The Obama Presidency: Hope, Change, and Reality*

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Objectives. The purpose of this article is to assess specifically whether President Barak Obama has been a transformational leader and, more generally, the utility of the concept of transformational leadership. *Methods.* The article explores the differences between the aspirations of leaders, their rhetoric, and the hopes of leaders' passionate partisan followers and the much harsher contextual constraints influencing what leaders, and especially U.S. presidents, can hope to achieve. *Results.* The Obama presidency, in particular, has shown significant sensitivity to its contextual opportunities. In general, it has seized the opportunities it did have to achieve outcomes that it defined as important but these opportunities have been sharply constricted as well. *Conclusions.* The notion of transformational leadership, and the rhetoric that accompanies it, is massively asymmetric. Leadership takes place when strategic opportunities arise, and these more frequently than not are rare.

In a familiar pattern of modern American presidencies, save perhaps that of George H. W. Bush, Barack Obama campaigned in 2008 as a potentially transformative leader. He charged up his audiences with glib oratory about "change you can count on." Most nonincumbents do, indeed, if vaguely, trumpet a new era that will be heralded by their arrival in the White House. They almost inevitably overstate their case, and, for sure, overstate their prospects for achievement. Depending upon whether one sees the Obama presidential cup as half full or half empty, a case for achievement may be made. Achievement, however, is typically less than what was aspired to. Alternatively, one may make a case for disappointment. Which of these conclusions one arrives at depends on what one expects a president can do and on the opportunities or constraints that this particular president has faced during his first term—and those likely to be faced by him in the event of a second term.

In this article, I want to make four main points. The first is that the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership, deriving from James MacGregor Burns (1978), creates a dichotomy that seems blind to political institutions and to the opportunities given thereby to political opponents to stymie leaders. It is not surprising that transformational leaders typically led revolutionary movements, and some were distinctly authoritarian. By emphasizing the moral authority of the leader as teacher, the notion of

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transformational leadership vastly overrates persuasiveness as a weapon in a leader's armory. The second point, which I think follows from the first, is that American political institutions make leadership difficult, and what is thought to be transformative leadership is something that is exceedingly rare, if it exists at all. The third point is that the Obama presidency has been operating in an environment of virile hostility and in an era of changing political norms, none of which have been kind to creating solutions to problems or of responding positively to a presidential agenda. Despite this limited view of leadership, my fourth point is that Obama's presidency has been one of achievement. Some of these achievements are considerably more than modest but are perhaps susceptible to rollback or to disputes over implementation. These accomplishments almost all occurred during the first two years when Obama still had substantial majorities in Congress and during the lame duck congressional session after the 2010 midterm election. Some he undertook through unilateral executive action. If measured against the soaring campaign rhetoric, of course, the achievements will be disappointing to the hard core Obama supporters. Viewed, however, against the inevitably harsher political realities, Obama's accomplishments look relatively strong. No president acts in a vacuum, however. Context matters. In fact, it likely matters in many ways more than who the president happens to be (Skowronek, 1997, 2008).

I divide this article into four principal sections. The first assesses the distinction between transformative and transactional forms of leadership—a distinction that, as noted, derives from the work of James McGregor Burns (1978). The second assesses the inhospitable institutional environment that impedes political leadership while the third takes note of the changing political climate that, except in limiting circumstances, creates even deeper hostility to accomplishment unless an executive leader has powerful political majorities. The combination of institutions and changing norms, however, makes the type of accomplishment that Democratic presidents want to achieve especially problematic. Still, and finally, it is worth pointing to what Obama has achieved and what perhaps he had hoped to achieve. On the whole, it is not a modest record. Whether what he has achieved has altered the country for better or worse is, of course, a separate matter.

Transformative and Transactional Leadership

In shorthand, the transactional leader is willing to bargain and to cut deals to gain tactical advantages and to get others to do as she or he wishes. Transactional leadership is largely instrumental, and neither pedagogical nor inspirational. Leadership in its transactional form is, thus, typically incremental and uninspired by a bold message. Above all, it is criticized as failing to inspire followers because it seems exclusively tactical, short term, and elusive with respect to direction. By contrast, Burns celebrates transformative leadership that changes the parameters of choice and the framework of

discussion. Transformative leaders inspire. They may negotiate but always with the broader picture in mind. Above all, they "educate" and inspire their followers. Of late, Ronald Reagan seems by popular acclaim, in the language of Republican and Democratic political leaders alike, the most vivid recent example of such a transformative leader. The reality, of course, is that Reagan, however reluctantly, agreed to a number of deals mainly because the Democrats controlled half of the Congress for six of his eight years in office and all of it for the last two.

