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# Obama, Explained

AS BARACK OBAMA CONTENTS FOR A SECOND TERM IN OFFICE, TWO CONFLICTING NARRATIVES OF HIS PRESIDENCY HAVE EMERGED. IS HE A SKILLFUL POLITICAL PLAYER AND POLICY VISIONARY—A CHESS MASTER WHO ALWAYS SEES SEVERAL MOVES AHEAD OF HIS OPPONENTS (AND OF THE PUNDITOCRACY)? OR IS HE POLITICALLY CLUMSY AND OUT OF HIS DEPTH—A PAWN OVERWHELMED BY EVENTS, AT THE MERCY OF A SECOND-RATE STAFF AND OF THE REPUBLICANS? HERE, A LONGTIME ANALYST OF THE PRESIDENCY TAKES THE MEASURE OF OUR 44TH PRESIDENT, WITH A VIEW TO HISTORY.

*By James Fallows*

IN THE LATE 1990s, when his fellow University of Chicago professor Barack Obama had just run for the Illinois State Senate and long before a newly inaugurated President Obama named him to his Council of Economic Advisers, the economist Austan Goolsbee was on the most terrifying airplane trip of his life. He was traveling on Southwest Airlines from St. Louis back to Chicago's Midway Airport. The plane got into a thunderstorm, and for a while many passengers thought they were doomed.

One jolt of turbulence was so strong that a flight attendant, not yet strapped in, hit her head on the airplane's ceiling. After another sudden drop, the lights went out on one side of the cabin. The violent ups and downs kept getting worse. Two rows ahead of Goolsbee, a professional-looking woman in her 50s began wailing, "We're going to die! We're all going to die!" "Everyone was looking around and on the border of panic," Goolsbee told me recently. "I was kind of wishing someone would start yelling, 'No, we're all *not* going to die!'"

At last the plane made it safely to Midway. As passengers filed off, Goolsbee spoke with a strapping young man who had been sitting, ashen but stoic and silent, in a window seat next to the woman whose nerves had broken. He was a high-school football player coming to Chicago on a college recruiting trip. "Quite a flight," Goolsbee said to him. "This is my first time on an airplane," the young man replied. "Are they always like that? I can see why people don't like to fly."

Goolsbee's punch line to the story is that during his two years in Washington, "I was that kid." He and his colleagues were trying to devise policies to cope with the worst worldwide economic crisis in living memory, in the most contentious political environment in nearly as long a time. He would ask himself, *Is it always like this?* He could see why people didn't like politics and government.

But when I heard the story, my thoughts turned immediately in another direction. Goolsbee may have felt like that kid, but to most of the world, the more obvious comparison would be to the man who

hired Goolsbee, Barack Obama. Four years after being sworn in as a freshman senator, occupying a position of executive authority for the first time in his life, Obama was, at age 47, instantly responsible for guiding the world's superpower and its allies through an emergency that had left far more experienced leaders wailing the political and financial equivalent of "We're all going to die!"

In office as during his campaign—indeed, through the entirety of his seven-plus years as a national figure since his keynote speech at the Democratic Convention in the summer of 2004—Obama has maintained his stoic, unflapped, "no drama" air. During the fall and winter of 2007, his campaign seemed to be getting nowhere against Hillary Clinton, who was then, to knowledgeable observers, the "inevitable" nominee. In 2008, John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate seemed to energize his campaign so much that, despite gathering signs of financial disaster under the incumbent Republicans, just after Labor Day the McCain-Palin team had opened up a lead over Obama and Joe Biden in several national polls. CBS News and an ABC-*Washington Post* poll had McCain up by 2 percentage points in early September, a week before the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy; a *USA Today*-Gallup poll that same week had him ahead by a shocking 10 points. But Obama and Biden stayed unrattled and on message, and two months later they won with a two-to-one landslide in the Electoral College and a 7-point margin in the popular vote. The earnestly devotional HOPE poster by Shepard Fairey was the official icon of the Obama campaign. But its edgier, unofficial counterpart, a Photoshopped Internet image that appeared as an antidote to the panic over polls and Palin, perfectly captured the candidate's air of icy assurance. It showed a no-nonsense Obama looking straight at the camera, with the caption EVERYONE CHILL THE FUCK OUT, I GOT THIS!

The history is relevant because it shows how quickly impressions of strength or weakness can evaporate and become almost impossible to reimagine. Try to think back to when sophisticated people thought that Sarah Palin was the key to Republican victory, or when Obama's every political instinct seemed inspired. I can attest personally to a now-startling fact behind Jimmy Carter's rise to the presidency. When he met privately with editorial-board members and veteran political figures across the country in the early days of his campaign—people who had seen contenders come and go and were merciless in spotting frailties—the majority of them went away feeling that in Carter they had encountered a person of truly exceptional political insight and depth. (You might not believe me; I have the notes.) Is this how the Nobel Peace Prize committee's choice of Obama as its laureate within nine months of his taking office will look as the years pass—the symbol of a "market top" in the world's romanticism about Obama?

Whether things seem to be going very well or very badly around him—whether he is announcing the death of Osama bin Laden or his latest compromise in the face of Republican opposition in Congress—Obama always presents the same dispassionate face. Has he been so calm because he has understood so much about the path ahead of him, and has been so clever in the traps he has set for his rivals? Or has he been so calm because, like the high-school kid on the plane, he has been so innocently unaware of how dire the situation has truly been?

This is the central mystery of his performance as a candidate and a president. Has Obama in office been anything like the chess master he seemed in the campaign, whose placid veneer masked an

ability to think 10 moves ahead, at which point his adversaries would belatedly recognize that they had lost long ago? Or has he been revealed as just a pawn—a guy who got lucky as a campaigner but is now pushed around by political opponents who outwit him and economic trends that overwhelm him?

**VIDEO:** Fallows talks to *Atlantic* Senior Editor Corby Kummer (who edited this story) about Obama's chances for reelection and why he might actually have something to learn from George W. Bush.

The end of a president's first term is an important time to ask these questions, and not just because of the obvious bearing on his fitness for reelection. Hard as it is to have any dispassionate discussion of a president's performance during an election year, it will be even harder once the election is over. If a year from now Obama is settling in for a second term, a halo effect will extend back to everything he did during his first four years. His programs will be more effective in reality, since he will get that many more years to cement them in with follow-up measures, supportive appointments to federal agencies and the courts, and possible vetoes of any attempts at repeal. And, through the lens of history, they will *seem* more effective, since whatever he did in his first term will appear to have been part of an overall plan that was ratified through reelection. Yet if a year from now a just-beaten former President Obama is thinking about his memoirs and watching his former appointees blame one another, and him, for the loss, the very same combination of missteps and achievements will be viewed as a narrative leading inexorably to defeat. By saying, after a year in office, that he would rather be "a really good one-term" president than a "mediocre" president who served two terms, Obama was playing to the popular conceit that presidents should rise above such petty concerns as reelection. The reality, though, is that our judgment about "really good" and "mediocre" presidents is colored by how long they serve. A failure to win reelection places a "one-term loser" asterisk on even

genuine accomplishments. Ask George H. W. Bush, victor in the Gulf War; ask Jimmy Carter, architect of the Camp David agreement.

Not knowing how the election will turn out, what can we say now? I'm not talking about how Obama looks to the roughly one-third of Americans who have been skeptical of him from the start—his highest approval rating was around 70 percent, just after he took office—nor about how he looks to the nearly comparable number who by the end of last year said they still had “strongly favorable” opinions of his performance. But for the seemingly huge number of people who sense that he has shrunk in office and that his administration has achieved less than it should or could have, and for scholars, historians, and political veterans who have matched it against presidencies of the past, is there an objective way to judge Obama's competence and control?

