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The Backward Party

The president offers an extended critique of Republicans.

By John Dickerson

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The Obama Partisanship Meter took another small jump today. When [last we checked the needle](#), President Obama had tweaked Republicans at a Democratic fundraiser, using pointed language to blame them for doing nothing to help improve the economy. It was an escalation in his rhetoric, but it was delivered to a partisan crowd. Today, in a noncampaign event, Obama made his critique more explicit.

The Democratic National Committee will be [relying](#) this fall on the president to sell the economic recovery and define the opposition. [In Pittsburgh Wednesday](#), Obama did both.

He didn't simply criticize Republicans. He implicated them in a unified and multifaceted narrative of blame. After explaining how his administration had reacted to the financial crisis, Obama told of how the opposition hadn't been much help. His opponents, he said, were playing politics. "Before I was even inaugurated, the congressional leaders of the other party got together and made a calculation that if I failed, they'd win," he said. The president then turned to the merits of their argument. "To be fair," he started, as if to suggest he might be, "a good deal of the other party's opposition to our agenda has been rooted in their sincere and fundamental belief about the role of government."

Noncraven Republicans who did not attend the pre-inauguration "Obama Must Fail" meeting might have thought he was going to assign them to a more benevolent category. They were soon disappointed. The president went on to define what Republican beliefs entailed: "It's an agenda that basically offers two answers to every problem we face: more tax breaks for the wealthy and fewer rules for corporations." The president left out their plan to punish the elderly and infirm just for sport. (For those interested in a more thoughtful speech, and a more generous interpretation of conservatism, read the president's [remarks](#) recently at the University of Michigan commencement.)

Though the speech was billed as a talk on the economy, it had all the hallmarks of a campaign speech, including the whiff of focus-group-tested phrases. "They want to go back. We want to go forward," said the president. It was a mantra repeated throughout his remarks. The goal, as Democrats have been saying for months, is to make the November elections a choice between alternatives, not a referendum on the Democrats.

The underlying theme of the speech was a defense of government. "It's our job as a nation to advocate on behalf of the America that we hope for," he said, arguing that only an activist government could provide a minimum safety net and give opportunity to poor students, innovative research, and businesses that invest in cleaner energy technologies.

As he reached the end of his remarks, Obama got specific about pending legislation, making his strongest pitch yet for the Senate climate change legislation. "The time has come to aggressively accelerate" the effort to put a price on carbon pollution, he said, before making a commitment: "The votes might not be there right now, but I intend to find them in the coming months." This is a different level of motivation than he demonstrated on immigration reform. On that topic, Obama said there was only so much he could do to push legislation because Republicans would not give him the votes.

The Gulf disaster provides all the motivation necessary for Obama to strongly support the legislation. But there's also a political benefit. With so few ways to show that he is in command of the spill and its cleanup, the legislation also provides the president with another opportunity to take command. He can show that he is fighting to protect the country from being in such a vulnerable position in the future. Republicans will no doubt react to this speech by giving him lots of opportunities to fight.

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John Dickerson is *Slate's* chief political correspondent and author of [On Her Trail](#). He can be reached at slatepolitics@gmail.com. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

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