Burns's seemingly simple dichotomy, however, is just that—simplistic. First, there is a big difference between stirring the passions of political activists or even more passive political followers and the broader mass public. For all the passions he stirred among his devoted followers, Reagan came into office with the lowest level of approval of any president up to that time. It also should be noted that while Reagan had major spurts of high popular approval during his administration, he also had intervals of falling popularity, especially in the context of high unemployment during 1981 and 1982 and in the face of the scandal involving his national security advisors in the Iran-Contra episode during 1986–1987. Above all, except for the first year of the Reagan administration, there was no evidence of an increased public buy-in on behalf of the Reagan agenda.

Second, the distinction between transformative and transactional leadership assumes that presidents have sweeping change in mind. Fred Greenstein's (1994) analysis of the Eisenhower presidency suggests that leaders may have plausible and perhaps admirable goals of focusing on the maintenance of domestic harmony and consensus—obviously, a different style of leadership and, equally, a different set of goals than parametric change. Similarly, the George H. W. Bush presidency was a classically conservative one. Bush's focus was largely on competently managing the numerous crises and issues that command a president's attention. The "vision thing" was not exactly his strong suit as he readily confessed. In fact, Bush was largely a deal maker when he had to be, as reflected in the budget negotiations that his administration worked out with the majority Democrats in Congress against the inclinations of the majority of Republicans in Congress.

Third, it is simple to say that people are inspired or turned on by certain leaders. But if they are, it is typically because they were already predisposed to be so. As George Edwards (2003) has noted, extensive use of the so-called bully pulpit yields little gain. Political leaders typically speak to their respective choirs, and that tendency has been powerfully reinforced by the intense and deep party divisions that currently structure the American political system. Ronald Reagan became a virtual deity to committed Republicans but Democrats were far less enthused, and the less committed were more fundamentally influenced by perceived changes in the economic climate that worked to Reagan's advantage first in getting to the presidency and secondly in gaining support while in the presidency once the economy began to turn around (to about the point where it was when Reagan was first elected).

There is no doubt that some politicians are more inspirational than others, although these episodes typically involve nonpartisan moments of rallying around the flag. Churchill's war time address following the flotilla rescue of British and some French troops from Dunkirk in 1940 is frequently cited. But this was a classic rally around the flag event. Reagan's moving speech, crafted by the artistic Peggy Noonan, following the Challenger disaster in 1986 was another such rally event. But matters that divide the parties also usually divide public opinion.

In any political system, political leaders are apt to find beautiful words and sentiments to be part of their political survival toolkit. (It should be noted, of course, that in the first postwar election in the United Kingdom, Churchill's government was defeated.) How much attention will be given to those words and to their speaker depends, to a considerable degree, on the current reputation of the political leader. Another element of any political leader's toolkit is to get others who have power to see things as the leader would wish his or her potential adversaries to see them or, barring that, to provide tangible benefits to at least some of those adversaries in return for their support or, at least, passivity. Bargaining is what politicians must do because their commands are not only likely to fall on deaf ears but because a political style based on command is likely to get leaders ousted unless, of course, they are in authoritarian systems. Even then, leaders have to manipulate others to survive.

To be sure, Barack Obama, by his newness and novelty and his embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of those who have been marginalized in American politics and society, was invested with aspirations unlikely to be met in full measure. In that sense, he was bound to be found disappointing by some. But, of course, his soaring campaign language virtually made that inevitable. On the other hand, except for George H. W. Bush, few presidents get elected on a pledge to do the status quo and merely soften it some around the edges. The evaluation of presidents by academics, for example, is biased toward presidents achieving bold outcomes—especially ones in the direction of the academics' preferences. Nobody gets credit for incremental steps. Large deviations from the status quo and meeting big challenges—ones usually presented to presidents—are the credentials that get presidents into the political hall of fame. Not surprisingly, therefore, presidents do think about their legacies. Neither campaigning nor contemplating a legacy, however, leads to a vision painted in pastel tones. Bold strokes—details to follow somehow in some way—get attention.