Early this year, just after Obama dared the Republican-controlled House not to pass a payroll-tax-cut extension and then announced “recess appointments” for nominees who had been blocked by Senate filibuster, Samuel Popkin, a political scientist at UC San Diego, told me that this might be the beginning of a shrewd Truman-esque election-year plan. In his forthcoming book, *The Candidate: What It Takes to Win—and Hold—the White House*, he describes how in 1946 Truman, after suffering a midterm-election setback even worse than Clinton's in 1994 or Obama's in 2010, based the come-from-behind success of his reelection campaign on the refusal of a “do-nothing Congress” to work with him or address the country's problems. Starting late last year, when he defied the House Republicans, Obama has seemed to follow Truman's script. “What I'd love to know is whether this was all a careful long-term plan,” Popkin said of Obama's evolution, “or whether they just lucked into it.”

Chess master, or pawn? That is the question I asked a variety of political figures last year, starting when the Obama administration was wrangling with Republicans in Congress to avoid a damaging default on the national debt. I spoke with current and past members of this administration, officials from previous administrations, current and past members of the Senate and the House, and some academics. Compared with the last two times a Democrat was in the White House—during Jimmy Carter's administration in the late 1970s and Bill Clinton's in the 1990s—I found Democrats much more careful about criticizing their own party's president during an election year. It's not that Democrats have become so much more disciplined, nor, obviously, that they have no complaints, but rather that they seem more worried about the risks of helping the other side. I asked someone who has been close to Obama if I could interview him about his experiences. He said, “I'm not going to say anything that might hurt during the campaign.” At the Capitol, I asked one prominent Democratic legislator what he had learned about Obama as a leader and a person that the general public did not know. He sat for nearly a full minute and then replied, “I would rather not say.” But other people I spoke with—from Congress and inside and outside the administration—volunteered sincere-seeming flattering accounts of the Obama they had observed in informal discussions and strategy sessions. Because of sensitivities on all sides, this article includes something our magazine tries hard to avoid: critical opinions in “blind quotes,” from people not willing to be named. In every case where I've used such a quote, it's from a person I trust and who was in a position to observe the events being described.

Having seen a number of presidencies unfold, and some unravel, I am fully aware of how difficult it is to assess them in real time. What I feel I've learned about Obama is that he was unready for the presidency and temperamentally unsuited to it in many ways. Yet the conjunction of right-wing hostility to his programs and to his very presence in office, with left-wing disappointment in his economic record and despair about his apparent inability to fight Republicans on their own terms, led to an underappreciation of his skills and accomplishments—an underappreciation that is as pronounced as the overestimation in those heady early days. Unprepared, yes. Cool to the point of chilly, yes. For all his ability to inspire and motivate people en masse, for all his advertised emphasis on surrounding himself with a first-rate “team of rivals,” Obama appears to have been unsavvy in the FDR-like arts of getting the best from his immediate team and continuing to attract the best people to him.

Yet the test for presidents is not where they begin but how fast they learn and where they end up. Not even FDR was FDR at the start. The evidence is that Obama is learning, fast, to use the tools of office. Whether he is learning fast enough to have a chance to apply these skills in a second term—well, we'll reconvene next year.

### **Why Presidents Fail**

We judge presidents by the specific expectations they ask to be measured against: inspiration (Kennedy, Reagan, Obama), competence and experience (Eisenhower, the first George Bush), strategic cunning (Johnson, Nixon), integrity and personal probity (Carter), inclusiveness and empathy (Clinton), unshakable resolve (the second Bush). But eventually each is judged against his predecessors, a process that properly starts with a reminder that all begin their terms ill-equipped, in ways that hindsight tends to obscure.

The sobering realities of the modern White House are: All presidents are unsuited to office, and therefore all presidents fail in certain crucial aspects of the job. All betray their supporters and provoke bitter criticism from their own side at some point in their term. And all are mis-assessed while in office, for reasons that typically depend more on luck and historical accident than on factors within their control. These realities do not excuse Obama's failings, but they do put his evolution in perspective.

Presidents fail because not to fail would require, in the age of modern communications and global responsibilities, a range of native talents and learned skills no real person has ever possessed. These include “smarts” in the normal sense—the analytical ability to cope with the stream of short- and long-term decisions that come at a president nonstop. (How serious is the latest provocation out of North Korea? What are the “out year” budget implications of a change in Medicaid repayment formulas?) A president needs rhetorical clarity and eloquence, so that he can explain to publics at home and around the world the intent behind his actions and—at least as important—so that everyone inside the administration understands his priorities clearly enough that he does not have to wade into every little policy fight to enforce his preferences.

A president needs empathy and emotional intelligence, so that he can prevail in political dealings with

his own party and the opposition in Washington, and in face-to-face negotiations with foreign leaders, who otherwise will go away saying that this president is “weak” and that the country’s leadership role is suspect. He needs to be confident but not arrogant; open-minded but not a weather vane; resolute but still adaptable; historically minded but highly alert to the present; visionary but practical; personally disciplined but not a prig or martinet. He should be physically fit, disease-resistant, and capable of being fully alert at a moment’s notice when the phone rings at 3 a.m.—yet also able to sleep each night, despite unremitting tension and without chemical aids.

Ideally he would be self-aware enough that, in the center of a system that treats him as emperor-god, he could still recognize his own defects and try to offset them. The psychoanalyst Justin Frank has written *Obama on the Couch* as a follow-up to *Bush on the Couch*, examining the psychological roots of each president’s strengths and weaknesses in office. George W. Bush: eternally craving approval from his distant mother and more accomplished father (and finally surpassing him, solely in being reelected). Barack Obama: aloof and unconnected because of his absent father and his eternal status as outsider.

You can take this psychoanalytic approach seriously, or not. The significant fact is that an abnormal-psych study could be written on every president of the modern era except the one who never ran for national office, Gerald R. Ford, and possibly also the first George Bush. When I heard critical comments about Obama’s personal style, they usually started with this trait: his emotional distance from all but a handful of longtime friends and advisers.

A new president’s first term is usually an experiment in seeing which weak point will limit everything else he does. George W. Bush was disciplined and decisive but not sufficiently informed or inquisitive. Bill Clinton was informed and inquisitive but was nearly driven from office because he was not personally disciplined. George H. W. Bush was disciplined and informed but could not seem empathetic or visionary. Ronald Reagan was eloquent and decisive but less and less attentive to the analytic part of his job. You can take the list back a very long way. Many presidents who survive to a second term and thereby attain the ultimate in political success see their preexisting failings bear worse fruit. Impeachment for Bill Clinton, Iran-Contra for Ronald Reagan, impeachment and resignation for Richard Nixon, and so on. (The main contemporary exception has been George W. Bush, whose most controversial decisions and events all occurred during his first four years—from the invasion of Iraq to passage of the expensive Medicare Part D benefits to the outsized role of his vice president—and who in his second term tacked back from many of those policies.)

Another harsh reality of the modern presidency is one we conveniently forget when thinking about new presidents. Without exception, they betray their followers—and must do so, to stay in office and govern. In Obama’s case, this started with the forgiving approach to Wall Street and continued with his recommitment of troops to Afghanistan and extension of other Bush-era security policies.

