

OBAMA'S TIME

A HISTORY



MORTON KELLER

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In memory of James Q. Wilson

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Preface

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OBAMA'S FIRST TERM is history; his second term is a work in progress. Is it too early for a historian to unfold his telescope, reverse it, and take a longer-perspective view of a still-evolving event?

This book rests on the assumption that it is possible to write history while the subject is very much around; still, so to speak, warm. Admittedly, the argument against trying to do so is compelling. What good is history without the perspective of lapsed time? Asked his view of the French Revolution, Zhou-en-Lai famously responded: "It is too early to tell." (Though he may well have thought he was being asked about the events of Paris 1968, not Paris 1789.)

I hold that he was wrong in two senses. It is *never* too early for a first stab at telling; it is *always* too early to tell once and for all.

This is a preliminary shot at a story that will be recounted from innumerable perspectives in years to come. Let me offer two justifications for doing it. The first is that, in a culture where most writing about politics is tediously one-sided, there is something to be said for the historian's ideal of trying to understand and explain without being driven primarily by prejudices and predilections: in other words, to be more like a judge than a prosecuting attorney.

PREFACE

Of course I have my own beliefs. But when I think and write as a historian, I try to put those beliefs aside or at least (being human) to hold them in check. My goal is not to score points but to seek a historical perspective, which, however hobbled by its temporal closeness to its subject, may have some lasting value in part because it is of the time that it examines.

I have sought to rely on what my best friend and severest critic has called my propensity to be pathologically fair-minded. If Obama's supporters find this book to be overly critical of his administration, I shall be content. My content will only grow if his opponents find it to be too favorable.

Then there is my second apologia: the sheer joy of trying something that is not conventionally approved. I retired from being a professor of history more than a decade ago. Since then, against the normal expectation of what advanced age is supposed to do to you, I have found it liberating to write not with my academic peers in mind but that much more challenging and amorphous target, the general reader.

Academic historians, like the rest of the professoriate, are for the most part confined to the tenets of discourse and perception defined by their discipline. That is a pity. It is clear that there is a hunger (or at least an appetite) for history that both tells a story and explains the world.

Analysis and historical comparison, not storytelling, are my stock in trade. But anyone who lays claim to being a historian has, I think, a responsibility to aim for clarity and readability to the limits of his talent. That I have sought to do.

Enough high-flying; now for the nitty-gritty. This is an early attempt to tell the story of Obama's presidency up to now and to speculate on the likely course of what remains of his second term. I didn't—I couldn't—rely on that standard historian's source, the

PREFACE

archives of participants. They're still not available or exist as e-mails in the Internet cloud.

Nor have I tried to emulate the good journalist's tool of extensive interviewing, as Ronald Sussman, Robert Woodward, and others have so ably done. Instead I have gathered, day by day, the on-the-scene, as-it-is-happening reports and analyses by journalists and pundits of the unfolding story of Obama's presidency: what has been called the first rough draft of history. Relying on this raw material and on my understanding of the American political system, I have sought to write a history of Obama's presidency and the political world in which it moves: in short, of Obama's time.

The Internet, with its attendant army of journalists and bloggers, has made this way of doing things possible on a scale inconceivable in the pre-Internet Dark Ages. So all thanks to that intrusive, vulgar, unreliable, indispensable artifact of the modern world.

Thanks as well to that archaic survivor, the readiness of friends, colleagues, and strangers who helped out by responding to my questions and reading my prose, among them, historian Stephan Thernstrom, political scientists Sidney Milkis and Mo Fiorina, Oxford Press editor David McBride, and Phyllis Keller, the last not only, as already noted, my best friend and severest critic, but also my severest friend and best critic.

Introduction

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Continuity with the past is not a duty, it is only a necessity.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

I wisht I was a German, an' believed in machinery.

— Mr. Dooley

WHAT DO I have to impart in this book? Historians generally don't put their conclusions up front; otherwise, how could they live up to their professional obligation to lessen the interest and attention of their readers? But as I said, age and retirement have liberated me from lots of conventions, including that one.

Oliver Wendell Holmes's aphorism conveys the essence of my first theme. Even so once-born a president as Barack Obama, with notable communication skills, remarkably few ties to the mainstream politics of his time, and a messianic desire to strike out in new directions, has been circumscribed by old devils: the institutional surround of the presidency and party politics, a polarized political culture, the entangling web of economic and ideological interests, and the constant intrusion of unexpected developments.

