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Gays, Guts and Reality: What Time Is the Right Time to Keep Obama's Promises?

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I watched the angry elderly set fire to the health care town meetings. I watched the simple idea of a president talking to school kids about hard work and education devolve into cries of "brainwashing."

And I came away with real concerns about President Obama's promises to the gay community.

In the heady days of the campaign -- the sweet season of promise and promises -- there was a belief that, in the same way African Americans saw Bill Clinton as the first black president, Obama would be the first gay president.

I believe, in his heart, he embraces that. But there is a big divide between heart and heartland.

If conservatives can shout down reasoned discussion on one of the most important legislative issues of our time; if they can turn a message to school kids into something so sinister that parents threaten to keep their kids at home, just think what they can do when gay marriage and gays in the military step on to the stage of serious legislative debate.

Somewhere, a chuckling Rush Limbaugh is raising a glass to the very thought.

Mindful of exit polls showing three of four gay and lesbian votes went to Obama, not to mention fund raisers good for millions of dollars a pop, an administration that has been slammed for moving too quickly in many areas is asking for patience in this one.

But for how long? Here is where things get tricky.

Obama recently told a gay and lesbian gathering at the White House: "I suspect that by the time this administration is over, I think you guys will have pretty good feelings about the Obama administration." Not exactly a roadmap.

Neither striking down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) nor allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military will save jobs, stop foreclosures, add points to the GDP or get us out of Iraq and Afghanistan. So there is a logical argument for priorities.

But the priorities are going to have a long tail.

Best case -- maybe deliriously optimistic case -- is that we will be well into the first term, and already getting into campaign mode for a second term, before the administration's audacious agenda is even partially complete. It's doubtful they will want to add diversions to unfinished business.

With success, a large mandate for a second term would create the opportunity for a meaningful push. But mandate is uncertain, and window is brief. Late second term administrations -- if history is a guide -- spend more time fighting charges than driving change.

Six months into a fresh start for America, Obama's approval numbers are already butting into the realities of hard decisions. With more hard decisions to come, at what point will the numbers be strong enough to take the hit that is certain to come from championing one of the country's more divisive issues?

In the past, the conservative and religious right has been able to frustrate human dignity and block social progress because they had the votes and they had the president. Now that they have neither, they have opted for righteous dissonance. Create enough controversy, sow enough fear and maybe, just maybe, we can prevent this administration from keeping its promises.

Standing up to that technology-savvy wall of noise is an act of unusual political courage - - poll numbers high or poll numbers low. Whatever time the administration decides is the right time to launch a serious effort on behalf of its commitments to gays and lesbians, the rancorous shock troops of the right will be locked, loaded and on-line.

There is a line in a Springsteen song, "The River," that asks if a dream is a lie if it doesn't come true. In spite of sincere promises and the best intentions, without real leadership inspired by uncommon courage, those who dream of equality in all things for all Americans may soon find out.