However jarring, this is part of a historical norm. George W. Bush’s name was barely mentioned in the recent Republican primaries, because a party that professes concern about debt, deficit, and big bailouts cannot easily talk about what happened on his watch. Bill Clinton now reigns as the Democratic Party’s sun king and savior. But in office Clinton infuriated much of the constituency that

had elected him, with his support for welfare reform, his perceived bungling of the effort to pass a national health-care plan, and the rise in his personal popularity that followed the Democrats' historic loss of control in Congress. Just after Clinton was sworn in for his second term, this magazine published a cover story called "The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done." It was by Peter Edelman, who had resigned as a senior administration official to protest the compromises Clinton made with Newt Gingrich's Republicans in passing the welfare-reform bill. After Clinton left office, *The Atlantic's* Jack Beatty wrote, "Listening to Bill Clinton—by turns, charming, shrewd, and wise—speak at the opening of his presidential library in Little Rock last week, brought home anew the gap between his gifts of brain, heart, and speech, and what he made of them as president. In this he compares unfavorably to George W. Bush." Anything that bitter liberals have said about Barack Obama's weakness and willingness to compromise was said more bitterly about the previous Democratic president.

The first George Bush agreed to raise taxes to balance the budget—and in so doing violated his "Read my lips!" promise to oppose all tax increases. This left conservatives feeling so betrayed that in his reelection campaign he faced first a strong primary challenge by Pat Buchanan and then the third-party candidacy of Ross Perot. Ronald Reagan spent the first year of his administration cutting taxes and the next seven agreeing to continued increases. Before him, Jimmy Carter so antagonized the left that its champion, Teddy Kennedy, waged a bitter primary fight against him and badly weakened him for the general election. You can take this list, too, as far back as you like.

To recognize this long history is not to defend any of the specific Obama-era policies that have most disappointed his original supporters. It is instead a reminder that every president takes infuriating steps away from "the base"—sometimes for reasons that look in retrospect like statesmanship (Nixon with China), strategic error (Johnson with Vietnam), or mere creation of political maneuvering room (Clinton's "triangulation" after the Republican victories of 1994). It is easy to forget this in the exasperation that surrounds the incumbent of the moment. And this history is systematically forgotten every four years. After all, the question in each campaign is a different and simpler one. It is not "How many of his aspirations will this president fulfill, and what trade-offs must he make along the way?" but rather "Is he better or worse than that other person?"

There is one last certainty about assessing presidents, which is that their prospects for political survival and reelection are far more fluid and uncertain than we will think they were when we look back on them. With nearly 20 years' hindsight, it is "obvious" to everyone that the Clinton administration's "Hillarycare" plan was a political disaster. But when it was first presented to Congress, it was popular in opinion polls and was expected to pass. (Skeptical? In September 1993, just after the plan was unveiled, the veteran political analyst William Schneider wrote, "The reviews are in and the box office is terrific. President Clinton's health care reform plan is a hit ... The more people read and hear about the plan, the more they seem to like it.") Two weeks after the plan's release, the "Black Hawk Down" disaster occurred in Somalia, which led to the resignation of Clinton's defense secretary and a cascade of problems for the administration. A year later, Newt Gingrich and his Republicans had taken control of the House, and the health-care-reform era was over for the Clintons. It is in comparison with the Clintons' near-miss that Obama's passage of a

health-care bill—the first item of complaint by his critics—is considered such an achievement by veterans of other Democratic administrations.

Similarly, it is retrospectively obvious that Ronald Reagan was going to trounce Jimmy Carter. We know that he carried 44 states against Carter in 1980 and went on to a 49-state landslide against Walter Mondale four years later. But Carter—despite the American hostages in Iran, despite high gas prices and a bad economy, despite the primary challenge by Teddy Kennedy and the third-party challenge by John Anderson, despite everything—was neck-and-neck with Reagan, and ahead of him in some polls, until the last few days of the campaign.

Even at the time, it was obvious to everyone that Richard Nixon was going to trounce George McGovern in 1972. But less than six months before Election Day, Nixon felt uncertain enough to deploy the Watergate burglars to break into Democratic headquarters and try to gain an extra edge. George H. W. Bush, with an 89 percent approval rating just after the Gulf War, was so obviously headed toward reelection that he could barely take the callow Bill Clinton seriously. Four years later, with an Obama-esque 42 percent approval rating at the beginning of his reelection year, Clinton was obviously in trouble—but went on to an overwhelming win.

Whatever now seems obvious about Obama's strengths and weaknesses, the future perception of his achievements and electoral fate will be subject to luck and to the adjustments he will make, or fail to make, in his own performance. This point too is obvious, except that the entire political-pundit industry rests on amnesia about its own long-failed record of looking ahead. Lawrence Summers, for two years the head of Obama's economic council, made a similar argument about Obama's health-care legislation. "If he is reelected, 40 years from now this will be like Medicare—an achievement that is part of the landscape and that people can't imagine being without." And if Obama should lose, Summers told me, and especially if conservative judges after his departure overturn some of its provisions, "then the health-care plan will be presented as a sign of 'overreach' and 'hubris' and the administration's 'inevitable' failure."

Obama was blessed by luck—and skill—in his campaign, but his administration had bad luck even before it began. "He ended up governing a country he never expected to govern," Gary Hart, the former senator and presidential candidate, told me. "The crux of the Obama administration's problems can be traced to October 2008," with the accelerating financial collapse. "You have a president who in the last days of his campaign began to understand that he was going to have to make fundamental adjustments in everything he had intended. We'll never know what an Obama presidency absent the economic catastrophe would have looked like."

### **Every President Is Ill-Suited to Office, Each in a Different Way**

What have we learned about Barack Obama's particular versions of the weaknesses every president brings to office? The diagnoses I heard, and have myself observed, fall into four main categories:

*Inexperience*: that Obama's own lack of executive experience left him reliant on the instincts and institutional memory of others—and since so many of his appointees came from the Clinton administration, he was also vulnerable to '90s-vintage groupthink among them. This was particularly

true, as we'll see, during his response to the economic crisis in his first year in office, and then during his showdowns with Congress after Tea Party–inspired Republicans regained control of the House.

*Coldness*: that what looks serene in public can seem distant and aloof in his private dealings and negotiations.

*Complacency about talent*: that the disciplined excellence he demands of himself—in physical fitness and appearance, in literary polish of his speeches, in unvarying control of his mood and public presentation—has not extended to demands for a comparably excellent supporting staff.

*Symbolic mismatch*: that Obama's personal achievement in rising to the presidency betokened, for much of the electorate, far more sweeping ambitions for political change than Obama the incrementalist operator ever had in mind.

You could write a treatise on each of these, as scholars undoubtedly will. Here is the sort of material you would use in the discussion.

About *inexperience*: “The key to everything is that he was a first-term senator, and one who began running for the presidency in the second year of his first term,” Gary Hart told me. “Governors have better odds of becoming president, but the Senate can be an ideal place to meet ... the new thinkers, hear about things and ideas that are over the horizon, and develop your own network of people you trust and will draw from. Because he began running so quickly, that is something he had little chance to do.”

Several people pointed out that Bill Clinton, though younger than Obama when he became president, had developed a network of advisers, friends, and thinkers through his nearly 12 years as a governor and a lifetime as a contact-maker across the United States and around the world. By the time Bill Clinton ran for the White House, thousands of people considered themselves FOBs, Friends of Bill. If you asked who his closest or “best” friend was, apart from Hillary, you would never get to the end of the answers. Obama had a much thinner array of Friends of Barack. When I asked associates and friends who his confidants were, apart from Michelle, the one name that kept recurring was Valerie Jarrett, a close friend of both Obamas in Chicago and a senior adviser in the White House, sometimes followed by his strategist David Axelrod. Because his own network of advisers was limited, and as part of the settlement of the bitter primary battle with Hillary, Obama inherited many of the Clintons' contacts and team members.