INTRODUCTION

The second major theme is captured in Mr. Dooley's comment. The core belief of the Obama administration is in the power of the national government—of “machinery”—to do social good. Adhering to and indeed expanding this goal has been Job One of the Obama presidency. But it has had to make its way against a strong counter-current of opposition. Here, too, the weight of the past and the contingencies of the present have set the tone of Obama's time.

THE PRESIDENT

Obama: What in his personality, experience, and ideology makes him tick? How has he conducted his presidency? Where does it fit in the larger historical context of the office? How has he identified with and been influenced by his predecessors?

Obama's presidential self-image is very much that of an academic: a teacher with a message to impart and a mission to lead the national student body. To a lesser degree he has been influenced by his relatively radical and notably limited political past. He raised large hopes that he had the brains and skills to sell his message and convert it into policy.

The fact that Obama is the nation's first African-American president is of great though as yet difficult to measure import. To what degree has this shaped his presidency? A number of Obama's closest confidants—Valerie Jarrett, Eric Holder, and not least his wife, Michelle—share that identity. He has had an impact on the political participation of blacks comparable to that of Al Smith and John F. Kennedy on the nation's Catholics. Yet his signature policies—the Stimulus, Obamacare, and Dodd-Frank—speak to national rather than racial or ethnic concerns. His rhetoric has dwelt on “the middle class” rather than on the poor, black or otherwise.

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Like his closest presidential analogue Woodrow Wilson, Obama won a second term with a vote (though a diminished one) of public approval. His youth, fluency, and Now persona continue to have wide appeal. As Wagner (so Mark Twain observed) was better than he sounds, Obama is more popular than his policies. But his place in history depends on more than this. Will his early claim to a New Foundation resonate as has FDR's New Dealer LBJ's Great Society? The record thus far suggests not.

GOVERNMENT

How has American government fared during Obama's presidency? What is new and what is familiar in his relations with Congress, his cabinet and his staff, the bureaucracy, and the courts? How has American federalism functioned in a time of substantial growth in the goals and resources of the national government?

Whatever his transformative aspirations, Obama quickly found that governing is encased in a cake of practice and precedent that long preceded him, obtrusively coexists with him, and is sure to outlast him.

Obama's approach to policy and governance is steeped in the verities of the twentieth-century Democratic reform tradition. His pole star is the large, active welfare state. And for all his populist rhetoric, big government, big unions, big business, and big media are prominent players in the Obama presidency.

The Republican opposition has been heavily buffeted by the winds of economic and cultural change. The Tea Party perspective has given new vigor to a hostility to government that is visceral but often detached from the demands of contemporary American life. If Obama's liberalism appears to be locked into the worldview of the

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large, activist, centralized twentieth-century state, Republican–Tea Party conservatism shows a comparable devotion to the precepts of nineteenth-century *laissez-faire*.

It is in the states and cities, afflicted by a severe fiscal crisis, over-heavy commitments and under-heavy revenue, that a new style of government less committed to the big-state assumptions of the past century has begun to make itself heard. How far this will go is anyone's guess.

Governing is intimately linked to legislation: the creation of policy, domestic and foreign. What is Obama's record here, and (again) how does it compare with his predecessors? Is it best seen as building on the FDR–New Deal legacy, perpetuated by Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson? Or has he deviated from that legacy, as Carter and Clinton did before him?

Obama came into office determined to do big things, from universal health care and cap and trade to immigration and education reform. But he was immediately plunged into a banking-financial-mortgage-jobs crisis that was not of his doing but quickly became his responsibility.

Whether the Stimulus was the job-creating, economy jump-starting, technology-transforming elixir that its supporters claim is arguable. But it resonates with FDR's relief programs, just as Obama's health-care reform and Dodd-Frank financial regulation act summon up memories of and comparisons with the New Deal's Social Security Act and its banking and financial reforms.

The difficulty of implementing these ambitious projects reminds us that modern bureaucracy is prone to systemic problems of implementation and to the iron law of unexpected consequences. Note, for instance, the sudden rise of fracking and abundant domestic shale gas and oil as challenges to Obama's clean/renewable energy vision. Or the travails of Obamacare's implementation and the uncertainties surrounding Dodd-Frank.

