

The Decline of the Obama Presidency: A Political Psychology Perspective

by Stanley A. Renshon *

Everyone agrees it has been an extraordinarily difficult year for President Obama. His second term agenda has stalled amidst a series of political and policy setbacks, and public approval of his policies and his leadership have sunk to new lows. What caused this decline? There is no shortage of answers. What should the President do? There is no shortage of advice. Is the Obama presidency essentially over? It depends whom you ask. This paper analyses these questions and the answers that have been proposed. It then offers its own perspective on the nature and causes of the President's difficulties from a focus that blends psychological and political explanations. It is argued that the core of the President's difficulties have less to do with the conventional explanations of why they occurred than with the "basic fault" of the Obama presidency. That has its origins in the mismatch between the President's transformational ambitions and the public expectations of which they ran afoul.

Das vergangene Jahr erwies sich für Präsident Obama als wenig erfolgreich. Die von ihm für die zweite Amtszeit angekündigten Vorhaben drohten aufgrund von politischen Rückschlägen verschleppt zu werden, zudem sanken Obamas Umfragewerte auf ein Rekordtief. Wodurch wurde dieser Niedergang verursacht? Was sollte der Präsident tun? Ist die Obama-Ära gar zu einem vorzeitigen Ende gekommen? Dieser Beitrag versucht, diese Fragen zu beantworten und im Anschluss Ursachen und Auslöser für die Probleme im Rahmen der bisherigen zweiten Amtszeit zu identifizieren. Im Mittelpunkt steht dabei die These, dass die aktuellen Schwierigkeiten, mit denen sich Obama konfrontiert sieht, weniger durch Standard-Antworten zu erklären sind; sie speisen sich vielmehr aus einem prinzipiellen „Fehler“ des Präsidenten, der in der Diskrepanz zwischen seinen ehrgeizigen, auf Transformation abzielenden Ideen und den Erwartungen der Öffentlichkeit an ihn wurzelt.

Cassius: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves ..."

Julius Caesar (I, ii, 140 f.)

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I. Introduction

Anyone who has followed the *Obama* presidency over the last year knows that it has been a rough one for the President and his agenda. At the President's end of year press conference, the very first question that he was asked was: "Has this been the worst year of your presidency?"¹

The President declined to agree with that statement, but his former press secretary *Robert Gibbs* was less reluctant to do so. In an interview, Mr. *Gibbs* said in answer to that same question raised by the moderator:² "No doubt about it. I would say this is the worst year for the President. It does beat out 2011. But – well, and especially given from where he started, the fact that the first year of his second term is historically the most productive of the second term."

The President's fifth year troubles are, in many respects, a surprise. He is, after all, considered by many to be an immensely talented leader – smart, thoughtful, knowledgeable, moderate, and a skilled rhetorical advocate of his positions. *Rockman* and *Waltenburg* called him "gifted" and "serious"³ in these pages in their analysis of his first two years in office. What's more, he had just recently won, convincingly, his re-election campaign. His Second Inaugural Address was described as a "confident [...] preview of the priorities he intends to pursue – essentially, a reaffirmation of core liberal Democratic causes",⁴ making "the case for a liberal last-term agenda that would more sharply define his legacy".⁵

That now seems unlikely to happen and the basic questions taken up by this analysis are: What happened, and why? Is this a case of presidential "personal missteps" or is it the result of "unforeseen events and structural problems with the political system", as one analysis framed the question?⁶ Is it an illustration, as *Ludger Helms* detailed in these pages recently of the possible relationship between "poor leadership" and "bad governance"?⁷ The answers to these questions

1 Press Conference by the President, The White House, Washington D.C., 20.12.2013.

2 Transcript, Meet the Press, NBC News, 22.12.2012.

3 *Rockman, B.A./Waltenburg, E.*: Obama at Mid-term, in: ZSE, 2 (2010), 177-201, here 201.

4 *Spetnick, M./Jeff Mason, J.*: Confident Obama lays out battle plan as he launches second term, in: Reuters, 21.01.2013.

5 *Wilson, S.*: Obama brings more optimism, partisanship and populism to second inaugural speech, in: Washington Post, 21.01.2013.

6 *Stein, S.*: Everyone knows Obama's 2013 was bad, the tough question is why, in: Huffington Post, 21.12.2013.

7 *Helms, L.*: Beyond the Great and Glorious: Researching Poor Leadership and Bad Governance in Liberal Democracies, in: ZSE, 4 (2012), 492-509.

may help to illuminate a core question in political science. What elements, whether personal or related to the political operating system in which leadership takes place, help to facilitate successful political leadership, and exactly what does that term mean?

Attempting to answer those questions requires us to delve into the intersection of political leadership and public psychology. A leader's psychology encompasses their basic character elements, skills, and their stance towards the political issues they face.⁸ The public's psychology reflects, in part, its views of desirable leadership and particular leaders, and the issues and concerns they have – all framed through the lens of their political expectations. Those expectations help to define 'the times' within which political leaders operate, and the boundaries that they cross at their own peril. A close examination of President *Obama's* political circumstances, and how he arrived at this low point, suggests that leadership "success" may well have paradoxical elements. Is it possible for a leader to be a "success" by some measures, even as in doing so, they plant the seeds of their own setbacks?

The analysis that follows is focused directly on a specific American president operating in a specifically American context. It therefore makes no claims of applicability elsewhere. That said, while it is true that the relationship between President *Obama's* psychology and his political circumstances are somewhat unique to him, the country he leads, and the times in which he is trying to govern, that doesn't mean we can't learn from them.

II. A Bad Year: But What Did It Mean?

It is clear that the President has had a bad year. One *Washington Post* columnist gave him his award for having had the "worst year in Washington",⁹ another referred to the President as being in a "second-term swoon"¹⁰ and the left leaning *New Republic* characterized 2013 as "*Obama's* Year from Hell".¹¹ The question on many minds was this: "In 2014, can *Obama* leave setbacks behind?"¹² While there seemed to be agreement that "President *Obama* is down", the big question

8 Cf. Renshon, S.A.: *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates*. New York, 2008, chapters 7 and 8.

9 Cillizza, C.: Worst Year in Washington, in: *Washington Post*, 13.12.2013.

10 Chinn, D.: Politics Counts: Obama's Second-Term Swoon, in: *Wall Street Journal*, 22.11.2013.

11 Chotiner, I.: Don't Blame the Constitution for Obama's Year from Hell, in: *New Republic*, 05.12.2013.

12 Page, S.: In 2014, can Obama leave setbacks behind?, in: *USATODAY*, 26.12.2013.

that dominated news coverage and analysis was: “But is he out?”¹³ Predictions were mixed. One supporter wrote that the “*Obama* political obituaries are way premature”,¹⁴ another argued that “media hysterics” were just simply “wrong”.¹⁵ Others noted that there was “still time for big things”, pointing out that in “his sixth year in office, *Ronald Reagan* signed a major overhaul of the tax code”.¹⁶ He also negotiated a major arms control agreement, signed major immigration legislation into law, and created the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Most prognoses for the remainder of the *Obama* presidency, however, were dire in their assessments. One despairing presidential adviser was quoted as saying: “This is the end of the presidency.”¹⁷ A conservative critic agreed, bluntly characterizing Mr. *Obama* as having a “failed presidency”.¹⁸ Another, more liberal *Washington Post* columnist asked “Does the health-care fumble mean game over for *Obama*?”, and concluded, yes, “it’s not likely that the public’s loss of trust will be repaired no matter how often or how genuinely he says ‘my bad.’”¹⁹ Several analyses argued that things would be even worse for the President in 2014.²⁰ And one sympathetic observer asked: “Can you reset a presidency?” and concluded that for *Obama*, “a reset, reboot, or rebirth of a more enduring nature remains elusive”.²¹

A few others were a bit more sanguine, but not optimistic. “The *Obama* presidency is not over, but it is failing”,²² was one voice, while another staunchly liberal observer anticipating the next year of the *Obama* presidency entitled his analysis: “The Year in Preview: *Obama’s* last Stand.”²³

From the perspective of the White House, and especially the President, the stakes

13 *Cillizza, C.*: President Obama is down. But is he out?, in: *Washington Post*, 11.12.2013.