“In any new administration ... the 20-somethings who'd been working in the campaign ... get the second- and third-layer staff jobs,” Hart said. “And for Obama, you had his immediate Chicago group. But the staff and policy positions—the Podestas [John Podesta, Clinton's White House chief of staff who co-chaired Obama's transition team] and Rahms [Rahm Emanuel, a Clinton White House adviser who became Obama's first chief of staff], and in State, Defense, and the NSC—it was essentially a third Clinton term.”

Some such carryover is inevitable and healthy, since junior members of one administration are natural candidates for senior posts the next time their party comes to power. The difference many

people stressed was Obama's comparative lack of an offsetting team of his own, and the edge that gave to those whose instincts were developed in the Clinton era. "When I look at the first year," one person told me, "I see people saying, 'Here is what we tried to do in the '90s, let's try it again—and here is my Rolodex [sic!] of people to work the problem.'" A person who has worked closely with the White House staff said, "Early on, you had all these Clinton-era economist-technocrat types"—Lawrence Summers, Peter Orszag, Timothy Geithner, and the like. "The danger is that if one of them is making a mistake, everybody agrees, and they're all making the same mistake."

Another person, who has extensive national-level experience, said that the biggest surprise for any new president is the strain placed upon the "decision-making muscle," since the choices that come upon him every day are precisely those the rest of the government has not been able to resolve. The question for someone whose only real executive training has been the management of his campaign is "how quickly that muscle will develop and improve"; as it is developing, the instincts and institutional memory of those around him inevitably have great effect. Obama frequently emphasizes how many troubles he faced as soon as he took office. The real problem, for an inexperienced president, is that he had to make so many big decisions so fast. How tough to get on Wall Street; how hard to push for extra stimulus; how much time to give Congress to mull health-care plans; how much to trust the Republicans to cooperate; how long to delay on energy and environmental plans—these are just some of the choices Obama had to make about domestic affairs.

With the clarity of hindsight, many of the choices look ill-considered, to say the least. He should have been harder on Wall Street, less patient about drafting of the health-care bill, more suspicious of Republican efforts to block his legislation and nominees. Plus, he should have made sure that Martha Coakley knew who Curt Schilling was! "I think they made a fundamental strategic error in presenting the health-care plan the way that they did," Jim Webb, the Democratic senator from Virginia, told me. "They were so conscious of not presenting Congress with a 1,000-page fait accompli, which was the big complaint about the Clinton plan, that they farmed it out to five committees and let 7,000 pages of health-care plans percolate up." Walter Mondale, the former vice president, made a similar point. "He had his honeymoon, but he took the position that he would let Congress work this all out. I think a president has got to be on legislators' backs all the way through, or it won't get done—or will be done in a way that involves all kinds of private packages on the Hill."

These misjudgments were the result of his own inexperience—and his reliance on a staff whose own formative experiences were mainly from the Clinton years and who were refighting some of those battles under different circumstances. But through the past year, his "decision muscle" appears to have developed. He has continued to make big strategic calls—from authorizing the assault on Osama bin Laden to defying the Republicans over the payroll-tax holiday—and most have gone his way.

### **Cool—or Cold?**

About *coldness*, the next item on the standard list of complaints: Politicians appeal to the left brain—ideas, interests—but at least as much to the emotions, hopes, and insecurities associated with the brain's right side. Politics inside Washington also runs on countless small acts of flattery and social-favor exchange: Who gets tickets for the White House box at the Kennedy Center? Who will get a

signed picture with the president to display on the office's "brag wall"?

"President Obama's extra-high intellectual capacity is simply not matched by his emotional capacity," I was told by someone with long experience in the executive branch. "Surprisingly for someone who led such an inspirational campaign, he does not seem to have the ability to connect with people." At the non-glorious but important retail level of politics, this leads to complaints by Democratic representatives and senators about having to *ask* for the small strokes to their vanity that matter so much, and that politicians as different as Bill Clinton or either of the George Bushes would administer instinctively. One senior fund-raiser, who considered himself beyond having any specific favors to ask of the administration, kept waiting for an invitation to visit the White House. Eventually he was invited for a briefing there, along with a number of others who had played supportive roles in the campaign. "The president walked in, he sat down in the front row of the briefing room, he listened along with everyone else, and then he walked out without speaking to anyone," a person familiar with the event said. "People would just as soon have not been invited." I heard variations of this story from legislators and others in the role of miffed supporter.

You hear this kind of griping about whoever is in the White House; and if you have the slightest introverted tendency yourself, you can sympathize with the desire not to be "on" and engaged with people who want your attention every instant of the day. Bill Clinton, of course, is not fully alive unless "on." Like Clinton and unlike George W. Bush, Barack Obama is said to be a night owl. But in the wee hours, Clinton would be on the phone, playing cards with friends, gabbing about history and politics, or doing anything else that involved live human company. Obama is more likely to be spending time with papers or a book, or even to be online—prowling through the same blogs and news sites as the rest of us, which is somehow unnerving given a president's otherwise total cocooning from the daily details of shopping, driving, waiting, in ordinary Americans' lives.

It turns out that Obama is sufficiently aware of and sensitive about his Mr. Spock-like image to have called it the "biggest misconception" about him in a year-end interview with Barbara Walters on ABC in December. It was entirely wrong, he said, for the public to think of him as "being detached, or Spock-like, or very analytical. People who know me know that I am a softie. I mean, stuff can choke me up very easily. The challenge for me is that in this job ... people want you to be very demonstrative in your emotions. And if you're not sort of showing it in a very theatrical way, then somehow it doesn't translate over the screen."

Whatever he thinks his real emotional makeup might be, the challenge of "showing it," and translating it over the screen, affects his ability to lead. As an explainer of ideas through rhetoric, Obama has few recent peers. And at least twice in the past four years, he has changed national opinion, and politically saved himself, through the emotional content of his words and presence. Once was in March 2008, when the media storm about his radical-sounding pastor, Jeremiah "God Damn America!" Wright, threatened to end his candidacy. Then Obama responded with his speech in Philadelphia about the meaning of race in America—which at least for a while, and for at least enough of the electorate to let him survive, made his mixed-race heritage a symbol not of threatening otherness but of the country's true nature. Then, in January of last year, his party's historic rout

during the midterm elections had made Obama seem as shrunken and defeated a figure as Bill Clinton had seemed after his midterm losses 16 years before. But even his usual opponents hailed Obama's speech in Tucson after the horrific shooting of Representative Gabby Giffords and others, for its sober but healing emotional power. One conservative blog, Power Line, said it was a "brilliant, spellbinding, and fitting speech"; John Podhoretz, a former speechwriter for Ronald Reagan, wrote in the *New York Post* that it was "beautiful and moving and powerful." Politically, this is when Obama seemed to return to life after the midterm disaster.

Jimmy Carter, like Obama primarily a creature of the left brain, had no comparable moments of emotionally triumphant rhetoric. But elevated as they are, such moments are still exceptions to Obama's mainly rational appeal. His natural register involves great issues of law and race—but not economics, and especially not economic struggle, which has turned out to be the commanding domestic issue of his time. Obama ran for office when the most urgent issues seemed to be war and peace, plus the moral basis of America's standing in the world. He has ended up governing when the most urgent issue has been jobs-jobs-jobs, which, as a matter both of policy and of rhetorical connection, comes less naturally to him.