Political Institutions and the Frustration of Leadership

American political institutions are designed to frustrate leadership and the rule of a given political faction. Multiple veto points, concurrent and extraordinary majorities, and the diffusion of political power horizontally and

vertically impede any agenda from being wholly triumphant. Consequently, would-be presidents often inspire others by deluding them about their power to alter events dramatically and to meet unrealistic aspirations and expectations whatever these happen to be. Undoubtedly, presidential aspirants themselves often hold unrealistic aspirations regarding their abilities to profoundly alter the status quo in whatever direction they wish to alter it. No one can possibly go through the grind of tireless campaigning and constant exposure without believing that in the end it is worth it. After all, enthusiasm animates effective campaigns, and enthusiasm is driven by hope. Jimmy Carter, after all, told us to get real, and we told him to get lost.

We know, of course, from Federalist Papers 10 and 51 that the architecture of the American political system was designed to deter capture by a tyrannical faction, and, therefore, was designed to frustrate the easy passage of leadership except under unusual conditions. At the same time, we also know from the Founders that the Federalist Papers dealing with the nature of the executive took seriously the notion of a vigorous executive, yet one whose powers were often implied rather than expressly delineated. This means that presidents are more powerful in some respects than in others. The presidential role as chief legislator, for example, depends greatly upon the magnitude of the president's coalition in both chambers of Congress. On the other hand, a president's willingness to assert unilateral authority, while not unbounded, places the ball squarely in Congress's court and places Congress on the defensive—at least for a time (Moe and Howell, 1999; Howell, 2003).

In President Obama's case, he entered office with strong majorities of his own party that were the consequence of two elections in 2006 and 2008 in which national currents favored the Democrats. His party controlled both chambers and had a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate after the 2008 election. The 2010 midterm elections, however, were disastrous for the Democrats as they lost their majority in the House and had it whittled away in the Senate where simple majorities, in any event, are not as relevant as in the House. These conditions clearly made for two different climates during Obama's term. During the first two years, he could step on the accelerator; during the last two years, he had his foot on the brake. Offense was the strategy in the first half; defense in the second half. With Obama in campaign mode during 2012, presidential rhetoric has been aggressive but it has focused more on what the Republican candidate would do and, questionably, on what he has done than on grand new plans for the second Obama administration should there be one. Typically, second terms achieve fewer presidential ambitions than first terms. Novelty helps to gain traction. And, it also helps if there is political wind at the president's back. With relatively rare exceptions, the second term provides less robust support for initiatives than does the first term (Light, 1983).

In sum, we know that the window of opportunity for American presidents is more often brief than not, and the opening is often slight. Big initiatives are rarely monumentally popular and they require a lot of political capital. Unless presidents have massive political majorities on their side, it is difficult

to get more than a small number of major initiatives through the legislative process. Those massive political majorities when they do appear often vanish as rapidly as the next election cycle.

It is often the case that presidents extend themselves beyond where their political support ends. George Edwards (2012) points out that Obama did just that, and that there was not extensive support for many of Obama's initiatives, particularly his health-care initiative. He speculates that this may have cost Obama dearly in successfully implementing initiatives that would have helped him in other spheres more critical to his political fortunes and, perhaps, the fortunes of the country. This is probably true, and, equally probably, inevitably true. Almost all presidents (perhaps Bush 41 aside and possibly Eisenhower as well) have ambitions beyond their grasp mainly because they are central to their political base. Even Ronald Reagan's economic plans were not wildly popular when he came to office. The public-supported deficit reduction more than tax reduction. Mass opinion on day-to-day political issues, of course, is deeply susceptible to how issues get framed and who gets the jump on framing them. Obama pushed healthcare as a major initiative because it had been in the Democrats' in-basket for decades. His plan was based on that adopted, ironically, by his Republican rival, Mitt Romney, when the latter was governor of Massachusetts. Moreover, the individual mandate was, in fact, supported by prominent Republicans as an alternative to the Clinton plan during the last great debate on and failure to enact major health-care reform. The point is that all presidents will—indeed must—lead beyond their most cautious instincts because it is vital to their political base to do so and to the ambitions they hold for their administrations. Folding the tent too early is likely an admission of political frailty.

