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Common ground means lasting solutions, not weakness

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WASHINGTON President Obama is currently being attacked by friend and foe alike for his willingness to seek common ground on issues ranging from health care to North Korea.

"The common ground is not always the high ground," writes Leon Wieseltier in the New Republic. "It informs the other side that what you most desire is the deal that you will never acknowledge the finality of the difference, and never be satisfied with the integrity of opposition. There is a reason that 'uncompromising' is a term of approbation."

This statement reflects a profound misunderstanding of what it means to search for common ground. It implies that a president who does not lock himself into a pre-set, principled position is somehow showing weakness and will invariably settle for the lowest common denominator. However being open to a wide range of opinion, as President Obama clearly is, does not mean a president will compromise core values. Rather, openness is essential to finding the highest common denominator, which can be defined as a workable solution that satisfies the needs and desires of a wide range of constituencies and interests.

George W. Bush was roundly criticized for taking the opposite approach, which his opponents described as uncompromising. He is famously remembered for saying, "You're either with us or against us."

So which approach do Americans really want from a president?

The answer is probably both, depending on the circumstances.

There are clearly times when a president needs to take an unyielding, unambiguous stand, as when Franklin Roosevelt declared that World War II would only end by the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, that solution was feasible because the Allies had overwhelming power to enforce it. As President Obama can testify now when he is trying to pass health-care reform or negotiate with North Korea, he lacks the ability to impose his will.

There is a broad spectrum of leadership styles. At one end is the authoritarian figure who rules by fiat. At the other end are those who allow the views of others to define their actions. In the middle, there are leaders who seek out a broad range of opinions as a key part of the decision-making process. President Bush was clearly more of a "decider," while Barack Obama is inclined toward the middle way.

In this respect, President Obama follows in the footsteps of both conservative and liberal presidents. Take Ronald Reagan. He never gave up his essential belief that communism was an evil system. Still, he negotiated a series of arms control agreements with the Soviets, which contained important compromises and which Mikhail Gorbachev and he both saw as being in the best interest of the two countries. Or consider Lyndon Johnson. He was a strong advocate of civil rights for all Americans and, at the same time, a master dealmaker. He guided groundbreaking legislation through Congress, both by insisting on a set of general principals and by making compromises in forming bipartisan coalitions. These presidents and most other successful ones found higher ground that served the best interests of the country.

There is no doubt that the best way to find common ground solutions is to listen carefully to those with different beliefs, to be inclusive, and to draw out the best from the various positions. In our individual lives, most Americans know this and reject absolutism. Indeed, most of us hold within ourselves both liberal and conservative attitudes, which we usually find ways to bridge. When we adhere to a single position, no matter how principled, and are closed to alternatives, our lives tend not to work very well. Successful relationships are almost always based on finding common ground, to the mutual benefit of

the parties.

Why then should it be difficult for Americans to accept a president who acts in the same way in leading the country?

While it is not easy for many pundits and politicians to accept, Americans seem to want a president who is willing to make compromises for the common good. Indeed, most of us yearn for a leader who can actually solve our national problems and that usually requires finding common ground.

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