INTRODUCTION

As the reality of the Great Recession altered the domestic policy of Obama's first term, so have the ever-changing facts of international life shaped the course of his foreign policy. Here, too, the dictates of the world as it is clash with his messianic impulses.

Is it appropriate to speak of an Obama Doctrine governing our relations abroad, as it was to speak of the Truman-Eisenhower-Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon-Carter-Reagan responses to the Cold War? Is Obama's foreign policy more notable for its deviations from or its adherence to that of his predecessor George W. Bush?

The dark Bush days saw the War on Terror, Guantanamo Bay, targeted assassinations of Islamic terrorists, domestic wiretapping, and touchy relationships with the Arab world, Russia, and China. The hopeful Obama succession has seen the War on Terror, Guantanamo Bay, targeted assassinations of Islamic terrorists, domestic wiretapping, and touchy relationships. . . .

POLITICS

Finally there is the realm of politics. Have elections in the Obama years followed established modern patterns? If not, how have they differed? What has been the impact of the media, of advocacy groups, of campaign organization, of money? What may we expect to happen next?

I don't approach these questions from the view that Obama's presidency is a resplendent event, as do Jonathan Alter in *The Promise* and *The Center Holds*, or Michael Grunwald in *The New New Deal*. Nor do I see it as the devil's spawn, as do Edward Klein in *The Amateur* or Dinesh D'Souza in *Obama's America*. I don't think the GOP is beyond the pale, as Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein do in *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, or that the Democrats are something similar, as Jay Cost does in *Spoiled Rotten*.

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Surely there is room for a more analytical way of looking at politics in the Obama years. I argued in a previous book, *America's Three Regimes*, that since the New Deal and World War II we have moved from a party-dominated to a populist politics. By this I mean that in the past, bosses and party machines called the turn over who ran for office, what the issues were, and how elections were run and paid for. Today autonomous candidates and outside players (the media, advocacy groups, monied ideological political action committees) are more prone to influence these things.

Party conventions have given way to primaries as the way to choose the candidates. Candidate-run money-raising has replaced party-run patronage and funding. Campaign foot soldiers are less likely to be party hacks and servitors and more likely to be special-cause hacks and servitors. Third parties are no longer necessary, because the more single-mindedly ideological major parties meet the need. Has this evolution ebbed, or is it likely to be the end of Obama's time? No, and possibly.

The most common cliché of our political age is that politics are uniquely polarized. This may be true of the presidency, Congress, state governments, and the parties. But is it true of the voters?

The electorate's ideological and party inclinations have been measured by decades of polling, and a few patterns are clear. There has been a slow but steady rise in the number of voters who identify as Independents. More Americans consider themselves Democrats than Republicans, yet more Americans consider themselves conservative than liberal. On issues such as abortion and the role of government, most voters occupy a middle-ground position.

Then why are our parties so polarized? Why don't they seize the day and set out to woo the moderate center, instead of endlessly catering to their presumably secure ideological tails?

One answer is the decline of the old party-dominated political culture. The media, advocacy groups, and big sources of money have

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little interest in fostering compromise or moderation by the parties and candidates that they support. Their numerical and financial clout lies in their ability to appeal to their ideological brethren, not to a broader, more diverse constituency. This is true of Fox News and the *New York Times*, of the National Rifle Association and the Sierra Club, of the Koch brothers and George Soros.

The electoral consequence of these developments is evident. Obama's 2008 victory was not a party or policy triumph. It was the product of his appeal to voting groups defined by ethnicity, age, and cultural predisposition; to big players in the popular culture (the mainstream media, Hollywood, TV); to an unpopular incumbent president and a less than compelling opponent; and perhaps most of all to a financial collapse with timing that made it seem like the direct interposition of God into human affairs.

The 2010 off-year election underlined the fact that Obama brought no profound change to the prevailing reality of declining party identity and a more populist politics. If the fresh persona and post-partisan message of Obama was the most notable element in 2008, the Tea Party reaction against his policies played that role in 2010.

Obama's 2012 reelection confirms this view of the American political present and its likely near future. Money, get-out-the-vote organization, the opposition's ineptitude, and Obama's personal and cultural appeal carried the day.