The important point here is that opinions about specific issues are typically not deeply held or, for that matter, much informed among significant segments of the public. The so-called political center is not vital; it is relatively flaccid. Nonopinions often dominate in that region. It is among the political bases of either party or those for whom the parties are important cue-givers that are unlikely to show any opinion movement. So, presidents go for the gold because it is expected of them by their most loyal supporters, and the failure to do so is often thought to be evidence of timidity. Like most prospectors, they get more dross than gold. And, the deeper and more complicated the changes they wish to make, the less likely they are to get their way. Presidents, according to Edwards, mostly overestimate their ability to be successful particularly through persuasion. Their failures have consequences for their future capabilities.

Mostly, the window of opportunity in American politics is brief and the window itself is narrow. That is the norm. But the milieu of Obama's presidency has been even harsher, reflecting norms and practices and sharpened party differences evolving toward a politics of no compromise for more than three decades. With overwhelming majorities, a president can make this work for him or herself. But with any slippage, especially in the Senate, the multiple veto points become even more ominous in the contemporary context of American

politics. Further, in the current political setting searching for compromises is virtually impossible since the center has left the house (and the House and, increasingly, the Senate as well). Republicans especially have disowned what they recently touted. As Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012) noted, "seven of the eight Republican co-sponsors of a bi-partisan health care reform plan dropped their support; by early 2010, the others turned on their own proposal ...." In other words, oppositionism has become the order of the day. The apparent stimulus for this is that a Democrat had become president.

The hurdles for presidents are not symmetrical with respect to party. Democrats have a more difficult time on the whole because their agendas are usually more complex with more moving parts. Doing less—or at least no more—is not as complicated, and that is usually what Republican presidents want to do. Doing tax cuts is not particularly difficult. Everyone likes them, especially when they appear not to have a noticeable effect on deficits—or, perhaps, when deficits are less pressing as a political issue. When both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush tried to put Social Security on the docket, however, they were roundly resisted and gained no traction at all. In other words, big changes to iconic programs are likely only if there is a buy-in from leaders, or at least significant segments, of both political parties. Blame for pain needs to be syndicated, but that would require the party likely to benefit from the political fall-out to forego those benefits. That is not likely.

Cooperation has become steadily more scarce, perhaps to the vanishing point, as the Republicans especially move farther rightward and the Democrats' Blue Dogs diminish in size (James, 2012; Mann and Ornstein, 2012). Although presidents can bypass the legislative process, there are limitations to doing so as well as risks to the constitutional system. Presidents can and do ignore pieces of congressional legislation up to a point. For example, Obama has currently instructed the Justice Department not to defend the Defense of Marriage Act, but he cannot provide benefits that the Act explicitly denies to same-sex couples. Presidents can make recess appointments when the Senate refuses to act upon their nominations but they cannot ensure more than a limited term for those of their appointees who have been appointed in this fashion. As a general matter, except in initiatives that a president can take abroad, no matter how often a president resorts to unilateral behavior, the big initiatives requiring legislation cannot be done without the cooperation of Congress. Of course, the reverse is equally true as the Ryan budget plan put forth by the Republicans in the House makes clear. This budget plan, named for its sponsor, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin), Chair of the Budget Committee in the House and 2012 Republican vice-presidential nominee, significantly alters the foundations of the Medicare program while diminishing funding for programs designed to benefit lower-income populations. The Ryan plan failed to be taken up in the Democratic-controlled Senate, but even had it passed there, it is not likely that the White House would have signed off on it. The upshot is that from wherever leadership initiatives spring, the gauntlet of veto points is omnipresent.

Ordinarily, these structural conditions might have brought about a bargaining situation in which a Nash equilibrium was the outcome—where neither party could improve its lot by pressing beyond this point. Plausibly, these might be one reason why David Mayhew (2005) found that unified and divided government made little difference with regard to important legislated outcomes. However, the capacity to reach interparty agreements has been drastically reduced as a consequence of the powerful polarization of the party system, the volatility of the electorate, and the changing norms affecting congressional behavior, especially in the Senate. But another important element is one that Mayhew discussed in an earlier book (1974), namely, that there may be more to be gained from position-taking than from legislation.

Changing Norms and "Oppositionism"

In 1950, the American Political Science Association issued a report "Toward a More Responsible Two Party System" in which, as in the British Westminster system, parties would fit more consistently along conservative–liberal lines, party discipline would be enhanced, and deviation from party-based votes would not be tolerated. The American Constitution, however, set forth a different set of ideas about the nature of governance. Rather than a dominant party government for which the responsibility and power of governance was to be the consequence of an electoral outcome, the U.S. system separated and divided the power to govern making elections less decisively consequential than in Britain. Accordingly, bargaining and negotiation were—and still are—necessary ingredients to make the system work, assuming, of course, that making it work is a goal.