14 *Tomasky, M.*: The Obama political obituaries are way premature, in: *The Daily Beast*, 19.12.2013.

15 *Macgillis, A.*: Those Media Hysterics Who Said Obama’s Presidency Was Dead Were Wrong. Again, in: *New Republic*, 06.12.2013.

16 *Page, S.*, op.cit.

17 Quoted in *Fournier, R.*: This Is the End of the Presidency, in: *National Journal*, 17.12.2013.

18 *Wehner, W.*: A Failed Presidency, in: *Commentary*, 11.11.2013.

19 *Milbank, D.*: Does the health-care fumble mean game over for Obama?, in: *Washington Post*, 15.11.2013.

20 *Wehner, P.*: So You Think Obama’s 2013 Was Bad? Just Wait Until 2014, in: *Commentary*, 18.12.2013; see also *Chen, L.*: If 2013 was hard on Obamacare, Just Wait for 2014, in: *Bloomberg News*, 30.12.2013.

21 *Shesol, J.*: Can You Reset a Presidency, in: *New Yorker*, 02.01.2014.

22 *Luce, L.*: The Obama presidency is not over, but it is failing, in: *Financial Times*, 17.11.2013.

23 *Shapiro, W.*: The Year in Preview: Obama’s Last Stand, in: *The American Prospect*, 17.12.2013.

could not be higher. President *Obama* entered office with the specifically stated aspiration of being a “transformational” and “great” president.²⁴ Yet, as one news analysis noted: “When historians write the story of *Barack Obama’s* presidency, 2013 will be his lost year. It opened with great promise and closed with equally great disappointment. In a year that could have been about building his legacy, the President was instead reduced to salvaging the signature accomplishment of his first term.”²⁵

It does not seem like hyperbole to note that at this point five years into President *Obama’s* term in office “history’s assessment of the 44th President”²⁶ is at stake.

III. What Went Wrong? The “Second Term Curse”?

President *Obama’s* circumstances have spawned divergent assessments, dozens of explanations and almost as much advice. Of all the many explanations for the President’s troubles perhaps the oddest was that they were the result of a “second term curse”.²⁷ The fact that other presidents had run into different kinds of troubles in their second term was true enough. However, it was the summoning of almost supernatural causes that gave one pause.

Among the ghosts of troubled second term presidents brought up to add weight to the question to those who raised it were the attempted stacking of the Supreme Court by *Franklin Roosevelt*, the scuttling of the US-USSR summit during President *Eisenhower’s* second term because the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spy plane over their territory, the impeachment and resignation from office of *Richard Nixon*, the Iran-Contra Scandal that came two years into *Ronald Reagan’s* second presidential term, the impeachment trial of *Bill Clinton* over lying to a grand jury about his sexual relationship with an intern, and most recently *George W. Bush’s* attempt to “privatize” social security and his failed nomination to the Supreme Court of *Harriet Miers*.

All of these were troubles, but of variable significance. They all had an impact on these president’s second terms, but they were disparate in origin and impact.

24 Renshon, S.A.: *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Redemption*, New York, 2013, 82, 84-87.

25 Cillizza, C.: *Worst Year in Washington*, op.cit.

26 Page, S., op.cit.

27 Tumulty, K./Rucker, P.: Will Obama suffer the “second-term curse”?, in: *Washington Post*, 11.05.2013; see also Thrush, G./Epstein, R.J.: Can Obama defy the second-term curse?, in: *Politico*, 19.01.2013. Alfred J. Zachler, a real-estate agent and amateur historian, wrote a self-published book on the second-term presidency entitled: *Presidential Power in Troubled Second Terms*, Sarasota, 2012.

Some arose from leadership hubris (*Roosevelt*), some from the grandiose feeling of being exempt from ordinary conventions (*Clinton*), or the confusion of political authority and legitimacy with presidential power (*Nixon*) – three occupational hazards of ambitious presidents. Some had to do with ordinary political miscalculations (*G. W. Bush*), or the risk-taking of subordinates coupled with a delegating presidential style (*Reagan*). And some had to do with the risks of carrying out perfectly legitimate and necessary national security policies (*Eisenhower*).

These disparate second-term problems were not necessarily dispositive of those presidents' overall assessment either at the end of their term in office or their place in history. The end of term popularity of all presidents mentioned as exhibiting manifestations of a second term curse were: *Roosevelt* (65%); *Eisenhower* (59%), *Richard Nixon* (24%), *Ronald Reagan* (63%), *Bill Clinton* (66%), and *George W. Bush* (34%).²⁸ Only Presidents *Nixon* and *Bush* ended their presidencies with a low approval rating, and former President *Bush*'s have improved over time, and now stand at 49%.²⁹

Moreover, presidents' second-term troubles generally have little to do with their historical assessment. Taking into account that lists of presidential "greatness"³⁰ vary by whether historians or ordinary people do the rankings,³¹ whether those ranking the presidents have distinctive ideological views,³² and the fact that assessments vary over time,³³ most presidents who have made the second-term curse list have fared rather well. *Franklin Roosevelt* is considered to be a "great" president by most historians. *Ronald Reagan* is ranked as a "great" president by the American public. Both *Eisenhower* and *Clinton* share high ratings of their presidencies. Only Presidents *Bush* and *Nixon* have low historical ratings to match their end of term approval ratings, and the issues that caused these ratings were quite different – policy setbacks in one case, abuse of power in the other.

28 These data are drawn from the American Presidency Project (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data.php>).

29 Jones, J.M.: Former President George W. Bush's Image Ratings Improve, in: Gallup, 11.06.2013.

30 Almost all lists of presidential greatness can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_rankings_of_Presidents_of_the_United_States. For a scholarly treatment of presidential greatness see also *Landy, M./Milkis, S.M.: Presidential Greatness*, Lawrence, 2000.

31 Compare: Americans say Reagan is the Greatest U.S. President, in: Gallup, 18.02.2011 (<http://www.gallup.com>) with: American Presidents. Greatest and Worst, Siena's 5th Presidential Expert Poll 1982-2010.

32 Lindgren, J. et al.: *Rating the Presidents of the United States, 1789-2000. A Survey of Scholars in History, Political Science, and Law*, 2000.

33 Clymer, A.: Textbooks Reassess Kennedy, Putting Camelot Under Siege, in: New York Times, 10.11.2013.

It is also well to keep in mind that less than half of the American presidents have served more than one full term, and that among modern presidents *Lyndon Johnson*, *Gerald Ford*, *Jimmy Carter*, and *George H. W. Bush* were not able to gain a second term in office. Presumably, substantial errors of leadership and/or policy in their first terms precluded their ability to suffer a second-term curse.

Presidential historian *Michael Beschloss* framed the issue this way: “Is it mainly a coincidence that every president of the past 80 years has had a hard time after getting re-elected? Or is it somehow baked into the structure of a second-term presidency that some combination of serious troubles is going to happen?”³⁴ The problem with this framing is of course that almost every modern American president has his share of first term problems, and no second term presidency is devoid of them. As a general rule, leaders can count on facing problems because neither the world at large nor even their domestic constituencies are of one view, and many feel strongly that it is *their* views that ought to triumph. Especially in the domestic politics of diverse ethnic and racial liberal democracies like the United States, the President’s difficult balancing task in these circumstances is to try to find or forge common ground where possible. That would seem to be a key definition of both leadership success and good governance, and the question raised by this point is: How does President *Obama* faire?

Answering that question is likely to be complicated. One ordinarily sensible political observer has written: “Whether you are a conservative or a liberal, you can choose, as a leader, to be a uniter or a divider.”³⁵ The author has a point, but it is a bit too broad. When the United States was attacked on 9/11, President *Bush* responded forcefully with a series of dramatic policy steps that were continued and in some cases expanded by his successor, President *Obama*.³⁶ Those policies lost support over time during Mr. *Bush*’s term of office, especially among Democrats, but in life or death circumstances, common ground may have to give way to necessity.

