

# BARACK OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY

The Judgment of Historians Will Depend on the History Still To Be Made

*By James T. Kloppenberg*

As soon as the newly elected United States president, having spent part of his childhood outside the nation's borders as the son of a discredited father, nominated his chief political rival as his secretary of state, both he and the cabinet member to be held responsible for foreign affairs were condemned by critics as illegitimate and corrupt. Undeterred, the president presented Congress with an ambitious program of federal spending that targeted education and infrastructure.

The purpose of democracy, in his words, was the progressive improvement of the conditions of the governed, and to that end he demanded that members of Congress take up their obligations to the country and the common good. He knew his opponents, particularly those from the states of the South, would protest that the American people opposed such federal initiatives, but he persisted. Representatives elected by the citizenry had a responsibility to act in the public interest, not to be paralyzed by partisan loyalties. He warned the lawmakers not to "slumber in indolence or fold up our arms and proclaim to the world that we are palsied by the will of our constituents."

A champion of the rights of African Americans, women, and other ethnic minorities, the president became anathema to white males, particularly those with little education. By the time he left office, the United States was even more partisan and polarized than it had been when he assumed the presidency promising moral, political, and intellectual improvement. In the rowdy electoral contest to choose his suc-

cessor, a tough-talking, rough-edged, self-styled man of the people came to prominence by assailing both the persons and the programs of the president and his secretary of state.

That is a description of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay back in 1825. Nearly two centuries of

▷ President Barack Obama, Oval Office of the White House, Washington, DC, Sept. 9, 2010. *Pete Souza/ The White House*



American history later, Barack Obama found himself denounced as an un-American elitist, while Hillary Rodham Clinton was branded a crook. Those who supported the man who would eventually succeed President Adams in 1829, Indian fighter and slave owner Andrew Jackson, hailed their hero as the authentic voice of the people. They railed against the antislavery and pro-Indian positions taken by the Harvard-educated son of the aristocratic Federalist John Adams, and they sputtered with rage against those who had stolen the contested election of 1824 from Jackson by striking a corrupt bargain with Clay.

When we attempt to assess the achievements of President Obama, it is helpful to keep in mind that historians' judgments change over time. For most of the twentieth century, ever since Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson*, published in 1945, sanctified Old Hickory as the first authentic champion of democracy and the first occupant of the White House to spring from and represent the people, his predecessor has been portrayed as an ineffectual political leader as well as an underhanded schemer who, with Clay's help, unfairly delayed Jackson's rise to the presidency. Viewed from this perspective, the election of John Quincy Adams was the last gasp of the old elites who had controlled the government ever since the presidency of George Washington. Now it was time for the people to rule. Adams later in life earned a kind of redemption, defending slaves in the Amistad trial and earning a reputation as "Old Man Eloquent" for the impassioned speeches he delivered against slavery in the House of Representatives; as president, he enjoyed few successes and endured multiple defeats at the hands of Congress. Only in recent years, as the fate of the Indians and African Americans whom Adams defended, and the causes of education and internal improvements that he championed, have resurfaced as important issues in U.S. history, has his reputation begun to change.

### **An Early Assessment**

How will history view the Obama presidency? As the transition from John Quincy Adams to Andrew Jackson and their shifting legacies suggests, a lot depends on what happens in the next eight years, and even more depends on how Americans a hundred years from now look back on the principal events of Obama's presidency. Now it seems fairly easy to tally up a list of pluses and minuses. Job growth has been steady; unemployment has sunk below 5 percent. More than 90 percent of Americans now enjoy health insurance. Gay marriage has become legal. The nation's financial system has been reformed and stabilized, and private banks can no longer provide federally financed student loans. Vast areas of land have been set aside as national monuments. The Paris Agreement has committed the United States to addressing the problem of climate change. A new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty was signed with Russia in

2010. Diplomatic relations with Cuba have been reestablished. Iran's development of nuclear weapons has been stopped.

On the other hand, the promise of the Arab Spring has turned to dust, and authoritarian regimes rule much of the Middle East and Central Asia. Despite sanctions against Russia prompted by its annexing of Crimea and its challenges to the sovereignty of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's regime remains as oligarchic and bellicose as ever. Armed conflicts continue in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the civil war in Syria grows ever more murderous. Although the territory controlled by the Islamic State appears to be shrinking, it remains a formidable threat around the world. No progress has been made to ease tensions between Israel and its neighbors. In the United States, large majorities of whites as well as blacks agree that race relations are worse now than they were in 2008, and the open expression of hatred of racial and ethnic minorities has again become acceptable to many people. The words "anger" and "angry" appear with striking frequency in articles concerning the public mood. The real income of most Americans has not risen in decades.