For several decades, the American political parties have increasingly and sharply distanced themselves from one another. Overlaps between Republicans and Democrats have disappeared (Poole, 2012), and to some extent, the followers of the parties have sorted themselves accordingly (Levandusky, 2010). The APSA Committee's fondest wishes largely have been achieved albeit in a system that does not accommodate partisan intractability well except under the rare conditions of a decisively and overwhelmingly unified party government. The lease on life of "party government" in the United States is not five years as in Britain but effectively two to the next midterm election where the "in" party typically absorbs losses.

The House of Representatives is supposedly the "people's chamber" in as much as its members' terms of office are short and it was the one element of government in the U.S. Constitution that was subject to direct popular voting. Most members once having survived at least two elections, however, tend to go on to have relatively durable careers, subject mainly to being redistricted out of their constituencies or their own aspirations for higher political office. Party traditionally has held more sway in the House than in the Senate because it is a majoritarian body and is more responsive to party

leadership. Despite its larger size, the House is a more orderly and efficient body than the Senate. Its members typically are elected from more politically homogeneous constituencies, and the redistricting process has tended to stack the deck in that direction, resulting in relatively fewer competitive districts. In the past, when Democrats still had considerable representation in southern and border states and Republicans in highly educated and affluent constituencies in the northeast, there was always significant cross-over potential. Localism and constituency tending was always important for House members and that too could provide the opening wedge for bargaining. The prospect for gaining cooperation might be enhanced by a strategic logroll or an executive payoff. But deal-cutting is effective only when ideological absolutes are less robust than they have become. Besides deal-making has been given a bad name in the age of transparency, and, as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) have noted, mass publics tend to be annoyed by both partisan bickering *and* deal-making.

Still, before nostalgia overtakes the reality of the past, the major divisions in the political system since the New Deal have been between liberals and conservatives and they remain so. On these matters, the divisions were largely party based but there was some overlap between the parties even if the party means were still distant from one another. Now, however, the coincidence between ideology and party is complete, so what we have is the same division but one that is now far more powerfully predictable by party. Not all issues in the past provoked the liberal–conservative distinction. Presidents could often rely on members of the other party on matters of foreign policy and national defense and, frequently, on civil rights. But now there is little give, and virtually any issue seems to provoke a liberal–conservative confrontation, which now means a party confrontation. It is not easy to distinguish ideological rigidity, of which there is now a surplus, from the self-interest of members in procuring resources for their political careers. The evolution of big money political action committees (PACs) and of lobbying and the implicit connection of these to the party system makes it as plausible for an ideologue to reinforce extreme ideological positions to procure these resources as it is for an opportunist to forge an ideological posture so as to attract such resources.

It is especially in the Senate where new institutional norms fortified by intense partisanship have made life maddeningly difficult for recent presidents, but to none more so than Barack Obama. The Senate is a body of mystifying complexity that operates on processes that bear little connection to those of the House. The Senate, as James Madison thought of it, was to be the cooling saucer to the cup of tea. From its inception, it was meant to be a checkmate to what was thought at the time to be the popular passions emanating from "the people's chamber."

The Senate was not conceived of as a democratic form of representation but rather was the product of a compromise to overrepresent smaller states in order to compensate for the population-based House. Moreover, until the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, the members were appointed by the state legislatures rather than directly elected. The internal rules of the Senate

further concentrated minority power through the ability to delay and even halt action ranging from nominations to legislation.

It comes as no surprise that it is precisely these mechanisms that have expanded as tools in the hands of the party minority. The length of time required for those administrative appointments that require the consent of the Senate has increased substantially, and its peak has been during the Obama administration. To be sure, there are numerous reasons for the appointment logjam (McKenzie, 2002; Aberbach and Rockman, 2009; O'Connell, 2010) that have little to do with the Senate. However, the Senate has clearly been a major contributor to that logjam and none more so than during the Obama administration, which had been relatively more efficient in getting nominations to the Senate than its immediate three predecessors but spent more time getting those appointments approved by the Senate (O'Connell, 2010). The use of "holds" on nominations—a means by which a single senator can tie the process up in knots—has been especially expansive during the Obama administration (Mann and Ornstein, 2012). The evidence on judicial confirmations shows an even worse pattern of delay by the Senate minority. President George W. Bush had approximately twice the number of judicial confirmations, according to an assistant attorney general in the current administration at the same point in his administration as had President Obama. The nomination process, according to assistant attorney general, Christopher Schroeder, "has become a part of the political agenda of each party" and that, consequently, the delays have "less to do with the qualifications of many of the individual judges whose confirmation votes are being held up and more often to do with policy disputes" (Duke News and Events, 2011).