This is decidedly not the case regarding the ordinary politics of domestic policy. There, incremental change is built into the American constitutional system. The nature of that system often facilitates where it doesn’t require the search for common ground, even if sometimes that ground is rhetorical. It also acts as a

34 Quoted in *Tumulty, K./Rucker, P.*, op.cit.

35 *Noonan, P.*: New York’s Divider in Chief, in: *Wall Street Journal*, 02.01.2014.

36 *Renshon, S.A.*: *National Security in the Obama Administration. Reassessing the Bush Doctrine*, New York, 2010.

check on presidential ambitions. This is no doubt frustrating at times for every president, but even presidents differ in their levels of ambitions.

All want to make a difference according to their own view of policy preferences and to leave their country a better place at the end of their term than it was at the beginning. However, a very few others, and President *Obama* is one of them, have a much more expansive view of their role and responsibilities. In aspiring to be a “great” and “transforming” president, which this President does, they are likely to feel stymied by constitutional or ordinary, conventional political procedures. And this President has. President *Obama* is a “conviction leader”, one whose views and acts reflect his fidelity to his political ideas.³⁷ He has been and is a leader of decidedly liberal views and his pragmatism has been in the service of advancing them. That would be difficult enough in a political culture that is sharply divided on the merits of his policies.³⁸ It is even more difficult in those circumstances when the president sees himself as a great, historic figure.

IV. What Went Wrong? Alternative Explanations

Much commentary on the decline of the President’s fortunes has focused on the roll out of his signature accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act (which both supporters and opponents refer to as *Obamacare*). The *New York Times* described that introduction as “a disaster after it went live on Oct. 1, with a roster of engineering repairs that would eventually swell to more than 600 items”.³⁹ However, that explanation succumbs to the cognitive error associated with the availability heuristic in which the most prominent element receives the most attention, rightly or wrongly. In reality, the flawed health care roll out was only the most visible element of the President’s troubles. In fact the “President was already seeing declines long before the ACA rollout problems and was below 50% in the Gallup data since July – long before the government shutdown clouded the issue. In other words, the ACA problems seem to have reinforced an ongoing trend for Mr. *Obama*, and this swoon could be the continuation of a

37 This is my definition of one of every president and leader’s three basic character elements, *character integrity*. The others are *ambition* and *relatedness*. See *Renshon, S.A.*: Psychological Assessment, op.cit.

38 *Balz, D.*: Red, blue states move in opposite directions in a new era of single-party control, in: *Washington Post*, 28.12.2013; see also *Lax, J.R./Phillips, J.H.*: The Democratic Deficit in the States, in: *American Journal of Political Science*, 56/1 (2012), 148-166.

39 *Stolberg, S.G./Shear, M.D.*: Inside the Race to Rescue a Health Care Site, and Obama, in: *New York Times*, 30.11.2013; see also *Shear, R.*: Health Law Rollout’s Stumbles Draw Parallels to Bush’s Hurricane Response, in: *New York Times*, 14.11.2013.

downward track for him, like the track Mr. *Bush* found himself on after Katrina.”⁴⁰

One list of the President’s trouble, compiled by a supporter of the administration, noted the following:

“It’s not just the poor rollout of the Affordable Care Act. To review: *Obama* worked Congress hard on gun control measures. It failed. He was hands-off with Congress on immigration reform. It failed. He pushed to avert sequestration cuts. They were enacted. He argued for unemployment benefits to be extended. They weren’t. Revelations of aggressive investigations into national security leaks led to a review of Justice Department activities. Revelations that the IRS had screened tea party groups led to a reworking of the tax agency’s practices. Revelations of the National Security Agency’s broad surveillance programs, endorsed by *Obama*, led to popular revulsion, a court rebuke, another review, and likely reforms [...] The ACA rollout was a disaster, and a signature promise of the program that *Obama* made himself was proven hollow.”⁴¹

Other observers framed the issue as a series of substantial scandals in which the administration “initially failed to give a straightforward account of its response to the Benghazi attack, which killed four Americans”, then adding: “The Justice Department’s seizure of AP phone records is an affront to civil liberties.”⁴² Another scandal list included the fact that the “Internal Revenue Service acknowledged that it had targeted tea party groups’ applications for non-profit, tax-exempt status and subjected them to heightened scrutiny”.⁴³

Some of these scandals were, in fact, administration policies that had gone awry. As a consequence, several analyses looked directly at the President’s policies and found what they thought were the reasons for his decline: the fiasco of the rollout of the health insurance exchanges; the unexpected revelations of former CIA employee *Edward Snowden* and his decision to leak a large number of classified documents; the Syrian crisis that “raised questions about *Obama*’s firmness and the United States’ capacity for leadership”; the failed push for gun control that to critics “was another example of *Obama* making fine speeches but being less adept at bending Congress to his will”; and the charge that the President “has

40 *Chinni, D.*: Politics Counts, in: Wall Street Journal, 19.11.2013.

41 *Stein, S.*, op.cit.

42 *Dallek, M.*: Rough times for Obama? Sure. But Nixonian? Please, in: Washington Post, 17.05.2013.

43 *Cillizza, C.*: Worst Year in Washington, op.cit.

failed to change Washington's culture, despite many promises to do so during his first campaign in 2008".⁴⁴

One of the President's most ardent liberal supporters also blamed his policies, however from a decidedly different perspective, attributing the "disappointment in the *Obama* presidency" to the missed chance "to become the voice for the voiceless" in "the great battle of our age [which] is about who will define the populist mantle in a nation in which major institutions are vastly unpopular".⁴⁵ In his view the President's policies had not been liberal enough. That, however, was a distinctly minority view.

Some criticized the President's lack of management experience saying that

"[t]he heart of the issue [...] is that *Obama* and his inner circle had scant executive experience prior to arriving in the West Wing, and dim appreciation of the myriad ways the federal bureaucracy can frustrate an ambitious president. And above all, they had little apparent interest in the kind of organizational and motivational concepts that typically are the preoccupation of the most celebrated modern managers."⁴⁶

Another observer agreed with the President's lack of management experience but put his focus on rhetorical leadership coupled with the lack of real-world experience:

"It's a leader's job to be sceptical of grand schemes [...] And this President wasn't. I think part of the reason he wasn't careful is because he sort of lives in words. That's been his whole professional life – books, speeches. Say something and it magically exists as something said, and if it's been said and publicized it must be real. He never had to push a lever, see the machine not respond, puzzle it out and fix it. It's all been pretty abstract for him, not concrete."⁴⁷

Still others saw the President's problems in his passivity. One noted that "*Obama* does not instill fear – one of the customary instruments of presidential power".⁴⁸ So much for the utility of "soft power"⁴⁹ as a leadership tool. Along similar lines another observer wrote, somewhat paradoxically given the charges of an *Obama* "imperial presidency" for exactly this reason: "Despite assuming the ability to

44 *Stanage, N./Parnes, A.*: Obama's year of missteps, in: *The Hill*, 27.12.2013.

45 *Budowsky, B.*: How Obama blew it, in: *The Hill*, 02.01.2014.

46 *Titus, E./Harris, J.F.*: Management experts knock Obama, in: *Politico*, 31.12.2013.

47 *Noonan, P.*: Low Information Leadership, in: *Wall Street Journal*, 03.12.2013.

48 *Harris, J.F./Sherman, J./Titus, E.*, op.cit.

49 *Helms, L.*, op.cit., 496.

take actions unilaterally without enabling legislative action, the administration is increasingly demonstrating an unwillingness, or inability, to make tough decisions.”⁵⁰ Another opined that the President’s problems stemmed “from his tendency to react politically to events, rather than from a lack of time”.⁵¹ Consistent with the passivity explanation was the observation that “[a]t the start of his presidency, with the economy shrinking and holding the largest Congressional majorities any president had held, again since LBJ, *Obama* called for an economic stimulus proposal. Yet, the administration did not propose one – despite repeatedly calling for them ever since – but turned it over to Congress.”⁵² The President did the same thing with his health care and immigration legislation. Congress essentially wrote both bills.