"Politics changes when people can't pay for their home mortgages and can't afford medical care and can't send their kids to school," Walter Mondale told me. "It is such a humiliating blow to be the head of a family and be unable to work and provide, that people don't respond entirely rationally all the time. It can explode in politics in a hard-to-understand way." Mondale said that until the midterm elections, Obama was seen—incorrectly, in Mondale's view—as an "aloof and diffident president in the eyes of those who were suffering." But he has now, Mondale thinks, changed his tone.

"The president," another very experienced Democratic politician told me, "is the only person in the American system who represents all the people, and learning what you need to know to effectively represent all the people is really impossible to do with intellect alone. You have to understand, emotionally, what people are feeling and going through. You have to cut through whatever intellectual jargon is given you by your advisers and pollsters, and cut right to the core. We don't see that in Obama. I have seen him try to synthesize it, but it comes across as synthetic."

*Complacency about talent?* This is a wounding charge for any administration, and perhaps the most surprising thing to hear about one that has a former senator and presidential contender in one Cabinet post and a Nobel Prize-winning physicist in another, that attracted a prospective Republican presidential candidate to the most important overseas diplomatic assignment, and that at different stages has deployed the likes of David Petraeus, Robert Gates, and the late Richard Holbrooke. But here is a representative story, which I heard several times: Just before the midterm elections, which undid then-Representative Rahm Emanuel's achievement of leading a Democratic takeover of the House in 2006, Emanuel announced that he was leaving as White House chief of staff to run for mayor of Chicago. Shortly after William Daley, himself the son and brother of Chicago mayors, succeeded Emanuel in the White House, he came to Obama with his initial report. You are reeling, he said—stating the obvious after the Republican surge. Part of the problem is that the team around you is not good enough. To raise your game, you have to surround yourself with the best people available.

There have to be changes.

Obama thought about it, and reportedly called Daley back in a few days later. “I like my team,” he said. “I am comfortable with who I have around me. Just so there’s no miscommunication, I’m saying that I like this team.” (The White House declined to comment on the episode.)

“The people he is most ‘comfortable’ with have the same limits of experience he does,” a veteran political figure told me. “An emotional reliance on people who are good people, and smart, but simply not A-plus players—it’s a limit.” These discussions often revolve around the central role of Valerie Jarrett in the Obamas’ professional and social lives. Her supporters say that she is the one friend they can truly trust; her detractors say that her omnipresence illustrates the narrowness of the president’s contacts.

Again, if you have been around politics, you have heard complaints about every White House staff—this one is too quarrelsome, that one is too paranoid. The one I was part of, in the Carter administration, was called Dogpatch-like and incompetent in its time. Several people who spoke on the record, like Lawrence Summers, made the opposite case about Obama. “Some White House staffs are well organized and disciplined, but the president is distant,” he said. “Others have intense presidential involvement but also some chaos, with micromanagement and relitigation.” Obama’s operation, he said, has been distinctive. The Obama team, he said, “stands out for having both intense presidential involvement and reasonable organizational order.” Still, this was the minority view—and given the brilliance of Obama’s campaign and the rigor of his standards for himself, “a subpar collection of talent” is not the complaint I expected to hear.

And *symbolic mismatch*? On the night he was elected, as a rhetorical opening of his speech to the throngs in Grant Park, Obama said, “Change has come to America.” He was careful to add that his election was only the beginning, that there was hard work and disappointment and—though he didn’t use the word—compromise still ahead. But every presidential election seems at the time to signal a new era, and that night the success of a handsome young black intellectual inevitably aroused expectations of comparably dramatic changes in policies. “I get the importance of his own achievement, and I celebrate it, but it was the wrong thing to say,” a senior Democratic official told me. “He opened himself to the interpretation that the great struggle was over just by virtue of his being elected, that ‘change had come’ to America before he had spent a day in office.”

In an influential *Atlantic* cover story published before the election, called “Goodbye to All That: Why Obama Matters,” Andrew Sullivan argued that precisely because of *who Obama was*—not just of mixed race but of a new generation, one not doomed to endless trench warfare in the cultural struggles that began in the 1960s—his election would in itself be significant, apart from any policies he might enact. Except for his early and politically crucial opposition to the Iraq War—the choice that made him rather than Hillary Clinton the Democratic nominee—Obama’s policies placed him, if anything, to the right of Clinton and the rest of the Democratic field. For instance, he attacked Clinton’s health-care plan because it included an “individual mandate” to buy insurance. “If a mandate was the solution,” he said on CNN not long after her victory in the New Hampshire primary, “we can try that to solve homelessness by mandating everybody to buy a house.”

No one remembered. A man who looked the way Obama did and ran on the platform of Hope necessarily faced expectations that would never have fallen on a President John Kerry, or Joe Biden, or Hillary Clinton. If Obama loses this year, inescapably he will be judged as a disappointment—not simply for having lost but for having governed in such a prosaic style after campaigning with such poetry. After Václav Havel's death, late last year, *The New York Times* reported that he had met Obama shortly after Obama's inauguration and given him a warning. "Limitless hope" projected onto a leader could be dangerous, Havel reportedly said, since "disappointment ... could boil over into anger and resentment." Obama told Havel that, as *The Times* put it, he was becoming "acutely aware" of the possibility.

### **What Obama Has Done ...**

Obama's opponents will argue this year that he has been both incompetent and diabolically effective: too weak in defending the nation's interests, and all too skillful in advancing his socialist agenda. The most disappointed of his former supporters may feel that the hopes he has dashed outweigh the achievements he has won. A year from now, we'll all know what we think.

What I've concluded now is that Obama has shown the main trait we can hope for in a president—an ability to grow and adapt—and that the reason to oppose his reelection would be disagreement with his goals, not that he proved unable to rise to the job. As time has gone on, he has given increasing evidence that the skills he displayed in the campaign were not purely a fluke.

"Three of the most important things he has done are hardest to appreciate," Tom Daschle, the former Senate majority leader and an early supporter of Obama's presidential campaign, told me. Obama had named Daschle to head his health-care initiative as secretary of Health and Human Services, but Daschle withdrew in a controversy over his income-tax payments. He listed three of the achievements that I heard most often in talking with other Obama supporters.

The first is a negative accomplishment: avoiding an economic catastrophe even worse than the one the United States and the world have been through. Jim Webb, who was in the Senate when the Bush administration was requesting the first round of TARP "bailout" funds, said that he called economists he trusted for advice on what to do. "Every one of them said, 'You have to do this'—vote for the funds," he told me. "One of them told me, 'These people need to be punished, but first you have to keep the system from going into cataclysmic default.'"

The second is what Daschle called "the dramatic improvement in the American image abroad." The daily reports about American problems around the world, the crises in U.S. relations with Pakistan and a few other countries, the ongoing worldwide bull session about whether the U.S. is "in decline"—all of these things mask the broad and dramatic improvement in America's "soft power" and international standing during Obama's time. For instance: according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, in 2008 the positive view of the United States in Germany was 31 percent, in France it was 42 percent, and in Japan it was 50 percent. Last year, it was 62 percent in Germany, 75 percent in France, and 85 percent in Japan (the dramatic improvement in Japan was partly in response to U.S. aid after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident early in the year). These changes can make a real

difference for American ideals and interests, but it is hard to mention them in American political debates without sounding “French.”