Indeed, the Senate minority has used a different tool by which to prevent confirmations even when it had no objection to the nominee but objected to the administrative agency the nominee was sent forth to direct. Such a case involved Richard Cordray (a former Ohio state attorney general), whose nomination to head the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau set up by the Dodd-Frank Financial Regulation legislation was opposed by the Republican Senate minority in 2011 not because of objections to him personally, but because of objections to the way in which the bureau was structured in the legislation. The procedure was to not allow the nomination to reach the Senate floor by requiring three-fifths (60 votes) support to proceed. The further exacerbation of delays in judicial appointments and in appointments to executive posts is especially ironic given that a bipartisan group of senators agreed during the Bush administration to forestall the then Republican Senate majority's threat to invoke what was dubbed the "nuclear option" of treating nominations as outside of the super-majority requirement in order to bring Bush administration judicial nominees to the floor for a vote unless the minority claimed the nominee to be egregiously unacceptable, a number to which it was implicitly limited. Since the turn in the control of the Senate to the Democrats, the new minority has now abandoned the earlier agreement on judicial nominations and essentially has treated executive position nominations more or less as though they were the equivalent of judicial

nominations, thus illustrating once more that the sturdiest principle in politics is "whose ox is being gored?"

Senator Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky), the Republican floor leader made it clear that opposition to any and all of Obama's agenda was essential to keeping his party together in the Senate, to enable Republicans to bounce back from their losses in 2006 and 2008, and to ensuring, as he stated publicly, that: "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president" (Shakir, 2010).

Pure party line voting has been evident now for some time. President Clinton's budget bill in 1993, which included increased taxes, passed both chambers of Congress without a single Republican vote. But rarely has the tactic of "oppositionism" been so boldly stated as McConnell did. As matters turn out, McConnell had some interesting political science research to support his tactics whether or not he was aware of it (Lee, 2008). Clearly, opposition tactics in the Senate made it not so much the "cooling saucer" as the deep freezer of legislation. The use of cloture votes on motions to proceed have become rampant and at an all-time high, thereby making it impossible to proceed without 60 votes, and these days that generally requires the majority party to have at least 60 votes (Hurst, 2010). Perhaps the reason that cloture votes on motions to proceed have become so commonplace has to do with the fact that filibusters now virtually never take place. The cloture vote was designed to prevent that and to avoid tying up the Senate. Instead, it has made cloture votes now commonplace and the 60-vote rule the norm (Koger, 2010).

Summing up the environment of Obama's first (and perhaps only) term, the hope that arose among his followers was quenched by his second year. A good part of this was due to the sluggish recovery from the "Great Recession" of 2008–2009. Obama's standing fell as the recovery remained tepid and the unemployment rate moved only modestly. Possibly, this was due to his policies as the Republicans claim or to an insufficient dosage of them as Obama's critics on the left argue. Realistically, it is unlikely that any set of policies would have had much immediate effect on the slow course of the recovery.

But the slow recovery gave renewed hope to Republicans to continue full-fledged opposition to any part of the Obama agenda. It is probably a feckless task to fully get at Republicans' motivations. Certainly, there is less and less that the parties can actually agree on whatever the underlying reasons for that. Yet, it is certainly plausible, as McConnell's comments seem to suggest, that there was also a strategic reason for holding out against the Obama administration's proposals.

Until Senator Ted Kennedy's death in August 2009, and his departure from Washington even before then, Obama's winning majorities seemed to be reasonably assured with a 60–40 edge in the Senate. Even so, the 2006 and 2008 elections brought a contingent of "Blue Dog" Democrats to the House, often from highly competitive or even Republican-tilting districts mostly in the South, the mountain states, and the border states. Further, in the Senate there were a few members of the Democratic caucus who were independent of the party's leadership and in at least one case also nominally independent.