The passivity explanation however, flounders on four central points. First, as *Rockman* and *Waltenburg* pointed out in these pages, that while “*Obama*’s style of leadership is largely deferential toward his party’s leaders in Congress, [...] in the end, he proved to be the driving force behind the reform”.⁵³ Second, it is inconsistent with the fact that this President, as other presidents have done before him, has concentrated political power in the Executive Office of the President.⁵⁴ Third, it is inconsistent with the complaints that the President has presided over an “imperial presidency”. The President has not only assumed “the ability to take actions unilaterally without enabling legislative”, he has done so in numerous cases⁵⁵ and ignored duly enacted laws of Congress.⁵⁶ And forth, it ignores the fact that with left-leaning Democrats in ascendency in the Senate and House, the President could rely on them to give him exactly the kind of bills he wanted.

50 *Young, J.T.*: *Obama’s Aimless Presidency is Starting to Alienate his Most Die-Hard of Supporters*, in: *Forbes*, 09.09.2013.

51 *Luce, E.*: *The Obama presidency is not over, but it is failing*, in: *Financial Times*, 17.11.2013.

52 *Young, J.T.*, op.cit.

53 *Rockman, B.A./Waltenburg, E.*, op.cit., 188 and 194.

54 Cf. “President Barack Obama is taking far-reaching steps to centralize decision-making inside the White House, surrounding himself with influential counselors, overseas envoys and policy ‘czars’ that shift power from traditional Cabinet posts.” *Shear, M.D./Connolly, C.*: *Obama Builds Powerful Team of White House Advisers*, in: *Washington Post*, 08.01.2009; see also *Martin, J.*: *West Wing on steroids in Obama W.H.*, in: *Politico*, 25.01.2009.

55 Cf. “Arguably more than any other president in modern history, he’s using executive actions, primarily orders, to bypass or pressure a Congress where the opposition Republicans can block any proposal.” *Kumar, A.*: *Obama turning to executive power to get what he wants*, in: *McClatchy Newspapers*, 19.03.2013

56 *Friess, S.*: *Obama’s Political Strategy: Ignore Laws*, in: *Politico*, 16.06.2012.

V. The President's Troubles: Some Particulars

The general explanations noted above are just that – general explanations. They are useful up to a point where they can serve as a framework within which more detailed examinations can be attempted.

Perhaps the most damaging question asked about the President's problems was whether they were scandals, just plain policy errors, or had to do with the underlying psychological elements of his leadership – his honesty, competence, and likeability. It is worth pausing a moment to consider why.

1. The decline of trust as an operating reality for presidential leadership

Social trust is the invisible bonding agent glue that helps hold societies together.⁵⁷ Ordinarily, it is invisible when it performs its functions because life proceeds as we expect it to.

Politics and political leadership share in the bonding brought about through trust. We expect and hope – the psychological combination that underlies trust – that our political and social institutions are doing their jobs. We trust that they are competent, fair, and honest with the power that they have been given. The same holds of our political leaders. We grant them a great deal of power and discretion, and expect/hope that they will use that power effectively, honestly and fairly.⁵⁸ When they do we are willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, which is helpful to realizing their own policy and leadership ambitions. When they are seen as not doing so, that leeway narrows even if leaders still have some discretion in both constitutional theory and fact.

Americans are not naïve. They understand that their political leaders, presidents included, do not always tell them the whole truth and that they will “accentuate the positive”, especially when it comes to their own policies. They know that a president's positions can change in response to circumstances and they understand, if grudgingly, that changes in policy are sometimes required. And they understand that their leaders do not fully control the outcomes they hope for and promise.

Yet they expect, and hope, that there will be some rough correspondence between a president's promises and his policies and between a leader's stated aspi-

57 Fukuyama, F.: *Trust. The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York, 1995.

58 Renshon, S.A.: *Political Leadership as Social Capital. Governing in a Fragmenting Culture*, in: *Political Psychology*, 21/1 (2000), 199-226.

rations and his actual accomplishments. Americans well understand that a president is a member of his political party, and within that framework has his own partisan views. Yet, they also expect, and hope, that he will take seriously his role as president of *all* Americans, and not unfairly or excessively reward his own partisans or punish his opponents.

These twin pillars, summed by the terms competence and integrity, are the psychological glue that help hold together our political institutions and facilitate the effective exercise of leadership within them. Yet, those psychological bonds have been fraying, and appear to be reaching a crisis point.

Over the past half-century, Americans have become increased distrustful and sceptical of their government, especially at the national level.⁵⁹ In 1993, roughly two-thirds of Americans offered favourable assessments of all three levels of government: federal, state and local. By 2012 the favourable rating for the federal government has fallen to just 33%; nearly twice as many (62%) have an unfavourable view.⁶⁰ And by October 2013, only 19% of the country thought they could trust the government all or most of the time.⁶¹ Just for perspective, in 1958 that number stood at 73%.⁶² Of course, the United States has accumulated a lot of political, cultural and economic history in those years. But the decline in public trust has been relentless. Worse, 72% of Americans say big government is a greater threat to the U.S. in the future than is big business or big labour, a record high in the nearly 50-year history of this question.⁶³

One could argue that the high levels of public trust in the Eisenhower years reflected post-war naivety. That is, before the public suffered the harsh lessons of assignments, riots, economic downturns and meltdowns, “vast but ineffective Great Society” like programmes, failed presidencies, terrorist attacks, inconclusive wars, and stubborn recessions that have now for many years failed to respond to administration policies. These kinds of historical experiences have doubtlessly had a depressing effect on the trust in government numbers. However, the events themselves, as damaging as many have been, are not the real cause of the decline.

59 Pew Research Center: Growing Gap in Favorable Views of Federal, State Governments, 26.04.2012.

60 Ibid.

61 Pew Research Center: Trust in Government Nears Record Low, But Most Federal Agencies are viewed favorably, 18.10.2013.

62 Pew Research Center: Public Trust in Government: 1958-2013, 18.10.2013.

63 Jones, J.M.: Record High in U.S. Say Big Government Greatest Threat, in: Gallup, 18.12.2013.

Well, if it's not the events that have caused the decline in trust, then what has?

The answer to this question lies in the exact wording of the Trust in Government questions: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?"⁶⁴ Note that it is not the particular events *per se* that drive the public's assessment of trust, but the government's response to them, the degree to which it can be counted upon "to do what's right".

Moreover, contrary to the assumption of widespread and irredeemable public scepticism about government, the public is able to give credit where it thinks it is due. So, for example, one of the highest rebounds in public trust in government occurred right after 9/11.⁶⁵ This was not merely a rally around the President for any decisive action but a response to President *Bush's* specific initiatives and policies.⁶⁶

How do we know this? Well, the Roper Centre asked, specifically. They noticed the clear spike in public trust after 9/11 that almost every major polling organisation had found, but went on to ask a most profound question: Trust in government ... to do what? They asked two questions that have major implications for our analysis of the President's declining fortunes. First, in January 2002, four months after 9/11 and in the midst of *G. W. Bush's* response to those events, they asked: "When it comes to handling national security and the war on terrorism, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" 68% of the public responded "just about always" or "most of the time". They clearly favoured President *Bush's* specific responses and felt confident they would be effective (the trust element).

A plausible inference would be that the specific trust levels associated with the President's national security actions after 9/11 would account for the *general* rise in public trust. However, that inference would be wrong. In that same survey, Roper asked: "When it comes to handling social issues like the economy, health care, social security, and education, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" In an almost reverse mirror response, 61% of the public responded "only some of the time" or "never".

Given these results, it seems clear that:

64 Langer, G.: Trust in Government ... to do what?, in: Public Perspective, July/August 2002, Fig. 1.

65 Pew Research Center: Public Trust in Government, op.cit.

66 Langer, G., op.cit.

- generalized public trust and confidence are built on the aggregation of the public's views on specific policies, although questions dealing with those specifics are not often asked;
- the public is perfectly able to distinguish one set of policy domains from another in its evaluations if it is asked;
- even when other areas have taken an upward tick in response to specific policies that seem to meet the public test of effectiveness and appropriateness, the government has gotten continuing low marks for issues like the economy, health care, social security, and education;
- the public is clearly able to distinguish between the government in general and specific agencies within the government and give each the different evaluations they think they deserve.⁶⁷

The implication of these facts and numbers for presidential leadership (and leadership more generally) and successful governance is quite clear. "Governing in an age of distrust is different than governing in an age of trust."⁶⁸ What then, exactly, can or should leaders do?