There is little evidence of larger shifts in political or social ideology, of the sort that accompanied the Democratic age of Andrew Jackson, the Republican age of Abraham Lincoln, or the Democratic age of FDR. Obama's time as president is winding down. But there is good cause to doubt if it will come to be known as Obama's Age.

CHAPTER ONE

. . .

Obama

WE BEGIN WITH the president: his persona, his agenda.

Extraordinarily high expectations attended Barack Obama's January 2009 inauguration. It came at a time of economic crisis that, however less devastating, evoked memories of the Great Depression. Popular dissatisfaction with Obama's predecessor George W. Bush echoed—but again, not at the same level—that enjoyed (or not enjoyed) by Herbert Hoover in 1932. Special, too, was the widespread national pride over the ascension of the first African-American president.

By any measure, Obama was an unusual public figure. The media and the educated classes in particular had a strong belief in his unique talents and the prospect of an epochal presidency. (So, apparently, did Obama. Early on he asked a group of historians what it took to be a transformative president.) His staff had even higher expectations. With minimal irony, they referred to him as Black Jesus.¹

Family and friends, too, were worshipful. According to *New York Times* reporter Jodi Kantor, “Michelle told Oprah Winfrey before

the 2008 election: "The question isn't whether Barack Obama is ready to be president. The question is whether *we're* ready." His closest confidante, Valerie Jarrett, thought that Obama was "bored to death his whole life. He's just too talented to do what ordinary people do."²

National Endowment for the Arts chair Rocco Landesman observed that as a memoirist Obama was "the most powerful writer since Julius Caesar." More widely noted was TV commentator Chris Matthews's confession that when Obama spoke, he "felt this thrill going up my leg." *The New Yorker's* Ryan Lizza concluded that Obama's "post-post-partisan Presidency," based on "working the system, not changing it," made his first two years "one of the most successful legislative periods in modern history. Among other achievements, he has saved the economy from depression, passed universal health care, and reformed Wall Street."³

There were times when Obama committed all-too-human gaffes, as when he said that the Union had 57 states, that Austria's language was Austrian, and that there was a president of Canada. But the media was not disposed to make much of these solecisms. After all, it was not as if they had come from George W. Bush.⁴

Hype aside, Obama did project a compelling presidential persona of intelligence, eloquence, and confidence. He would maintain a place in public confidence and esteem that consistently outstripped the popularity of his policies.

Books on Obama and his presidency generally reflect the prevailing adulatory tone, with occasional critiques that dismiss him in comparably over-the-top language. At one end of the spectrum is Harvard historian James Kloppenberg's elevation of Obama as the product of a philosophical liberalism that drew on Alexis de Tocqueville, William James, John Dewey, John Rawls, Reinhold Niebuhr, and (to add a dash of radical spice) Saul Alinsky and Jürgen Habermas. At the other is conservative Dinesh d'Souza's

portrayal of “a made-to-order front man for contemporary, upscale, shy-about-itself, *nouveau* socialism”: the product of an anticolonialist radical left tradition embodied in the writings of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said and the actions and words of 1960s’ Weatherman William Ayers and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.⁵

In between but strongly sympathetic are David Remnick’s *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (2010) and David Maraniss’s *Barack Obama: The Story* (2012), the most substantial biographies to date. Remnick grounds Obama in the civil rights movement (Obama: “it’s *my* story”), drawing his title from John Lewis’s observation that “Barack Obama is what comes at the end of that bridge in Selma,” where blacks seeking freedom memorably confronted white police seeking to deprive them of it.

The flood of books on Obama sorts out in other ways as well. Like the Kloppenberg intellectual biography, the first tranche of psychobiographies tended to the eulogistic. One of them spoke of Obama’s “obsessive bipartisan disorder” as contrasted with the “us/them psychology” of the Bush presidency.⁶

Obama may have come into office with more radical instincts than his predecessors or more than he let on to the public. But he was soon constrained by the realities of the presidency and American politics, which bridled change and imposed continuity—a theme that emerged in books dealing more with his presidency than his persona.