Consequently, Obama's majorities looked better on paper than they actually were. Still, they were strong enough to support a good bit of his agenda. With Kennedy's passing and the unexpected election of a Republican, Scott Brown, to the Senate seat in Massachusetts in a special election in January 2010, the Obama agenda now appeared in jeopardy in the face of relentless Republican opposition. By manipulating Senate procedures, the administration was able to pass its signature health-care reform bill. It claimed that the bill, which had already passed the Senate but needed a conference bill with the House to go back to the Senate for final approval, was a budget bill that overrode the Senate's use of the filibuster rule. None of this made Republicans happier with Obama, but by this point it was clear to Obama that the only deals that he could make were within his own party. The other side was dictating and opposing but not dealing.

After the disastrous 2010 midterm elections for the Democrats, things got better for Obama in the lame duck session before they then got appreciably worse after the Republican majority took over the House in the 112th Congress in January 2011 and sharply eroded the Democrat's majority in the Senate, thus ensuring stalemate in that body. If the hangman's noose concentrates the mind, congressional Democrats hung on in the lame duck 111th Congress to pass some major pieces of legislation including repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" law, thereby allowing gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military. In exchange for a two-year extension of the Bush tax cuts, the administration gained an additional economic stimulus by getting in exchange a temporary reduction of payroll taxes. It also managed to get the votes to pass what had become a contentious missile agreement with Russia.

This productive December session from Obama's standpoint, however, was followed by two years of harrowing defense as crises emerged over a government shutdown in April 2011 and a threatened government default into early August through congressional reluctance to raise the deficit. Only at the stroke before midnight were both crises averted, but they are likely to arise again, especially as the so-called Supercommittee of 12 members of Congress appointed by the party leaders in each chamber stalemated on a solution to avert the next default crisis. As a result, automatic sequestrations are to go into effect to come from the discretionary budget, half of which will come from the defense budget.

As the political campaign of 2012 has begun to heat up, Obama's political management team has aggressively gone after the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, and what it interprets as the Republican vision for the future. The hope and change themes of 2008 have given way to a theme whose implicit premise is "fear for the future if they [Republicans] come into power." As the Carter reelection campaign in 1980 strongly attacked the Republican nominee of that year, Ronald Reagan, its theme from 1976 of "why not the best?" when Carter was a relatively unknown challenger seemed to devolve into a more familiar theme of "consider the rest" once Carter was the incumbent and was assigned responsibility for an unfavorable state of affairs.

A Relatively Successful But Not Transformational Presidency

Presidents are joined with context. Their ability to lead depends greatly upon the political circumstances that they inherit and whether times are good or bad. They all operate in a system designed to frustrate leadership and one that has become more difficult to lead as a result of changing political and institutional norms and intense partisan polarization. But leadership is also dependent upon realistic prospects for success. The heroic conception of leadership suggested by the language of "transformational leadership" is largely fictitious and should best be abandoned. Those seeking truly transformational goals are likely to fail, their intentions notwithstanding. Doing the so-called right thing without regard to political consequences may be heroic but also fatal. Virtue in politics may have to suffice as its own reward because chances are that virtue is asking for sacrifice, something that mass publics, as well as anyone else, are not keen on doing (Weaver and Rockman, 1993).

The main difficulty with the politics of hope and change is that it is modeled after religious or utopian expectations rather than realistically achievable results even in settings, unlike the United States, where elections might more directly lead to clearer outcomes. People have different hopes and they want to see different changes, so clearly a presidential candidate is speaking to a set of followers whose hopes have sufficient commonality. As Chinni and Gimpel (2011) point out, there are at least 12 distinctive idea communities inspired by very different things. Even then, how much change a president can bring about or even how much a political system can bring about is surely open to limits. The political system can make civil rights come alive for particular populations (African Americans, women, gays, and lesbians) just as it can deny their civil rights and liberties. But income inequality is a different matter. To be sure, there are palliatives for reducing it. However, the sources of income and wealth inequality are far deeper than the tax structure alone and the distribution of social benefits. They have to do with deep structural changes in labor markets nationally and globally, with the flight of capital to cheaper labor markets, and the technology revolution that increases efficiency but decreases the availability of jobs. Surely, it is noticeable that customers now wear two hats—one as customer the other as the implicit employee of the company by doing for yourself what others once got paid to do for you.