Yet this balance sheet should not be considered the final verdict. It will be a long time before we can confidently assess the successes and failures of the Obama presidency. Consider three early struggles of 2009: the battles over the stimulus package, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. Critics on the right condemned all three proposals at the time, and rolling them back remains among the principal goals of the Republican Party. Critics on the left believe that all three were but half-measures, fatally flawed from the start. A closer look complicates those judgments.

Today it seems clear that the \$800 billion stimulus worked. It kicked off eight years of unspectacular but uninterrupted economic growth by pumping money into sectors of the economy reeling after the 2007–08 collapse of the housing and financial sectors. Although left-leaning commentators such as Paul Krugman of the *New York Times* have complained that the unprecedentedly large stimulus was too small, studies such as *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* by Michael Grunwald have made clear that even members of Obama's own party, notably the fifty-four conservative Blue Dog Democrats, were unwilling to support anything more ambitious.

Obamacare has secured health insurance for more Americans than ever, but it has not slowed the spiraling medical expenses many people face. Even though it follows a blueprint produced by a conservative think tank and enacted first, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, by Republican Governor Mitt Romney, conservatives still brand it a government takeover. They worry openly that if it were to succeed, it would embolden social democrats to expand even further the role played by public

authority in domains they consider private. First health care, so the argument goes, next railroads, urban mass transit, free university education, public housing, guaranteed jobs, and eventually the United States will become Denmark! By contrast, left-leaning Democrats have savaged the reliance on private insurance companies. Strangely blind to the obstacles that even this more moderate proposal faced in Congress, they still clamor for a single-payer plan, a proposal that stood no chance of passing even in 2009. Because Democrats enjoyed a small majority in the House and the Senate until 2010, some commentators have argued that President Obama could have rammed through a much more ambitious program had he possessed the skills of, say, Franklin D. Roosevelt or Lyndon B. Johnson.

The result of the protracted congressional debate over health care reform resembles most of the earlier landmarks in American social legislation. Like social security in 1935 and voting rights, Medicare, and Medicaid in 1965, the healthcare reform measure of 2010 is a product of the sausage factory that we call representative democracy. Obviously far from perfect, it will have to be revised as its flaws become clear. It might also be the best bill Obama could have gotten through Congress. The election of 2008, although historic because it gave the United States its first black president and briefly gave his party a slim majority in the House and the Senate, was hardly a landslide. The political scientist William Galston, a veteran of Bill Clinton's White House, has pointed out that Obama's own electoral majority was only one percent greater than Clinton's in 1992, and Obama was running at the time of the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression. Democrats held sixty seats in the Senate at least until Massachusetts, in a special election to replace Ted Kennedy after his death, bewilderingly elected an almost unknown Republican (a pick-up truck owner and former model named Scott Brown) to replace the long-time champion of healthcare reform. By contrast, when Franklin Roosevelt began his second term in office, Democrats held seventy-five seats in the Senate, the Republicans only seventeen. When Lyndon Johnson maneuvered the Voting Rights Act through Congress, Democrats held sixty-eight seats in the Senate and a 295-140 majority in the House. Moreover, in the 1930s and 1960s both parties were far less ideologically homogeneous than they are now: more than half the Republicans in the House and more than 40 percent in the Senate voted for Medicare. In his first two years, Obama overcame much more resistance than FDR or LBJ faced, and after the 2010 election an unprecedentedly intransigent Congress blocked everything he proposed.

So how should we judge Obamacare? If the United States moves toward a single-payer system in the coming decades, Obamacare will appear to have been a tentative, toe-in-the-water step down a road that the United States was destined to follow, an unsatisfactory measure that at least moved the nation in the right direction. If, on the



other hand, a future Republican president or conservative-dominated Supreme Court succeeds in dismantling the program and the United States reverts to its exceptional status as the only advanced industrial nation that does not provide national health insurance for all citizens, then Obamacare will seem only a mysterious anomaly.