Most of these studies are quite favorable. But a note of dissatisfaction, even disappointment, intruded early. With the passage of time, more critical works emerged, dwelling as much on his inexperience and remove as on his radicalism (or lack of it).⁷

Beyond special pleading for or against, and the limits of journalism, is there a broader basis for evaluation and analysis? One of these, surely, is the character of the incumbent. Why has he performed as he did? The other theme to be explored is his conduct of

his presidency and its relation to the political tradition to which he supposedly belongs.

I. THE CONTENT OF HIS CHARACTER

Over the course of his presidency, the most striking change in the political class's perception of Obama has been the attention paid to his remove from the normal give-and-take of American politics. Early on, Washington was "thick with stories about Obama's insularity and distance." One senator, asked if he could name someone who really knew Obama, said he could not.

This is not to say that Obama was indifferent to politics. He played the game as intensely and as well as anyone. But he did so on his own terms, with little regard for the political tradition of the Democratic party. In this he was distant indeed from his Democratic predecessors FDR, Truman, JFK, and LBJ and closer to Carter and Clinton. He reinforces the view that a more autonomous, populist political culture has replaced the previous strongly party-defined one.⁸

Acerbic *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd noted a disconnect between Obama's persona and his performance. In January 2012, three years on in his first term, she found him still "cool, joyous, funny, connected." But he also was a deeply divisive president (a May 2012 Gallup poll would confirm that), unable "to read America's panic and its thirst for a strong leader." Sympathetic journalist Ron Suskind concluded that Obama's problem in dealing with the recession was "in guiding the analysis toward what a president is paid, and elected, to do: make tough decisions."⁹

Every century or so we have what might be called an intellectuals' president: Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800s, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the early 1900s, Barack Obama in

the early 2000s. Only Wilson was a professor. But Jefferson thought that founding the University of Virginia was an act on a par with his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the Declaration of Independence. Obama's approach to his presidency often has had a profoundly academic cast.¹⁰

He has an unusually broad, removed view of his office, seeing it as the abode of a philosopher king and not just a rent-seeking politician. His Hope and Change campaign slogan, his New Foundation program label, were more than rodomontade. They were how he defined his presidency.

This should not be surprising. After all, much of Obama's adult life was spent not in politics or business but in higher education, as a student and law school lecturer. He flourished in those venues because of his intelligence, his way with words, his self-confidence. He received a steady stream of recognition from an affirmative action-saturated academy, hungry to bestow its laurels on someone who was a person of talent as well as a person of color. Nor did it do his self-esteem any harm to move from the Illinois state legislature to the presidency in four years, as if guided by a special Providence.

Evidence of Obama's academic bent abounds. He has kept as far away as he could from that intensely political and not easily controllable exercise, the presidential press conference. The communications-challenged George W. Bush ventured into that realm 11 times in his first three years in office; the far more well-spoken Obama did so a modest 17 times. For seven weeks and more in the election summer of 2012, he took no substantive question from the White House press corps. In contrast, FDR had 337 press conferences in his first term, a third of the thousand that he conducted in the course of his presidency.

Obama prefers one-on-one interviews with journalists—office hours, so to speak, where he is in firm control. He had 408 of them

by the end of February 2012, more than Clinton and George W. Bush combined.¹¹

Reporter Ron Suskind observes that Obama's favorite venue is "the prepared speech, meticulously crafted and delivered": the political equivalent of a classroom lecture. Liberal columnist Robert Kuttner called his campaign address on the financial crisis "Roosevelt quality: the president as teacher-in-chief."¹²

After the 2010 election—in a sense Obama's midterm exam (and indeed it was often referred to as "the midterm")—he sat down with Suskind to meditate on the lessons to be learned from that "shellacking." His response was very much that of a professor, secure in his command of his subject matter, ruminating on his students' inability to absorb what they had been taught.

His failure, he said, "was less on the policy front and more on the communications front." He had been elected "because I told a story to the American people . . . People felt I had connected our current predicaments with the broader arc of American history." The demands of day-to-day problem-solving frayed that narrative. Now the necessity remained "to tell a story to the American people about where we are and where we are going."