Within the realm of things a president can control, and within the current context of governance, Obama's first term, especially its first half, must be regarded as reasonably successful, though big problems continue to linger. What did Obama accomplish in conjunction with his party during the period in which the Democrats controlled Congress?

First, the economic stimulus package, which may have been too small rather than too large, helped to arrest the decline in the economy but failed to stimulate a robust recovery, thus making attendant deficit reduction problems cyclically deeper. Continuing cuts in the public sector, over which Obama

has no authority or control, have only deepened the economic malaise. The emphasis on reducing the deficit and the accumulated debt made it impossible for the administration to put forth a second broad stimulus.

Second, the bail-outs of both the banking industry, parts of the insurance industry, and auto industry, as well as the partial and temporary takeover of the latter and ultimately of FNMA (Fannie Mae) and GNMA (Ginny Mae), were costly to Obama politically in spite of their apparent success in promoting the survival of the auto industry, the liquidity of banks, and the survival of high-risk insurance in financial markets. The reality is that much of this began in the last quarter of the Bush administration. The narrative, however, was that it was all attributable to Obama, and it spiked both Tea Party antipathy toward government and the populist impulses of others. Another reality, though, is that without the rescue, the Great Recession could equally have become the second Great Depression.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Dodd-Frank banking regulation, the Lilly Ledbetter legislation to protect women's rights to equal pay, and the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" certainly were major pieces of legislation on which Obama prevailed, typically without any—or very little—Republican support. In terms of potentially momentous legislation as well as the effort to recharge the economy, Obama's record is enviable from what in baseball would be called the "slugging percentage." Whatever one's view of these legislative enactments, they are "big hits." However, enactment is one thing—and all of these were achieved when Obama still retained his party majorities in both chambers—and implementation is another. Much of this legislation is still in the process of being administratively defined, especially the health-care and financial reform acts, and the resources for administration and even the appointments process can be influenced by subsequent Congresses. In other words, there is more to be said. There is also litigation to be considered. At this juncture, significant parts of the Affordable Care Act have already been influenced by the Supreme Court. Prior Court rulings may also influence how the Ledbetter legislation gets treated.

Much, however, that Obama had hoped to achieve and much that he needed to achieve remains undone. Although President Obama issued an executive order in 2012 to provide a pathway for legalizing undocumented immigrants, the Dream Act remained an unfulfilled legislative aspiration as the nativist wing of the Republican Party dominated its business and agrarian wings. Efforts to make it easier for unions to organize also were stymied in Congress. Closure of the Guantanamo prison and bringing terrorist suspects under the jurisdiction of U.S. civilian courts also was rejected in Congress. The cap and trade legislation that passed the House and possibly contributed to the Democrats' losses there appears to be dead for the foreseeable future as the traditional fossil fuel lobbies have worked both sides of the aisle hard and have been triumphant. Between the fossil fuel and utility industries and people's unwillingness to pay more for energy or to be inconvenienced, climate change legislation will have a hard road ahead.

Obama's efforts to reach out to the Islamic world were complicated by the special relationship with Israel, and Obama's political need to not aggravate voters sensitive to that relationship. The Arab Spring also complicated that relationship. And the difficult relationship with Iran remained just that as the Obama administration needed to deter its ally Israel from doing anything rash as well as to placate the mainline Sunni Arab states, especially those in the Gulf, by promoting severe economic sanctions on Iranian commerce, which, in turn, have contributed to the rise of oil prices.

All in all, a president is only one actor. Opposition will well up against a president's initiatives when proposed legislation is controversial and sometimes even when a president's nonlegislative proposals are, such as the closing of the Guantanamo prison, and such opposition often has the upper hand. Regardless of who opposes whom, by virtue of changes in the culture of the American political class and the mammoth divide that separates the members of that class, opposition is now the favorite to win the day. Altered institutional norms in the Senate have especially contributed to this state of affairs.

Those with hopes beyond the possible should consult a person of the cloth. That could be transformational. Those with more realistic hopes as to what our political system can produce and what our politicians can resolve will be appropriately skeptical of the "hope and change" business. Ultimately, under any circumstances, there are a limited set of things that can be more than incrementally influenced by political action. So, Barack Obama has not been a transformational president. No presidents are, certainly not by themselves. Context provides the potential for decisive actions. But using a milder standard, Obama has been a reasonably successful president when the circumstances have allowed him to be.

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