And finally, according to Daschle, the health-care bill that passed so narrowly and is so controversial will, especially if Obama is reelected, rank with Medicare in the list of legislative and social achievements by Democratic presidents. Yes, having helped plan the bill, Daschle is biased—as is Lawrence Summers, who argues that because of the health-care plan, “the historic debate will be whether the accomplishments of his first two years are the most substantial since Lyndon Johnson’s in 1965–66, or the most substantial since FDR’s in 1933–34.”

Other party grandees I spoke with, including Gary Hart and Walter Mondale, who had fought for the nomination that Mondale won in 1984, and Michael Dukakis, who won the nomination in 1988, emphasized how much Obama had accomplished given the economic hole he had to dig out of and the Republicans’ political strategy of simply trying to thwart him. Each had critiques and suggestions on the margin. Dukakis thought there could and should have been a stronger emphasis on public-service jobs—direct hiring of teachers, public-health workers, road builders—as part of an initial stimulus program. “In all the other recessions that I remember, public-service jobs were an important component of fighting unemployment,” he said. “I believe in giving people unemployment checks for half a year or even a year and helping in the course of their job search—and after that, if there simply are not a lot of jobs out there, you take the checks and turn them into jobs. But, for the Republicans these days, public-service jobs are Bolshevik policy”—a slight (but only slight) overstatement of the real Republican opposition to direct job creation through public projects. Mondale wished that Obama had been tougher on the banks and had started campaigning earlier against the Republican strategy of stonewalling his health-care proposals. Hart regretted that Obama had not tried harder to transform the Cold War military structure and contain the defense budget—areas of Hart’s expertise starting with his “defense reform” caucus in the 1980s—or moved more quickly toward disengagement from Iraq and Afghanistan. I would add my amazement at the administration’s lackadaisical approach to the crucial business of staffing the government. Three years in, Obama had left more vacancies on the federal bench, and used his recess-appointment power far less often, than any of his recent predecessors. Part of this reflected Republican determination to block his nominations; part, Obama’s decision not to fight.

### **Test Cases**

So where can Obama claim to have shown mastery of the job? In foreign policy, where a president can carry out his own strategy, he has shown that he actually has a strategy to execute. And in management of the domestic economy, he has shown increasing command of the tools of office, in ways surprisingly prefigured by his temperamental opposite, Harry Truman.

Like any president, Obama has had his share of embarrassments and failures in foreign policy. U.S. relations with Israel are near one of their periodic lows and perhaps worse than that, with many people in Israel feeling that they can’t trust Obama, and much of the rest of the world viewing him as having been outmaneuvered by Netanyahu. Relations with Pakistan are worse; the situation in Afghanistan has been contained rather than solved; and then there is Iran. But through his first three

years in office, Obama suffered no major international disasters or setbacks, and meanwhile managed surprising progress on many fronts at once. If you were making a list of what has gone right, or not gone as badly wrong as it could have on his watch, it would include:

- containing what could have been an open-ended commitment in Iraq;
- walking a tightrope in Afghanistan: avoiding criticism from the military for doing too little while also preparing a path for withdrawal;
- managing the troubled relationship with Pakistan—including in the aftermath of the Osama bin Laden raid;
- encouraging the Arab Spring events in general, without getting mired in the details of any of them;
- supporting the Europeans during their debt crisis, while keeping the United States somewhat insulated from it; and
- putting U.S. relations with China on a better footing than in many years, a task that has to be among the very most important for any president of the early 21st century.

This last item is one I watched unfold from the beginning of this administration, when I was still based in Beijing. Much like Nixon's approach to China, I think it will eventually be studied for its skillful combination of hard and soft power, incentives and threats, urgency and patience, plus deliberate—and effective—misdirection. The details are significant:

As Obama began his term, official China was growing smug and prideful. The triumphant Beijing Olympics were just behind it; the American financial collapse symbolized the decline of a superpower and the world's reliance on its new paymasters, the Chinese. Because of China's heavy reliance on exports, its labor force was hit harder by the worldwide collapse of demand than that of any other major economy, but the Chinese pulled themselves out far more rapidly. Americans and Europeans dithered about applying stimulus; the Chinese went ahead and applied it, creating jobs for many millions of people and expanding the country's physical infrastructure in the process.

By the time Obama made his state visit to Shanghai and Beijing, in November 2009, the press in both countries and the rest of the world was primed to present his usual low-key demeanor as servility. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* contrasted Obama's supposed hat-in-hand manner with the bravado of Bill Clinton, who had mentioned the Tiananmen Square protests while standing next to President Jiang Zemin.

Yet even as Obama was politely listening to lectures about China's new superiority, members of his administration were executing an elaborate pincer movement to reestablish American influence, real and perceived, among the growing economies of Asia. In practically every formal statement by U.S.

officials, from President Obama to Secretaries Clinton, Geithner, and Gates, U.S. representatives hammered home a single message. The message was that America *welcomed rather than feared* China's continued rise. This was directed at a widespread Chinese suspicion: that America would try to thwart China's continued development because it viewed any increase in Chinese influence as a flat-out loss for the United States.

Many Chinese officials remained skeptical, but the reassurances set the stage for the next phase of the administration's message: we welcome your rise, but we disagree on the following things— censorship, currency, and pollution, all matters that could be presented as containable items for discussion rather than as inherently threatening aspects of China's ascent.

In the few months after Obama's visit to China, some Chinese military and diplomatic officials began believing their own adulatory press clips. China entered its period of what was broadly described as overreach: challenging the Japanese, South Korean, Vietnamese, and Philippine navies with expanded claims of coming supremacy in the South China Sea and the broader Pacific; antagonizing trading partners from Russia to Burma to Australia with more-aggressive practices and claims. Through this period, the U.S. government was stitching up relations with every one of these countries. Part of the message was that with its inevitable extraction from the mire of Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States could reassert its presence in the fastest-growing economic region of the world; the other part was that, for all its excesses, the United States was an easier regional power to live with than the Chinese would be.

Two years after Obama's "humiliating" visit to Shanghai and Beijing, U.S. relations with China were a mix of cooperation and tension, as they had been through the post-Nixon years. But American relations with most other nations in the region were better than since before the Iraq War. In a visit to Australia late in 2011, Obama startled the Chinese leadership but won compliments elsewhere with the announcement of a new permanent U.S. Marine presence in Darwin, on Australia's northern coast.

The strategy was Sun Tzu-like in its patient pursuit of an objective: reestablishing American hard and soft power while presenting a smiling "We welcome your rise!" face to the Chinese. "It was as decisive a diplomatic victory as anyone is likely to see," Walter Russell Mead, of Bard College, often a critic of the administration, wrote about the announcement of the Australian base. "In the field of foreign policy, this was a coming of age of the Obama administration and it was conceived and executed about as flawlessly as these things ever can be."

In the realm of foreign policy, Barack Obama has learned what every modern president eventually does: despite the dangers, the emergencies, the intractable disagreements, and the life-and-death risks, international affairs naturally claim an ever-growing share of a president's attention and enthusiasm. On the world stage, he represents an entire mighty country, not one perhaps-embattled party. International figures may be frustrating to deal with—Karzai, Ahmadinejad, Netanyahu in their different ways—but usually they can't totally thwart or undermine him the way a Mitch McConnell or a Roger Ailes can. He can think big thoughts and announce big plans without seeing them immediately picked apart or ridiculed. And he can dare to devise a long-term strategy, like Obama's with China, knowing that the tools for carrying it out—in the military, the diplomatic corps, the

intelligence agencies, and the rest of the national-security apparatus—are within his line of command.

