the payroll tax provisions in his 1040. Followed by Tom Daschle, who had to fall on his sword according to the new Washington rule that no Cabinet can have more than one tax delinquent.

The Daschle affair was more serious because his offense involved more than taxes. As Michael Kinsley once observed, in Washington the real scandal isn't what's illegal, but what's legal. Not paying taxes is one thing. But what made this case intolerable was the perfectly legal dealings that amassed Daschle \$5.2 million in just two years.

He'd been getting \$1 million per year from a law firm. But he's not a lawyer, nor a registered lobbyist. You don't get paid this kind of money to instruct partners on the Senate markup process. You get it for picking up the phone and peddling influence.

At least Tim Geithner, the tax-challenged Treasury secretary, had been working for years as a humble international civil servant earning non-stratospheric wages. Daschle, who had made another cool million a year (plus chauffeur and Caddy) for unspecified services to a pal's private equity firm, represented everything Obama said he'd come to Washington to upend.

And yet more damaging to Obama's image than all the hypocrisies in the appointment process is his signature bill: the stimulus package. He inexplicably delegated the writing to Nancy Pelosi and the barons of the House. The product, which inevitably carries Obama's name, was not just bad, not just flawed, but a legislative abomination.

It's not just pages and pages of special-interest tax breaks, giveaways and protections, one of which would set off a ruinous Smoot-Hawley trade war. It's not just the waste, such as the \$88.6 million for new construction for Milwaukee Public Schools, which, reports the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, have shrinking enrollment, 15 vacant schools and, quite logically, no plans for new construction.

It's the essential fraud of rushing through a bill in which the normal rules (committee hearings, finding revenue to pay for the programs) are suspended on the grounds that a national emergency requires an immediate job-creating stimulus -- and then throwing into it hundreds of billions that have nothing to do with stimulus, that Congress's own budget office says won't be spent until 2011 and beyond, and that are little more than the back-scratching, special-interest, lobby-driven parochialism that Obama came to Washington to abolish. He said.

Not just to abolish but to create something new -- a new politics where the moneyed pork-barreling and corrupt logrolling of the past would give way to a bottom-up, grass-roots participatory democracy. That is what made Obama so dazzling and new. Turns out the "fierce urgency of now" includes \$150 million for livestock (and

honeybee and farm-raised fish) insurance.

The Age of Obama begins with perhaps the greatest frenzy of old-politics influence peddling ever seen in Washington. By the time the stimulus bill reached the Senate, reports the Wall Street Journal, pharmaceutical and high-tech companies were lobbying furiously for a new plan to repatriate overseas profits that would yield major tax savings. California wine growers and Florida citrus producers were fighting to change a single phrase in one provision. Substituting "planted" for "ready to market" would mean a windfall garnered from a new "bonus depreciation" incentive.

After Obama's miraculous 2008 presidential campaign, it was clear that at some point the magical mystery tour would have to end. The nation would rub its eyes and begin to emerge from its reverie. The hallucinatory Obama would give way to the mere mortal. The great ethical transformations promised would be seen as a fairy tale that all presidents tell -- and that this president told better than anyone.

I thought the awakening would take six months. It took two and a half weeks.

letters@charleskrauthammer.com

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