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Op-Ed Columnist

Hail the Conquering Professor

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The Democrats were walking around in a state of shock.

Holy cow, they were saying to themselves. We're not total wimps! We don't have to sit around and let ourselves be slapped silly by Republican bullies and Tea Party scaremongers. We can actually get something done if we suck it up and find a way to pull together.

One minute they were legislative losers, squabbling and scrambling for the off-ramps. The next they were history-makers, sharing chest bumps and goose bumps at the White House. How had the lofty president and the wily speaker suddenly steered them off Jimmy Carter Highway and onto F.D.R. Drive?

One gleeful and relieved White House aide called the bill-signing ceremony in the East Room, packed with Democratic lawmakers snapping pictures and acting like obstreperous children, "an Old Spice moment."

"You could see it in their faces," he said. "It was kind of like that Old Spice ad where the guy smacked himself on the cheeks and said, 'Wow, that feels good!' It was like they smacked

themselves on the cheeks and said, ‘You are a member of Congress and now you can start doing things. Wow, that feels good!’ ”

David Axelrod agreed: “It was incredibly moving to be in that room today. This was such an emotional high that I actually saw congressmen hugging senators. People are so used to low expectations around here that the idea that you could do something big and meaningful is exhilarating.”

The Democrats held hands, held their breath and jumped over the cliff — not that it was a radical bill. And, *mirabile dictu*, nothing awful happened. The markets went up. The polls went up. Their confidence went up.

John McCain threatened Democrats, telling an Arizona radio affiliate that “there will be no cooperation for the rest of the year” from Republicans. So much for “Country First.” (He’s so clueless that he came on the Senate floor and said, “Let’s stop this legislation, and let’s start from the beginning.”)

But David Frum, the former W. speechwriter, conceded that in trying to turn health care into Obama’s Waterloo — a replay of the Clintons’ disaster in 1994 — Republicans may have made it their own Waterloo.

“We followed the most radical voices in the party and the movement, and they led us to abject and irreversible defeat,” Frum wrote on his blog, adding: “Conservative talkers on Fox and talk radio had whipped the Republican voting base into such a frenzy that deal-making was rendered impossible. How do you negotiate with somebody who wants to murder your grandmother?”

Some base members of the Republican base showed themselves as the racist Neanderthals they are.

Protesters outside the Capitol on Saturday called two black congressmen, the civil rights hero John Lewis of Georgia and Andre Carson of Indiana, a racial epithet as they walked by.

Another, Representative Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri, was called that epithet and got spit on. Barney Frank of Massachusetts was called an anti-gay slur. The anti-abortion Democrat Bart Stupak was called a “baby killer” by Texas Republican Representative Randy Neugebauer, who says he’s had a “tremendous outpouring” of support for his outburst.

It was disgusting. And for the Democrats who had battled each other through every twist and turn of health care, it was unifying.

Senator Al Franken, who had blown up at Axelrod after Obama held a televised session with Senate Democrats in February, arguing that the president wasn’t fighting hard enough or strategizing well enough, sent Axelrod a congratulatory note after the bill passed.

“You’re welcome,” Franken wrote. He added an asterisk: “Joke. I used to be in comedy.”

Only a week ago, Fred Hiatt, The Washington Post’s editorial page editor, had written that Obama did not seem happy in his job, that he projected “weariness and duty” instead of the “jauntiness” of F.D.R. and J.F.K.

But Tuesday, the president was joyous, and that infectious smile so sparsely offered over the last two years lit up the East Room. Many Democratic lawmakers and Obama supporters were frustrated at the president’s failure to show more spine earlier. As Representative Louise Slaughter told The Times in February, “I wouldn’t mind seeing a little more toughness here or

there.”

Until now, Obama has gotten irritated at those who cast Washington affairs in Manichean terms of strength or weakness and red or blue. He wanted to reason, to compromise, to float in his ivory tower.

But at long last, when push came to shove, he shoved (and let Nancy push). He treated politics not as an intellectual exercise, but a political one. He realized that sometimes you can't rise above it. You have to sink down into it. You have to stop being cerebral and get your hands dirty. You can fight fear with power.

The Chicago pol in the Oval has had to learn one of the great American truths: You've got to slap the bully in the face. He's a consensus-building “warrior,” Axelrod boasted to Charlie Rose.

The president, who has been reading Edmund Morris's “The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt,” has always spoken with a soft voice. Now he's wielded the big stick.

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