It is no wonder that the “national-security state” in all its aspects has continued to grow throughout the decades since the beginning of World War II. Defense budgets, intelligence and surveillance networks, private military contractors, irregular forms of war: these and other executive-branch tools of international power work like a ratchet. Some presidents rapidly increase them in times of emergency, as George W. Bush did after the 9/11 attacks. No president scales them back. Thus the imbalance continues to grow between international efforts, where a president has an ever greater array of tools and weapons, and the frustrating domestic arena. Despite having run on his opposition to the Iraq War and overseen the formal U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, Barack Obama has, if anything, expanded the range of executive military power, from his unilateral (and mainly successful) decision to intervene in Libya to his expansion of drone attacks.

Think of the contrast with domestic affairs, especially economic management. Here the “chess master” case for Obama is that things did not deteriorate as disastrously as they easily could have. The “pawn” argument is that he was too often the victim of events, a cunning opposition, and his own naïveté—and will survive politically, if he does, thanks mainly to the clumsiness and overreach of his Republican opposition.

The standard view of Obama’s failures in the closely intertwined domestic fields of economic management and political strategy involves this series of mistakes, with cumulatively worsening impact:

- His administration underestimated the severity of the economic crisis from the outset, and therefore
- it proposed too small an offsetting response, while promising too quick a recovery; and meanwhile
- it coddled the financiers who had created the crisis, being quick to cover their losses and very slow to impose any conditions or correctives; while
- it wasted precious “honeymoon” time humoring the congressional committees that dickered over a proposed health-care bill; and throughout this time
- it naively imagined that the congressional Republicans were interested mainly in compromise solutions, which dispirited the administration’s allies and gave Obama a reputation for prizing the appearance of being reasonable over the achievement of his economic goals; and even worse
- it was fatally slow to recognize the Republican strategy of blocking its appointments and filibustering bills—and even when it saw what was happening, it enabled that strategy, by refusing to fight for nominees who encountered resistance (Elizabeth Warren being only the

most familiar name on a long list) and failing to fight the routine use of the filibuster, as its predecessors had. And as if all this were not enough, after the rout in the 2010 election

- it self-destructively adopted the Republican claim that the federal deficit was the most immediate threat to the country, even though cutting the budget in response to that threat would make the real emergencies of unemployment and recession worse. And, finally
- it created a disaster that nearly consumed it, by trusting the new congressional Republican majority, now that it had what Obama called “the responsibility to govern,” not to risk a showdown over raising the ceiling of federal borrowing last year.

The list could go on, with items elaborating two main concerns: that the president and his team didn't know what they were getting into, and that they were always one move behind real-time events in the political combat of today's Washington.

What is the possible contrary case? Someday, we may know how the president himself might answer that question. (The White House declined our repeated requests for an interview.) His reflections in public have tended to be anodyne laments about the failure of bipartisan spirit; he can't possibly believe it's that innocent. But those around him make the case that in addition to being very unlucky (in the circumstances he inherited) and very lucky (in the Republican field that chose to run against him), Obama also shaped his luck by being shrewd, in three significant ways. First, according to this view, he always kept his eye on what mattered most, namely avoiding another recession—and compromised and backtracked only when, in his assessment, the alternative would have been a greater economic risk. Next, he absorbed pummeling by Republicans not so much because he was weak or unsuspecting as because he recognized problems the over-reaching opposition was creating for itself, much as he had during the 2008 primaries (and much as Bill Clinton had in 1995). And finally, that while like all presidents he came in unprepared, he adjusted as fast as anyone could have expected and was increasingly in control of events as time went on. Obviously, these don't add up to the hopes for a second Lincoln that some of his most fervent backers held four years ago. But I think they are plausible analyses on their own terms.

The first contention—that from beginning to end Obama has chosen the path he thought would minimize new shocks to the economy—accords with normal political logic, since the worst threat to a sitting president is exactly the kind of slowdown Obama has tried to avoid, with mixed results at best through his first three years. It also makes sense of an otherwise disparate pattern of decisions, starting with his administration's apparent coddling of Wall Street in 2009. This early failure of accountability is the main theme of Ron Suskind's *Confidence Men*, and virtually everyone I spoke with said that it created a substantive and symbolic problem the administration has never fully recovered from. Substantive, because of the “moral hazard” created by using public money to guarantee the bonuses and repay the losses of people who had been so recklessly destructive. Symbolic, for all the reasons that eventually came to a head with last year's Occupy movement.

An official familiar with the administration's economic policy told me: “The recapitalization of the

banks was a good idea, and necessary. But we did not put enough conditions on [their] getting the money. Ultimately not being tougher with the guys that got the money is the thing that overthrows the government twice—in 2008 [in a reaction against Bush’s TARP plan] and again in 2010.”

Keeping the system going was the guideline during the early days of financial rescue, and again later during the argument over government shutdowns and the raising of the debt ceiling. During the initial rescue, Obama’s response was of course shaped by the technocrat circle that guided the effort. From their experience with Asian and Latin American financial panics during the Clinton era, the likes of Summers, Geithner, and Orszag understood that their task was akin to emergency-room medicine, or firefighting. They had to contain the emergency first, because otherwise there was no telling how dire the consequences could be, and worry about anything else later. “Larry, Tim, Peter—when they heard about restricting bonuses or compensation, they would think, *These are people’s contracts, we can’t change their contracts,*” a member of the executive branch said. “But really it was the idea that the problem was enormous, the economy is in big trouble, do we want to make enemies while we’re putting out the fire? Usually they opted for whatever they thought would keep the economy going.” This rings true about the mood in the middle of an emergency, and also about the cultural tone-deafness that can affect people who all come from the same rarefied world.

So too during the showdowns with Congress over keeping the government funded, or raising the debt ceiling to prevent a default on Treasury notes. After the Republicans gained control of the House in the 2010 midterms, the negotiating team on the administration side was heavy on Clinton-era veterans who had been through previous dealings with a Republican Congress. Gene Sperling, who succeeded Summers as head of the National Economic Council and had held the same job during the Clinton years, and Jacob Lew, who succeeded Peter Orszag at the Office of Management and Budget and then William Daley as chief of staff, had dealt with Speaker Newt Gingrich and his new Republican majority in the 1995 budget battle that led to a government shutdown. Jason Furman, now Sperling’s deputy at the NEC, was a young staff economist on Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisers at about the same time.

As they tried to arrange budget agreements with Speaker John Boehner and his new majority, they seemed to be the last people in Washington to recognize how different the circumstances were. The 54 new Republican representatives who arrived with Newt Gingrich mainly owed their positions to him. Or they thought they did: Gingrich’s “Contract With America” had been the unified nationwide platform for the GOP surge that year. When Bill Clinton sat down to negotiate with him, a deal made with Gingrich was a deal that would stick.

But the Obama team got clearer and clearer signals—first in budget negotiations in the spring, then in votes on the debt ceiling in the summer, and then in the confrontation over the payroll-tax holiday just before Christmas—that Boehner was a leader without a following. The 63 Republican freshmen owed him nothing; many had run against Washington business-as-usual practices that included the GOP establishment. “The Tea Party didn’t want a deal,” Austan Goolsbee told me. “The world understood that default was crazy and would destroy the economy. But hitting the ceiling would force big parts of the government out of business. *That’s* what they wanted. They weren’t bluffing.”