Several years later, Obama was asked in a TV interview what he considered to be his biggest misstep. "The mistake of my first term," he replied, "was thinking that this job was just about getting the policy right. . . . But the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times."¹³

I can't prove that Obama identifies more with past presidents than his predecessors did. But I believe that he has a special need for validation from previous authorities, as academics are prone to have. He frequently summons up the shades of transformational chief executives. This "channeling" (dictionary definition: "The act or practice of serving as a medium through which a spirit guide

purportedly communicates with living persons”) is the product of a complex mix of self-regard, initial inexperience, Republican obduracy, and the institutional weight of the presidency.

From 2007, when he announced his candidacy in Lincoln’s Springfield, to 2013, when he took his second oath of office on Lincoln’s Bible, the Great Emancipator was on Obama’s mind. When he came into office, he closely identified with FDR’s 100 Days as a model of crisis management. He took note of how FDR let all know he was in charge, put people first, restored confidence. He aimed to set a progressive agenda for the new century, as FDR had for the previous one. He was not alone in this. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* conjoined “Obama” and “100 Days” almost 900 times in the first six months of 2009.

Obama has sought for and found meaning in “his peer group, his competitors”: FDR, “much of whose New Deal did not work, but who restored the confidence of the American people; or John F. Kennedy, whose economic policies are forgotten but not his Peace Corps.” In a *60 Minutes* interview in December 2011, he declared: “I would put my legislative and foreign policy accomplishments of my first two years against any president with the possible exceptions of Johnson, FDR, and Lincoln”—a self-judgment prudently edited out of the broadcast version.¹⁴

As difficulties mounted, and the 2010 election setback occurred, less majestic analogues came to mind. He admitted to sharing with Jimmy Carter and Clinton “the disease of being policy wonks.” But “a larger and ostensibly more effective model of leadership would be a star to guide him in the years ahead.”¹⁵

Obama identified briefly with Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism of 1911–1912, and more frequently with, of all people, Ronald Reagan. During their primary battle, Hillary Clinton accused him of the sin of “admiring Ronald Reagan.” He envied Reagan for being “very comfortable in playing the role of president.” His predecessor

took pride in “not engaging in a lot of symbolic gestures, but rather thinking practically.” Obama thought that his own “symbols and gestures mattered as much as what my ideas were,” and he believed that “leadership in this office is a matter of helping the American people feel confident,” as FDR and Reagan did before him.¹⁶

Obama’s political trajectory has been much like Woodrow Wilson’s (although he has been loath to identify with that closest of predecessors). Each won an initial victory that was in good part the result of external events: the TR-Taft split in 1912, the financial collapse of 2008. Each took credit for a substantial body of legislation in his first two years in office. Each ran into big trouble in the ensuing bye-election: The GOP gained 62 seats in 1914, 63 in 2010. Each won a second term, with reduced support, against a pallid Republican opponent, and each faced a rising sea of troubles as his second term unfolded.¹⁷

Critics could reasonably observe that Obama, as Clemenceau said of Wilson, talks like Jesus Christ and acts like Lloyd George. But that combination should not be taken lightly. In the hands of a master—FDR enacting Social Security, or Reagan dealing with tax policy—it can produce policy results of a high order, suggesting that a statesman can be a live politician and not necessarily a dead one. Obama’s equivalent task is to see to it that his health-care reform is successful. That is likely to be his greatest challenge as he serves out his presidential time.

In the wake of Obama’s 2010 loss of Congress, two other past presidential records took on new significance: Harry Truman’s in 1946–1948, and Bill Clinton’s in 1994–1996. For all their similarities—a bad off-year defeat followed by victory in the succeeding presidential election—Truman and Clinton adopted very different models of response. Truman in 1948 ran against a Republican Congress and managed to revive enough of the FDR–New Deal

coalition to win. Clinton distanced himself from the New Deal–Great Society tradition of his party—and won.

Did Obama, facing a similar political situation, repeat his 2008 message of a presidency that transcended partisanship? Or did he try to double down, Truman-style, on his liberal base? As the 2012 campaign unfolded, his choice was clear: to adopt the Truman model of strong, ideological identification and a presidential persona that outclassed his opponent: Thomas E. Dewey then, Mitt Romney now.¹⁸

The intensity of GOP congressional opposition provided some justification for taking a Trumanesque line. But Obama's 2010–2012 was not Truman's 1946–1948. Then the New Deal and World War II, the glue that held the Roosevelt coalition together, were still vivid memories. Nor was it Clinton's 1994–1996. Clinton's support for NAFTA, welfare and tax reform, and modest engagement overseas was a new politics for a new America, caught up in the challenges of a postindustrial economy and a post–Cold War world.