One path is for a leader to try to frame and establish their own narrative – a compilation of selected facts and preferred causal linkages that tout your sides' views, often attacking the legitimacy of our opponents'. Another path is to accept the idea that, in reality, your preferred views coexist with other legitimate, reasonable views of an issue, and to honestly try and find common ground. That is very difficult in a highly partisan atmosphere, and made even more so when a president, or leader, is absolutely certain of the superiority of his own positions.

2. The President's declining public standing

It is within that context that President *Obama's* slipping ratings on several core performance and personal attributes come into sharper focus. It is clear for example that the President has also lost key ground on policy matters:

"On the question of who is seen as better able to handle the country's main problems, *Obama* and Republicans are tied at 41%. A year ago, the President's advantage was 15 points and at this stage in 2010 it was still five points. *Obama* also has lost the lead he enjoyed on who could better deal with the economy. Today Republicans are at 45 % to *Obama's* 41 %. Last year at this time, it was *Obama* at 54 % and congress-

67 Pew Research Center: Trust in Government Nears Record Low, op.cit.

68 *Brooks, D.*: The Legitimacy Problem, in: New York Times, 23.12.2013.

sional Republicans at 36 %. A 26-point *Obama* advantage a year ago on who would better protect the middle class has fallen to just six points in the latest survey.”⁶⁹

However, at the same time, he has also lost ground on important personal attributes relevant to his leadership role. One analysis summed up his situation as follows: “*Obama*’s job approval and personal favourability ratings are near the lowest point of his presidency, with increasing numbers of Americans saying they no longer consider him to be honest or trustworthy.”⁷⁰

In early December 2013, former Senior White House Adviser *David Plouffe* said in an interview that he believed that President *Obama*’s “numbers will recover” and that people “trust this President”.⁷¹ However, the survey numbers told a different story. An end of year 2013 Wall Street Journal/NBC news poll found that “Mr. *Obama*’s job approval has fallen to 43% from 52% at the start of the year” and that “[t]he percentage of those polled who give him good marks for being honest and straightforward has dropped 10 points to 37%”.⁷² Moreover, “[j]ust 28% give the President high grades for being able to achieve his goals (down 16 points from January) [...] and 44% give him high marks for being able to handle a crisis (down another 5 points since June).” 54% “say they disapprove of his job, which is the highest mark in his presidency” and “a combined 50% say they are either ‘disappointed’ or ‘dissatisfied’ with the President, versus a combined 28% who are ‘proud’ or ‘satisfied’”.⁷³

The President also lost ground on another personal attribute that had helped to buttress and then cushion his poll numbers: likability. One reporter noted that

“[w]hen voters were asked to judge their feelings about *Obama* and his policies, 36% said they liked him and his policies, while 28% said that while they liked the President personally, they didn’t like his policies. (31% of people didn’t like *Obama* or his policies and 2% liked *Obama*’s policies but not him.) [R]oughly one in four people [...] still like *Obama* but disapprove of his policies. That’s a group whose opinion about *Obama*’s policies, at least at the moment, is heavily influenced by the botched rollout of HealthCare.gov and the President’s mistaken claim that if you liked your insurance you could keep it. (Of the 50% of people who said they were ei-

69 *Balz, D./Clement, S.*: Obama suffers most from year of turmoil, poll finds, in: Washington Post, 17.12.2010.

70 *Benac, N./Pace, J.*: Obama’s Presidency Beseit by Fits, Starts in Year 5, in: Associated Press, 30.12.2013.

71 Quoted in *Weinger, M.*: Plouffe: “People trust this president”, in: Politico Now, 13.12.2013.

72 *Murray, M.*: NBC/WSJ poll: Obama ends year on low note, in: NBC News, 10.12.2013.

73 *Seib, G.F.*: Obama Seeks Way to Right His Ship, in: Wall Street Journal, 30.12.2013.

ther ‘disappointed’ or ‘dissatisfied’ with *Obama’s* presidency, roughly one in every three attributed that unhappiness to *Obamacare’s* problems.”⁷⁴

The number of people who both liked the President personally but disapproved of his policies was 28% in December 2013 and 35% in December 2010.

Actually, the President had begun to lose ground on several critical leadership criteria in 2010, in which the Pew Foundation study noted that “[m]uch of the erosion has come as a result of new questions about the President’s leadership qualities”.⁷⁵ Among the findings in the Pew study released in 2011 and entitled in part *Obama Leadership Image Takes a Hit*⁷⁶ were these: “A record high number of people say that *Obama* is not a strong leader (47%), can’t get things done (50%), isn’t well-informed (33%), is not a good communicator (22%) and doesn’t stand up for what he believes in (22%).”⁷⁷

3. Breaking a very public signature promise

It isn’t often that a president makes a direct, explicit, and unequivocal promise to the American public on a matter of substantial personal importance to them, does so repeatedly, and then breaks his promise.⁷⁸ That signature promise of the Presidents’ was that “if you like your healthcare plan, you can keep it, period”. The promise turned out not to be true and so misleading that the *Tampa Bay Times* which had won a Pulitzer Prize for its political “Fact-check” articles awarded it the dubious distinction of being named “Lie of the Year”.⁷⁹ Worse, it turned out that “behind the scenes, White House officials discussed whether that was a promise they could keep and decided to go ahead with it despite reservation. As one former aide put it in the midst of a hard-fought political debate: ‘If you like your plan, you can *probably* keep it’, isn’t a salable point.”⁸⁰

74 Cillizza, C.: President Obama is down, op.cit.

75 Pew Research Center: Obama Leadership Image Takes a Hit, GOP Ratings Decline, 25.08.2011.

76 Ibid.

77 Blake, A./Weiner, R.: Americans begin to question Obama’s leadership, in: Washington Post, 26.08.2012.

78 George H.W. Bush did so with his “read my lips; no new taxes” pledge which he broke. He was not reelected. See Noonan, P.: What I saw at the Revolution. A Political Life in the Reagan Era. New York, 1990, 307.

79 Holan, A.D.: Lie of the Year. If you like your health care plan, you can keep it, in: Tampa Bay Times, 12.12.2013.

80 McCain Nelson, C./Nicholas, P./Lee, C.E.: Aides Debated Obama Health-Care Coverage Promise, in: Wall Street Journal, 02.11.2013 (emphasis added).

It also turned out that other presidential assurances – that you could keep your doctor,⁸¹ that your health care costs would go down,⁸² that you would be able to use the same hospitals that you were familiar with,⁸³ that the medicines you used would be covered⁸⁴ – were all highly variable and for millions untrue. The administration had not honestly prepared the American public for the changes, many unprecedented, in how health care would operate under the new law. As a result, many Americans were undeniably upset.

The President's health-care initiative was controversial from the start for a number of reasons. The fact that the bill would put the government in charge of health care that constituted 1/7 of the American economy was controversial. The fact that the government would now be involved and in many cases making decisions, about the most basic details of individuals' health care services and relationships was controversial and unprecedented in the United States. And the way in which the law was passed was also controversial.

The ACA bill was signed into law on March 23, 2010. It was passed in both Houses of Congress through a technical legislative manoeuvre, "reconciliation", that allowed the bill to be considered, voted upon, and passed with a simple majority⁸⁵ rather than a filibuster proof 60 vote "super majority". The bill was passed on a straight party line vote in both the House and Senate. Every Democrat supported it and every Republican opposed it. It was the first time in modern American history that such a major piece of social, economic, and political legislation had not been passed on a bipartisan basis.