If keeping the economy growing was so central for Obama, why was the initial stimulus “only” \$800 billion? “The case is quite compelling that if more fiscal and monetary expansion had been done at the beginning, things would have been better,” Lawrence Summers told me late last year. “That is my reading of the economic evidence. My understanding of the judgment of political experts is that it wasn’t feasible to do.” Rahm Emanuel told me that within a month of Obama’s election, but still another month before he took office, “the respectable range for how much stimulus you would need jumped from \$400 billion to \$800 billion.” In retrospect it should have been larger—but, Emanuel says, “in the Congress and the opinion pages, the line between ‘prudent’ and ‘crazy spendthrift’ was \$800 billion. A dollar less, and you were a statesman. A dollar more, you were irresponsible.” The three Republicans who voted for the stimulus bill—Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe of Maine, and about-to-be-Democrat Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania—all complained that it was far too large, as did Jim Webb and many other Democrats.

### Can Obama Play Truman?

The second, related argument is that Obama’s passive, even withdrawn-seeming stance as “the only adult in the room” has positioned him better for reelection—and thus for his best chance to lock in the gains he has made—than a more directly combative approach would have. Not until Obama writes his post-presidential sequel to *Dreams From My Father*, and perhaps not even then, will we know all the sources of his seeming horror of partisan conflict. His above-the-fray pose was certainly the key to his rise in the first place. I was in the arena in Boston when he declared in his 2004 convention speech, “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the *United States of America*.” The house erupted in cheers, and America’s first black president could not have gone on to win had he struck a more strident or divisive tone.

But lines like that described an ideal, not an operational reality, and once Obama entered office, his opponents didn’t buy them. Late last year John Barrasso, a Republican senator from Wyoming, explained to me that his colleagues would have been “only too willing” to work with Obama, if he had not, in Barrasso’s view, “frozen us out” by listening only to Nancy Pelosi and the extreme-liberal base.

If Obama really thought that America had moved past partisan division, then he was too innocent for the job. But part of political leadership is being able to project a positive idealism that you know is at odds with the real world. I am ready to believe that Obama adopted this faux-harmonious tone, apart from its being his natural register, as a way to win the election, and as a marker for what he hoped America could become, and—crucially—that once in office, he maintained it as a sound position for himself as he moved toward reelection. Late last year, he also applied it with chess-master skill against the congressional Republicans, in daring them to let the widely popular payroll-tax cut expire at the start of an election year. They backed off, and when the dust settled, the Republicans found themselves at an unaccustomed political disadvantage. Having secured an agreement on government funding for the rest of the year, Obama had taken one of their favorite tools, the threat of a government shutdown, out of their hands through the campaign season. And after three years of seeming to shy from “partisan” rhetoric, he began linking the slate of GOP presidential contenders to the Tea Party–dominated Republican Congress, whose approval ratings were far worse than his own.

The payoff for Obama in a strategy of remaining Mr. Reasonable is the prospect of occupying the acceptable center, as the Tea Party spins the Republican Party off to the extreme. The risk is that even if the Republicans make themselves unpopular through filibuster and obstruction, they make Obama look weak—and that’s worse.

Obama’s future, and his effectiveness, depend on that balance, whose results we will see this year. My impression from recent evidence is that he has found his footing, and has come to understand how to use the constrained but still real powers of a president facing congressional opposition—just in time. The most enlightening document I found for assessing Obama’s recent moves turns out to be 66 years old.

This is a memorandum that James H. Rowe Jr., a Harvard-trained lawyer who had been Oliver Wendell Holmes’s last law clerk on the Supreme Court and after World War II was a young official at the Bureau of the Budget, wrote to President Harry Truman soon after the midterm elections of 1946. In that election, the Republicans gained 55 seats in the House and 12 in the Senate, to take control of both houses for the first time since before the New Deal. Truman was if anything less prepared, for more overwhelming responsibilities, than Obama was. Three months after he unexpectedly became president upon Franklin Roosevelt’s death, he had to decide on the use of atomic weapons whose very existence FDR had never let him know about. After that came management of post-war Europe and Asia. But the fundamentals of Truman’s political situation, as described in Rowe’s memo, are amazingly similar to those Obama now faces.

Rowe tells Truman that, with the Republican victory, he should be prepared for obstruction and nonstop partisan stalemate, not because of strategic mistakes on his side but because this is the basic nature of the American system. Anyone who thinks that American politics is more embattled “than ever,” as I am often tempted to, should read this memo (and Samuel Popkin’s exegesis of it, in *The Candidate*).

Rowe points out that when an opposing party holds Congress, it will always view weakening the president as its paramount goal. It will launch as many congressional investigations as possible, in hopes of finding scandal in an administration or at least distracting its appointees. It will block nominations and try to frustrate a president’s attempts to keep the executive branch operational. Its leaders will define “compromise” as the president’s accepting all of their demands and abandoning his own. If the leaders of Congress do finally strike a deal with the administration, a president should be wary. The “simple fact” about most deals with a congressional opposition, he writes, is that “they just won’t work under the American two-party system”:

For “cooperation” is a one-way street. The President can discipline the Executive Branch sufficiently by exercising his right to hire and fire; he can force it to cooperate. The Republican leaders may agree to have co-equal responsibility for executing the agreements reached on policy but they do not have co-equal power “to deliver” ... [Congress] has no parliamentary discipline ... for a very simple reason—Congressmen are *not* representatives of *all* the people; they represent only their own districts or sections and the particular pressure groups within those sections which are vital to them. No Congressional leader can commit his party because

no commitments are binding upon the Members except those they may personally make to their own sections.

Negative discipline, of the kind that Mitch McConnell has exercised to keep Senate Republicans voting as a bloc against Obama's proposals, is easier to maintain than positive discipline, of the kind Newt Gingrich wielded temporarily over his Republican majority. That is the exception. A president "should first of all accept the inevitability that formal cooperation is unworkable," Rowe concludes. "Despite his sincere desire to cooperate, he should accept the verdict of the politicians, of history, and of the disinterested students of government."

And so Rowe offers his recommendation. With legislative ambitions blocked, with many appointments left to languish, with rear-guard battles under way to uphold vetoes and fend off investigation, a president should resort to the only tool that is uniquely his: the ability to speak to all of the public. He should prepare the ground by sounding reasonable and conciliatory, in light of an unquenchable if unrealistic belief that parties should be able to get along. ("Public demand for bipartisan cooperation will probably continue. The *realpolitik* of the situation requires that there be some gestures toward cooperation.") Then, with his bona fides established, the president can move into the next election, making a clear case for his side.

If Barack Obama loses this fall, he will forever seem a disappointment: a symbolically important but accidental figure who raised hopes he could not fulfill and met difficulties he did not know how to surmount. He meant to show the unity of America but only underscored its division. As a candidate, he symbolized transformation; in office, he applied incrementalism and demonstrated the limits of change. His most important achievement, helping forestall a second Great Depression, will be taken for granted or discounted in the dismay about the economic problems he did not solve. His main legislative accomplishment, the health-care bill, may well be overturned; his effect on America's international standing will pass; his talk about bridging the partisan divide will seem one more sign of his fatal naïveté. If he is reelected, he will have a chance to solidify what he has accomplished and, more important, build on what he has learned. All of this is additional motivation, as if he needed any, for him to drive for reelection; none of it makes him any more palatable to those who oppose him and his goals.

And for those who supported him the first time, as I did? To me, the evidence suggests that given a second term, he would have a better chance of becoming the figure so many people imagined.

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