The same holds true for Dodd-Frank. If the banking sector remains stable and consumers remain secure from extortionate interest rates and shady products, it will appear a triumph to some historians. But if its regulations are dismantled and the nation's financial sector returns to the hands of freewheeling, buccaneer bankers who profit handsomely and pay enough to insure political support for their power, Dodd-Frank may appear to have been just another example of misguided, job-killing government overreach. If such regulations are extended, of course, it may appear to have been as tepid and toothless as it now seems to radicals who demanded the privileges enjoyed by corporate America be removed and the banks shackled.

### **The Obama Doctrine**

Consider foreign policy. When President Obama delivered his Cairo speech of June 4, 2009, he was widely hailed for renouncing America's imperial ambitions and wisely acknowledging the legitimacy of other nations' points of view. Many commentators judged the speech, which promised A New Beginning, a landmark in U.S. foreign policy, and it helped secure the Nobel Peace Prize for the new president just four months later. In 2016, with the Arab Spring a fading memory, wars continuing in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and the United States mounting but seldom acknowledging murderous drone strikes against multiple enemies, President Obama's pledge to extricate America from the wars he inherited remained unfulfilled. In Iraq, he has withdrawn American forces, as he promised to do, but it is not clear that stability has returned after the U.S. invasion to remove Saddam Hussein from power. In Afghanistan, the president followed the recommendation of his military advisors and increased the size of American forces, but it is not clear that the strategy paid off. In Syria, President Obama seems to have decided, against the advice of some of his advisors, that nothing Washington might do is likely to make a horrible situation less horrible.

Now what? Again, if what has come to be known recently as the Obama Doctrine—"don't do stupid stuff"—marks the start, over the long term, of a U.S. foreign policy that relies less on invasions and military occupations and more on use of soft power such as sanctions and boycotts, then President Obama's initial reputation as a visionary peacemaker may yet be restored. If, however, as seems much more likely, nothing the United States tries succeeds in altering the evermore ominous trajectory of escalating terrorist attacks and merciless civil wars, developments that threaten to further destabilize international relations, then President Obama will probably be

condemned as the inexperienced naïf that his critics claimed he was from the beginning. Of course those who demand that the United States do something (anything!) in situations such as the civil war in Syria comfortably occupy the high moral ground by opposing death and destruction. Finding reasons to think that any particular policy would succeed better than what has been tried in Afghanistan and Iraq for longer than the U.S. has ever been at war, and at a cost that dwarfs everything else the federal government has done, is more challenging than self-righteous proclamations of horror.

The point is simply that President Obama's stature will depend, to a degree that those of us reflecting on it in 2016 have trouble seeing, as much if not more on what happens after he leaves office as it does on what has happened since he was elected. Not only will historians have access to documents that will be sealed for decades, documents that will eventually shed light on the decisions made by the president and other government officials, it is also inevitable that developments we cannot foresee will powerfully shape our understanding of the meaning of our past.

When President Obama spoke in Charleston, South Carolina, after the slaughter of the pastor and eight members of the congregation of the Mother Emanuel church, he praised the church for having harbored runaway slaves and for having served as a haven for African Americans seeking shelter from the intimidation and violence that sustained white supremacy. The time had come, he declared, to remove the Confederate flag from public buildings throughout the South because Americans were finally willing to denounce the cause for which the war was fought, the defense of slavery. Academic historians today would agree with everything the president said at Mother Emanuel. Between a century and a century and a half ago, however, U.S. presidents, bolstered by the best scholarship produced by the community of academic historians, saw things very differently. At the height of Jim Crow, propped up by so-called scientific racism, many prominent white historians claimed that slavery was in the best interests of African Americans, and those who enforced the rule of whites over blacks who did not know their place were redeemers who saved the South from the injustices of Radical Reconstruction after the tragic and unnecessary War Between the States. Although today such views seem an abomination, a century ago only a few brave African American historians dared challenge them.

All of us think history is on our side, or at least we hope it is. Those of us who share President Obama's commitments to a more egalitarian and inclusive nation believe that his ideals will be vindicated when the policies he hoped but was unable to enact—a much higher minimum wage, a much more steeply graduated income tax, programs to address the problems of unequal access to education and health care, and systems of law enforcement and criminal justice that treat different people

differently—become part of a social democratic America. Those Americans who cherish a different vision of the nation, oriented more toward individual freedom, inherited traditions, and unregulated private enterprise, perhaps, likewise expect to see their values proven correct. The presidency of Barack Obama is coming to a close. The struggle over its meaning will never end.