The bill has never gained majority public support. Indeed, support for it and the President have fallen since it was passed. A survey taken at the time the bill was passed, March 22, 2010, asked: "From what you've heard or read, do you approve or disapprove of the current health care reform bill?" 15% "strongly approved", 27% "approved somewhat", 14% "disapproved somewhat" and 32%

81 *Pear, R.*: Lower Health Insurance Premiums to Come at Cost of Fewer Choices, in: New York Times, 22.09.2013.

82 *Kessler, G.*: President Obama's claim that Americans saved \$3.4 billion in health-care premiums, in: Washington Post, 07.07.2013.

83 *Somashekhar, S./Cha, A.E.*: Insurers restricting choice of doctors and hospitals to keep costs down, in: Washington Post, 20.11.2013.

84 *Beck, M.*: Drug-Cost Surprises Lurk Inside New Health Plans, in: Wall Street Journal, 04.12.2013.

85 *Keith, R./Henniff Jr., B.*: The Budget Reconciliation Process: House and Senate Procedures, Congressional Research Service, 2005.

“strongly disapproved”. This is a roughly even 42-46% split.⁸⁶ A very recent CNN poll (December 16-19, 2013) asked: “As you may know, a bill that makes major changes to the country’s health care system became law in 2010. Based on what you have read or heard about that legislation, do you generally favour or generally oppose it?” It found that 60% opposed it and 35% favoured it.⁸⁷

VI. The Decline of Expectations: Hope and Disappointment

The *New York Times* reported that President *Obama* “ends the first year of his second term – typically the best chance for policy achievements before lame-duck status sets in – with his approval ratings having hit a record low and many Democrats disillusioned by the controversies over the health insurance law and disclosures about widespread intelligence surveillance of phone records”.⁸⁸ All of this was a far distance from the President’s re-election speech in November 2012. Then, standing before cheering supporters, “[i]n a victory speech studded with the soaring rhetoric that first drew voters to him in 2008, *Obama* reminded the electorate what was still on his agenda – immigration reform, climate change and job creation” and promised “the best is yet to come”.⁸⁹ And that was a farther distance still from the President-elects’ first victory speech telling his supporters in 2008: “I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on Earth. This was the moment – this was the time – when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves, and our highest ideals.”⁹⁰

86 The poll can be found at Pollingreport.com, p. 6. (<http://www.pollingreport.com/health6.htm>.) That website contains a comprehensive listing of all health care related polls over time.

87 The CNN poll can be found at Pollingreport.com, p. 1. (<http://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm>.)

88 *Calmes, J.*: Weary *Obama* at Break, Hoping for a Breakthrough, in: *New York Times*, 20.12.2013. The term “lame duck” in the quote refers to the point in the second term of a president’s second four-year term of office when public and congressional attention begins to shift to the upcoming presidential election. That point is ordinarily at, or around, the “off-year” Congressional elections that take place two years before the election for a new president in which the entire House of Representative and one-third of the Senate are also up for reelection.

89 *Goldman, R.*: *Obama* Promises “Best Is Yet to Come”, in: *ABC News*, 06.11.2012.

90 Remarks of Senator Barack *Obama*, Final Primary Night, Tuesday, 3 June 2008, St. Paul, Minnesota, in: *Huffington Post*, 05.11.2008.

Compared to the soaring rhetoric and ambition that began the *Obama* presidency and his re-election four years later, the President's sober reminder to a reporter, and perhaps to himself, at his end of year press conference was subdued and poignant: "I've also got to wake up in the morning and make sure that I do better the next day and that we keep moving forward. And when I look at the landscape for next year, what I say to myself is: We're poised to do really good things."⁹¹

Not transformative things, not great things, but rather good things. The narrowing of the President's legislative ambitions is reflected in the issues, an extension of the unemployment benefits and a new debate on the country's debt limit that will face the President first in 2014. A White House spokesman said of these issues: "We've created a road map for how you can get some of these things done. Even if they aren't landmark pieces of legislation, they still represent positive steps."⁹²

VII. Diverse Advice Leading in Different Directions

If there is one thing that any American president can count on, it is unsolicited free advice, and President *Obama* is no exception. One commentator suggested "finding a way to convert the 28% of people who like him but don't like his policies into backers of those policies" but then added: "Possible? Yes. Easy? Absolutely not."⁹³

The immediate drawback to that advice is that it is the President's policies that helped get his presidency into trouble in the first place. According to one list, those presidential problem areas included his healthcare policies, his national security agency communication surveillance policies, his policies towards the Syrian civil war, gun control policies, and his relationship with Congress.⁹⁴ Oddly missing from this list is the president's handling of the economy of which 65% Americans disapprove. In addition, that poll reported that 59% disapproved of his health care policies, 60% disapproved of his handling of immigration policy and 56% disapproved of his handling of foreign policy.⁹⁵ Given that the economy is, and has been repeatedly, the single most important issue on Ameri-

91 Press Conference by the President, Office of the White House, 20.12.2013.

92 *McCain Nelson, C.*: Obama's 2014 Priorities Face Early Tests in Congress, in: Wall Street Journal, 03.01.2014.

93 *Cillizza C.*: President Obama is down, op.cit.

94 *Stanage, N./Parnes, A.*, op.cit.

95 Pew Research Center: Obama's Second Term Slide Continues, November 2013, 2.

cans' minds over the last six years, the President's 65% disapproval ratings on this critical issue are not a positive sign. They are all the more troubling given that the American economy has begun to show some signs of improvement. They however have not yet translated into improving the President's ratings very much.⁹⁶

Another set of suggestions for the President's comeback included the following: "Open up the wagons" (add new advisors); "mend health care"; "go on the offensive", "beyond the water's edge" (sign a nuclear deal with Iran); and last "luck".⁹⁷ Yet another article entitled *Five things Obama must do to avoid lame-duck status* listed these general pieces of advice: Minimize the liabilities; keep the base engaged; hold the line against the GOP; take a page out of the *Clinton* playbook (new staff/consistent aspiration message); and go undercover in supporting Democratic candidates in the 2014 Congressional elections.⁹⁸ Ordinarily when the word "must" appears in the title of an advice piece, it is not a good sign and this one is no exception. Of course, any president would want to minimize his liabilities, but that first requires a frank appraisal of what they are and a plan to overcome them that does not bring further criticism. Yes, you want to keep your base engaged, but that may mean ratcheting up conflict with the opposition which may engage your base and makes it less likely that productive collaboration will be possible.

Adding new staff is a perennial suggestion, but it runs into particular difficulties in the *Obama* Administration. The White House has recently added *John Podesta*, a former Chief of Staff in the *Clinton* White House, as a senior advisor. This has given rise to analyses that purported to raise and answer the question if *John Podesta* could save *Barack Obama* at the lowest point of his presidency.⁹⁹

Unfortunately for the President, the answer is: most likely not. Mr. *Podesta* is a skilled, experienced Washington player, but he is also a highly partisan advocate who in one of his first interviews said the administration is "facing a second term against a cult worthy of Jonestown in charge of one of the houses of Congress", a reference to a mass suicide and the murder of a congressman who went to the

96 Gallup, Presidential Job Approval, 31.12.2013, puts the president "underwater" at 44% approval, 49% disapproval.

97 *Hunt, A. R.*: How Obama Can Get His Groove Back, in: Bloomberg News, 05.01.2014.

98 *Parnes, A.*: Five things Obama must do to avoid lame-duck status, in: The Hill, 31.12.2013.

99 *Thrush, G.*: The Reboot, in: Politico Magazine, 17.12.2013.

commune to investigate. Mr. *Podesta* later apologized.¹⁰⁰ Comments like that may help to keep the President's base engaged but they do little to further the search for common ground, if that should be the direction that the President chooses.

