

BUILD BACK LATER

by Carl Golden, January 6, 2022



Build Back Better, the centerpiece of President Biden's ambitious domestic legislative agenda, has become Build Back Later...maybe.

What was to have been the administration's history-making signature accomplishment - a \$1.75 trillion expansion of existing social welfare programs and the creation of new entitlements - now lies in ruins and the odds of its resurrection are beyond bleak.

What was to have arrested the president's downward spiral in public support resulted instead in a further erosion of confidence in the administration's competence. (The Real Clear Politics polling average, for instance, places Biden's approval at 42 percent and disapproval at 53 percent.)

What was to have provided a record of achievement for Democratic congressional candidates to campaign on this year has instead highlighted the internal fissures in the party while adding greatly to their fears of a Republican sweep and seizing control of Congress.

Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer's confident prediction that the program would reach the president's desk in September was wishful thinking rather than achievable reality as his self-imposed deadline was postponed time after time.

The warning signs were clear and persistent, yet seemingly ignored by Schumer and the White House.

For months, West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and Arizona Sen. Krysten Sinema were steadfast in their opposition to the infrastructure proposal, citing the adverse impact of massive additional government spending at a time of unprecedented debt and a perilous upsurge in inflationary pressures.

In an evenly divided Senate, both held make or break leverage, eventually invoked by Manchin's televised announcement he intended to vote against the bill after prolonged negotiations with the Administration and the president personally broke down.

Schumer acknowledged he'd lost the high stakes contest and further efforts to resolve the differences were futile. He conceded that BBB, in some form or other, may be considered in March - six months past his deadline - and well into the 2022 midterm election season.

In the meantime, he strove to save face and offer some degree of optimism by declaring both sides had agreed to a "cooling off period" and negotiations would resume at some undetermined point.

Manchin appeared less urgent, pointing out no further talks had been scheduled while reiterating his opposition and again suggesting major revisions - read, reducing the cost - would be the crucial factor in winning him over.

There appears to be growing sentiment for separating the major components and bringing each to the floor to stand or fail on their individual merits - a tacit admission that stuffing dozens of programs into one massive bill and cooking the books to maintain the fiction of cost-consciousness was a strategic blunder.

It was a case of kitchen sink legislating, throwing program after program into the proposal and believing support for some would be sufficient to overcome misgivings about others.

The White House messaging was flawed as well, particularly the glaringly absurd insistence by the president and his communications staff that the bill would cost "zero dollars," that it would be fully paid for raising taxes on the wealthy and corporations.

It was the level of simplistic thinking usually found in a contest for the presidency of the sixth grade class in elementary school.

Taxpayers instinctively understood that the no cost rationale was patently silly, that raising corporate taxes would result in the cost being passed on to the consumers in the form of higher prices for goods and services.

There existed a level of hubris as well on the part of congressional leadership and the White House, a belief that a new president would enjoy a period of unfettered support, that his agenda would be automatically accepted for the asking by a unanimous Democratic party, particularly contrasting sharply with the chaos and uproar that occurred daily in the prior Administration.

Irresistible momentum would be built, they believed, carrying even doubters along toward an eventual celebratory Oval Office bill signing ceremony.

Falling under the spell of political hubris too often skews its victims' perspective and the jolt back to reality can be painful, indeed.

It is certain that whatever the outcome of negotiations and whatever final form BBB eventually assumes months from now, it will bear scant resemblance to Roosevelt's New Deal or Johnson's Great Society.

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