Obama's 2012 reelection has been credited with a comparable affinity to a demographically and culturally changing country. The validity of this view, confirmed (though not overwhelmingly so) by his 2012 victory, would be another test of his second term.

2. THE ORBIT OF HIS PRESIDENCY

Obama's response to the challenges of his presidency not surprisingly reflected the strengths and limitations of his persona. He ran an eminently successful 2008 campaign, though certainly it benefited from the perfect storm of Bush's unpopularity, McCain's limitations, and the financial crisis. He also enacted much of his ambitious legislative program. If the scale of what he has done does

not match FDR's New Deal or LBJ's Great Society, it outdid the first terms of his Democratic predecessors Carter and Clinton.

Supporters found in Obama's early legislative victories confirmation that his was indeed a transformative presidency. So too was a substantial recasting of government: the bureaucracy, federal agencies, and their powers and responsibilities. Here was evidence that a remarkable leader was accomplishing unprecedented things. Along with his intellectual and oratorical gifts, Obama's youth and mixed racial background made him for many an unusually attractive candidate and an excitingly fresh occupant of the White House.

But he soon was confronted by the unbearable heaviness of governing. That condition, faced by every president, is the antithesis of the theme of Milan Kundera's great novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera's protagonists struggle with the reality that their life—their being—is self-contained, isolated, without a mission: “light.” Presidents live in a quite different world, a “heavy” one, in which the weight of past precedents, institutional surround, vested interests, and the ever-contingent course of events prevails.

Early on, the normal vicissitudes of the presidency kicked in. Legislation had to be modified or abandoned; best-laid plans of governance went awry. Obama's initial high popularity eroded; interparty rigidity rose; he relied increasingly on the power of the executive branch to circumvent legislative stalemate.

Obama may have underestimated how difficult it would be to largely alter the prevailing political environment. And while there was a substantial public desire for change, it is less clear that there was a desire to see change effected through more active and more costly government.¹⁹

The first benchmark in the demystification process was Obama's early decision to forego bipartisan support for his major legislative achievements: the Stimulus, Obamacare, and Dodd-Frank. This was forced on him by Republican bloody-mindedness,

say his supporters; he took this course because he was a deeply ideological president, say his opponents.

The next moment of truth was the severe swing to the Republicans in the 2010 elections, widely read as the result of high unemployment, high debt, and a sluggish economy but also as a rebuke to Obama's Stimulus and health-care reform.

How did Obama respond to these challenges in the second half of his first term? He proposed no major new legislative program: no Second New Deal, no Great Society. In halfhearted homage to the Clinton precedent, he made some attempt to strike a deal with the Republican House leadership.

But he did not adopt Clinton's post-1996 election conclusion that "the era of big government is over." Instead he sought to merge a desire for more effective government with the commitment to keep it large and active. He dwelt on the need to make the American economy more competitive, to simplify the tax code, reduce the deficit, expand trade, improve the schools, and streamline government. He emphasized the development of high-speed rail, clean renewable energy, universal access to the Internet: "a New Foundation for a post-crisis economy, à la the New Deal."²⁰

In short, Obama doubled down on his commitment to economic stimulus through substantial deficit spending, a search for new revenue and a reluctance to cut existing entitlement programs, forceful regulation, and subsidies for renewable energy. He may well have felt that he had no alternative, given the obduracy of an increasingly antigovernment GOP. But it reflected as well his deepest beliefs.

Obama sought to give his approach political legs by seeking to move public attention away from trillion-dollar annual deficits and an escalating national debt. Instead, he focused on the unequal distribution of wealth in the society and the need to secure more tax revenue from the rich. His tax-the-rich / protect-the-middle-class

strategy had obvious political potential and stood him in good stead in the election of 2012.