Also relevant is Mr. *Podesta's* role as a founding leader of a Washington think tank with close policy ties to the administration, one of whose contributions to the White House was a "whitepaper" urging the President to take further, more far reaching executive actions.¹⁰¹ Not surprisingly, the first sentence of Mr. *Podesta's* interview that ended in his Jonestown remark was: "They [the White House] need to focus on executive action."¹⁰² A recent set of interviews with senior staff suggests the White House is thinking along similar lines, "the administration's interest in shifting the paradigm of *Obama's* presidency through the forceful, unapologetic and occasionally provocative application of White House power – which is to say executive orders, directives by the President with the force of law while he is in office that require no congressional authorization or approval."¹⁰³

One reason suggested for Mr. *Podesta's* appointment was that the President had reached the conclusion that "[d]ealing with Congress is a dead end".¹⁰⁴ Consistent with that view is advice the President has received to invest more heavily in "progressive populism with an aggressive, spending-oriented, activist government approach".¹⁰⁵ Such an approach would be likely to inflame already strong Republican opposition to any presidential initiatives that require Congressional support. It would also reinforce narratives that have developed because of the President's use of executive orders during first term that his is an "imperial presidency".¹⁰⁶

100 *Allen, J.*: John Podesta apologizes for Jonestown quote, in: Politico, 19.12.2013.

101 *Wartell, S.R.* (Compiler): The Power of the President Recommendations to Advance Progressive Change, Center for American Progress, November 2010.

102 *Thrush, G.*, op.cit.

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Cillizza, C.*: Why President Obama brought John Podesta into the White House, in: Washington Post, 10.12.2013.

105 *Dovere, E.*: President Obama turns left, in: Politico, 13.12.2013.

106 That term first gained currency as an accusation against *Richard Nixon* over his refusing to spend money that Congress had appropriated, his efforts to centralize power in the executive office of the president, and of course his continuation of the war in Vietnam at a time when many were calling for its end. See *Schlesinger Jr., A.M.*: The Imperial Presidency, New York, 1973; *Ruddelvig, A.*: The New Imperial Presidency. Rebuilding Presidential Power After Watergate, Ann Arbor, 2002.

Perhaps, however, the most obvious problem with this strategy is that it seems to preclude and elude thinking through an even more basic decision for the President as he goes forward, whether to escalate his fight with Republicans or try to find areas of accommodation. If the President decides to go in that direction of attempting to govern by executive order, he will certainly have a willing supporter in Mr. *Podesta*. Yet, that fact raises another issue about the clarion advice to “[f]ire Your Team, Mr. President.”¹⁰⁷

It is not advice that any president is likely to take. Scuffling staff,¹⁰⁸ adding staff and replacing leaving staff are all common responses to the fatigue that sets into any presidential administration over time. Other recent two term Presidents, *Bill Clinton* and *George W. Bush*, made similar changes in their second terms. However, “firing your team” is a pundit’s fantasy. No president can afford wholesales replacements of people who know him, strongly support his policies and have the institutional memory and experience that is very valuable for moving ahead. Yet a serious downside of having closely knit advisors is the sense of comfort and validation that they give a president.¹⁰⁹

“Yes, Mr. President” might be the amusing American version of the British comedy series “Yes, Prime Minister”¹¹⁰, but that show’s lessons are no laughing matter. Getting honest, straightforward advice, especially when it disagrees with a president’s, is no easy matter and is difficult to do when the White House has organized itself so that a small cohesive group of senior advisors keep tight reigns on the decision making process. It is harder still when senior advisors idealize the president, as many of *Obama*’s advisors do. And it is almost impossible when, in addition to these two dynamics, the president considers himself, as Mr. *Obama* does, as his own best, most knowledgeable advisor.

This is not hyperbole. At one point during his first presidential campaign Mr. *Obama* asserted that in picking a Vice Presidential nominee he doesn’t have to worry about foreign policy experience because “ironically, this is an area – foreign policy is the area where I am probably *most* confident that I know more and

107 *Fournier, R.*: Fire Your Team, Mr. President, in: *National Journal*, 02.12.2013.

108 *Baker, P.*: Shuffling Staff, Obama Strives for a Recharge After a Tough Fifth Year, in: *New York Times*, 13.12.2013.

109 The classic treatment of these issues remains *George, A.L.*: *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy. The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Westview, 1980.

110 *Yes Minister*, BBC, 07.01.2014 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesminister>).

understand the world better than Senator *Clinton* or Senator *McCain*".¹¹¹ Asked after the presidential campaign about the best advice he had received while running he replied: "Well, I have to say it was the advice that I gave to myself."¹¹² In July of 2007, he told a group of fundraisers: "I'm the best retail politician in America."¹¹³ In early 2007 when *Obama* interviewed *Patrick Gaspard* who became the campaign's political director he told him: "I think that I'm a better speechwriter than my speechwriters. I know more about policies on any particular issue than my policy directors."¹¹⁴

VIII. What Really Went Wrong? The *Obama* Presidency's Basic Fault

As the above analysis makes clear, explanations for the President's deteriorating political circumstances are numerous and many are plausible. None of them, however, appear to get at the more basic underlying reasons for the President's troubles. For that we have to look to the concept of "the basic fault".

In 1968, the Hungarian psychoanalyst *Michael Balint* published his seminal book *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*.¹¹⁵ His insight was that for all structural and dynamic psychological complexities that characterized most adult functioning, the real roots of peoples' troubles lay in an early mismatch between their needs and their experiences. In *Balint's* view this "basic fault" represented the starting point of an emotional fault line that developed early and often carried over into later life. Even among successful people, the right circumstances could trigger this "basic fault" and undermine them.

Balint's concept of the basic fault was developed to help guide psychoanalytic work, but it has some usefulness in thinking about the basic faults that may lie at the core of presidential leadership. The usefulness of the concept is that it provides a conceptual vehicle to understand how smart, accomplished people who ought to be successful leaders sometimes fail in their efforts at both leadership and governance.

Ambition is the life's blood of accomplishment. Every successful person and political leader owes some of what they accomplish to making use of it. Almost

111 Quoted in *Fower, M.*: Obama: no need for Foreign Policy Help from V.P., in: Huffington Post, 07.04.2008 (emphasis in original).

112 *Balz, D./Johnson, H.*: The Battle for America, Viking, 2010, 28.

113 Obama quoted in *Alter, J.*: The Promise. President Obama, Year One, New York et al., 2010, 150.

114 Obama quoted in *Lizza, R.*: Battle Plans. How Obama Won, in: New Yorker, 17.11.2008.

115 *Balint, M.*: The Basic Fault. Therapeutic Aspects of Regression, Evanston, 1992.

all presidents aspire “to make a difference”, a rather easy level of ambition to fulfill. Almost all want to do the best job they can and within the circumstances they face advance the policies they support and the views that they hold. *How* they go about this, whether by moderation, compromise and truly searching for common ground or by trying to gain ascendancy and ultimate triumph, reflects a core element of a president’s leadership psychology and ultimately affects their approach to governing.

Almost every president who runs for office and wins has high levels of ambition, but even at this level presidents differ. Some want merely to be good; other wish to be great. There is little doubt about which category President *Obama’s* ambition levels belong to, as he has been quite clear about his aspiration. He wants to be a “great” and “transformational” leader. Announcing his candidacy in Springfield, Illinois he said: “Let us transform this nation”,¹¹⁶ again repeating the phrase campaigning in Iowa (“I want to transform this country”)¹¹⁷ and New Hampshire (“We’re going to change the country and change the world”).¹¹⁸ In his inaugural address he called on his fellow citizens to help “remake America” – not change it, mind you, but remake.¹¹⁹ On his hundredth day in office at a town meeting he said: “So today, on my 100th day in office, I’ve come to report to you, the American people, that we have begun to pick ourselves up and dust ourselves off, and we’ve begun the work of remaking America. We’re working to remake America.”¹²⁰ Asked in an interview about his personal list of heroes, including *Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gandhi* and *Martin Luther King*, he replied: “When I think of what makes them together, I’m enamoured of people who change the framework, who don’t take something as a given, but scramble it.”¹²¹ And discussing *Obama’s* role as commander in chief and having two wars to contend with, one report noted that “Mr. *Obama* sees them as ‘problems that need managing’, as one adviser put it, while he pursues his mission of transforming America.”¹²² The President was still fervently driving toward that ambition as he took his oath of office for his second term and gave his second inaugural address. There, “[i]n outlining a liberal last-term agenda, *Obama made clear that*

116 Senator Barack Obama’s Announcement for President, Springfield IL, 10.02.2007.

117 Quoted in *Wolffe, R.*: *Renegade. The Making of a President*, New York, 2009, 67.

118 *Harnden, T.*: Barack Obama vows to “change the world”, in: *Telegraph*, 17.10.2008.