It had costs as well. One was Obama's failure to meaningfully support the recommendations of his own Bowles-Simpson committee for a mix of spending cuts and revenue increases. The other was a long and ultimately fruitless attempt to carve out a compromise with the House Republicans on taxes, spending, and debt. Whoever was to blame for this, the net effect was to erode some of Obama's primary sources of public appeal: his commitment to a less polarized politics, his responsiveness to the public desire for hope and change, his ability to get things done.²¹

The charismatic campaigner of 2008 turned out as president to lack a professional politician's practiced ease with people. He was manifestly uncomfortable with the small talk, backslapping, and often faux conviviality of the political world. In this Obama was very unlike FDR, Reagan, and Clinton and more like those more buttoned-down templates Wilson, Hoover, Nixon, and Carter.

The stresses of his presidency hardly made him a more engaged leader. Observers spoke of Obama becoming a "loner president," of entering into a "self-imposed exile" with his family and his closest and oldest Chicago associates. Journalist Jodi Kantor thought that he and his wife Michelle felt "overassaulted and underappreciated."²²

This mindset had strong psychological roots. But it also derived naturally from the parabola of Obama's career, particularly his dizzying ascent to the presidency. While he had ties (some of them questionable) to the very political world of Chicago's Democratic pols, his academic-community organizer persona set him apart. So did the rapidity of his rise, which catapulted him from one level to another before he fully assimilated to it.

Most of all, Obama is distinctive for being the first African-American president. The place of that fact—and indeed of the

larger American dilemma of race—in the Obama presidency will take a long time to unravel.

The kind of African-American he is—half white, half African, brought up in Indonesia and Hawaii—sets him apart from the great majority of American blacks. Nor has he made the core issues of the black underclass a central theme of his presidency: his “middle-class” mantra hardly speaks to them or their condition.

Yet Obama has been impelled by circumstance—the black community’s stake in his ascent, the satisfaction that so many whites derive from an African-American president—to pursue the dual demands of the nation that he leads and the social watershed that he represents.²³

There is a noticeable duality as well in Obama’s approach to his presidency. On the one hand he has presided over a demi-revolution in running campaigns and pushing his agenda. Organizing for America, his primary instrument for campaign fundraising and agenda support-building, was a personal rather than a party device.

Obama has appeared to turn inward over the course of his presidency: to family, to old and close associates, to familiar political themes and comfortable modes of communicating. At night he frequently holes up with his family, books, and an Internet browser.

He did make sporadic attempts to play the political game the traditional way: some cocktail parties for congressmen from the two parties; the occasional invitation to watch a Sunday football game on TV; hospitality to big donors. But by most accounts these outreaches were awkward, and over time he abandoned them. With far more enthusiasm he has used those favored instruments of contemporary mass culture talk shows and the social networks, much as FDR did radio and JFK TV.

Obama’s is not an easy, casual self-assurance but a tense, Nixon-like one. He explained to House Majority Whip Eric Cantor in a

discussion over the size of the 2009 stimulus bill: "I won." He reportedly waved aside a Blue Dog Democrat's concerns over a 2010 congressional defeat similar to Clinton in 1994: "the big difference here and in '94 was you've got me."²⁴

As the 2012 election approached, it turned out that Obama's political position was by no means as parlous as 2010's results implied. It was not that his policies won him increased popularity, as happened with FDR after 1934 and Clinton after 1994. But his inequality theme struck a popular chord; Republican obstructionism continued to reap public disapproval; and the unattractive GOP presidential primary follies and less than compelling Romney candidacy added to Obama's appeal.

So did his effective balancing act of verbally stroking his liberal-left core constituency while compromising on policy issues. One critic observed, "The President falls between stools. He is a man of half measures." He never shows bravery, complained *The Economist*. He flip-flops, tacks and weaves, says one thing and does another, is better at governing than leading, his critics noted. This may have disappointed hope-and-change votaries. But Obama's more flexible and varied self-presentation served him in good political stead.²⁵

Obama's early foreign policy record also buttressed his standing. A prudent withdrawal from his original pledge to close the Guantánamo Bay prison, the elimination of bin Laden, the successful removal of Ghaddafi, and the growing use of drones to kill terrorists without American troops at risk won greater popular approval than his more contentious domestic policies. Potential overseas problems—China's increasing military assertiveness, Putin's Stalinist-lite obstructionism, no decrease in Arab-Islamic anti-Americanism, the ongoing problem of Iran's quest for a nuke, the Syrian civil war—have not yet become significant political or policy flash points.²⁶