119 President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address, 21.01.2009.

120 Remarks by the President in Arnold, Missouri Town Hall, 29.04.2009.

121 Obama quoted in *Wolffe, R.*, op.cit., 188.

122 *Baker, P.*: For Obama, Steep Learning Curve as Chief in War, in: *New York Times*, 28.08.2010.

he still intends to change the country – but now without first changing Washington”.¹²³

This wasn't merely political rhetoric. *Obama's* large-scale transformative policy agenda would seem to indicate that he is serious. By succeeding in the historic tasks of transforming the country and redeeming its promises of justice and fairness at home and abroad, as he sees them, *Obama* carries on his father's life work who tried and failed to do the same thing in Kenya.¹²⁴ *Obama's* success would vindicate his efforts and burnish his tarnished legacy. At the same time, by so doing the President would establish himself as a “great” president.

Obama has fervently pursued these twin ambitions even in the face of substantial setbacks which his determination helped to overcome. After Republican *Scott Brown*, running on a platform of opposition to the President's health care plan, was elected Senator in liberal Massachusetts in 2010, some in the administration suggested pulling back on health reform. But with the words “I'd rather be a one-term president and do big things than a two-term president and just do small things”¹²⁵ *Obama* pressed ahead.

Ryan Lizza who covered *Obama* on the campaign trail wrote that he is “keenly aware that presidential politics is about timing, and that at this extremely low moment in American political life, there is a need for someone – *and he firmly believes that someone is him* – to lift up the nation in a way no politician has in nearly half a century”.¹²⁶ These characterizations of the President's ambitions come not only from others but also from the President himself. In an early interview he himself said directly that he wished to be a “great president”.¹²⁷ He was then asked about what he meant during a *Meet the Press* interview¹²⁸:

Mr. Russert: You told *Men's Vogue Magazine* that if you wanted to be president, you shouldn't just think about being president, that you should want to be a great president. So you've clearly given this some thought.

123 *Wilson, S.*: Obama brings more optimism, partisanship and populism to second inaugural speech, in: *Washington Post*, 21.01.2013.

124 On *Obama's* fathers' ambition and its relationship to his, see *Renshon, S.A.*: *The Obama Presidency*, op.cit., 82f.

125 *Obama* quoted in *Scherer, M.*: How Barack Obama Became Mr. Unpopular, in: *Time*, 02.09.2010.

126 *Lizza, R.*: Above the Fray, in: *GQ*, September 2007 (emphasis added).

127 *Obama* quoted in *Givhan, R.*: Mussed for Success. Barack Obama's Smooth Wrinkles, in: *Washington Post*, 11.08.2006.

128 Transcript, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 22.10.2008.

Sen. Obama: Yes.

Mr. Russert: And what would, in your mind, define a great president?

Sen. Obama: When I think about great presidents, I think about those *who transform how we think about ourselves as a country* in fundamental ways so that, that, at the end of their tenure, we have looked and said to ours – that’s who we are. And, and our, our – and for me at least, that means that we have a more expansive view of our democracy, that we’ve included more people into the bounty of this country [...] *And they transformed the culture* and not simply promoted one or two particular issues.

The exchange makes *Obama’s* view of transformation as involving remaking America’s basic culture and identity quite clear.

IX. How Do You Become a “Great” President? *Obama’s* Choice

There remains the question however of how one becomes a great president. There is no doubt that “greatness” comes in successfully meeting a great national crisis, as *Lincoln* did with the Civil War or *Roosevelt* with Pearl Harbour and the Great Depression. *Obama* came to office with no comparable crisis. The solution to the liquidity crises, the enormous infusion of government funds (TARP), was put into effect by *George W. Bush* and *Obama’s* role was to continue that policy and to help resolve the economic dislocations that resulted from the recession.

That is one of several reasons that *Obama* tried to leverage the economic situation he inherited to accomplish his big policy goals. In his speech to a joint session of Congress in February of 2009 he said: “History reminds us that at every moment of economic upheaval and transformation, this nation has responded with bold action and big ideas.”¹²⁹ And the President certainly intended to provide both. At the time White House Chief of Staff *Rahm Emanuel* remarked: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. Things that we had postponed for too long, that were long-term, are now immediate and must be dealt with. This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before.”¹³⁰ *Rockman* and *Waltenburg* correctly remind us that when he assumed office in January of 2009 “*Obama* found himself in a situation ripe for bold action. The public expected it, wanted it, and would back him on it. The condition

129 Remarks of President Barack Obama. As Prepared for Delivery Address to Joint Session of Congress, White House, 24.02.2009.

130 *Rahm* quoted in *Seib, G.F.*: In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama, in: Wall Street, Journal, 21.11.2008.

of the nation's economy seemed to require it. Finally, *Obama* and his administration, as well as the congressional leadership, were predisposed toward it.”¹³¹

However, *how* that substantial economic stimulus was targeted, and to whom, was very much a matter of presidential choice. And the President used the stimulus package to fund a vast array of his own economic priorities and those of his allies. There is nothing unusual about this, but it was a choice and it did have consequences. His very first legislative initiative would set the tone for his leadership style and governing strategies. At a meeting, Republicans suggested some minor additions – tax deductions for some small businesses, making unemployment benefits tax free and a provision that would let businesses losing money carry the losses over to pay fewer taxes in a different fiscal year –, none of which were enacted. As to the larger issues of the number and nature of the stimulus, when Republicans objected the President responded: “I won. So I think on that one, I trump you.”¹³²

On this, the President was correct. A president's views, however large or small his margin of electoral victory, are ordinarily the starting point of policy debate and legislation. That said a great deal depends on exactly what the president's policy views are and where they stand on the American political spectrum.

If you can't have a major war or a Great Depression to increase your presidential stature the next best thing is to be on record as having passed major legislation. *Ryan Lizza* reported that in 2009, the President “was aggravated when he was told that none of the money from the stimulus would be spent on a signature project, a modern-day Hoover Dam or Interstate Highway System. A bold infrastructure package has all the hallmarks of a major *Obama* policy: It would create jobs, it has a government-reform component, and it could establish a legacy in the form of an upgraded power grid or a high-speed train, with which *Obama* might forever be associated.”¹³³ Or consider health care. Of that decision *Jonathan Alter* reported: “So *Obama* decided early to bet his domestic presidency on health care. It wasn't that he would face certain defeat in 2010 without it; *unem-*

131 *Rockman, B.A./Waltenburg, E.*, op.cit., 185.

132 *Kahn, H.*: “I Won”: President Obama Works to Be Bipartisan But Shows There Are Clear Limits, in: ABC News, 23.01.2009; see also *Martin, J./Lee, C.E.*: Obama to GOP: “I won”, in: Politico, 23.01.2013.

133 *Lizza, R.*: The Second Term: What will Obama do now that he's reelected?, in: New Yorker, 18.06.2002.

ployment and Afghanistan were much bigger issues for voters. But for greatness he needed health care."¹³⁴

And that provides one good explanation of why, with Democrats in veto proof control of both Houses of Congress, the President chose to spend his first two years focused almost exclusively on his health care legislation even though the economy was the public's number one priority throughout. It was a big-ticket legacy item. It was transformative (as well as redistributive), and it was the kind of big legislation historically associated with "great" presidents.

It is true that "the *Obama* administration and the Democratic leadership wanted some Republican crossover votes".¹³⁵ That would provide their legislation with some political cover as being bipartisan. Yet, here, as with the stimulus, the President was willing to make token and marginal adjustments, but not much more. At a health care summit on February 25, 2010, when Republican Senator *John McCain* raised objections to the way in which the President's health care legislation was being developed by Democrats "behind closed doors", the President replied that "we're not campaigning anymore. The election's over."¹³⁶

Recent analysis is not wrong in claiming that "the Affordable Care Act [is] the biggest domestic achievement of *Barack Obama's* presidency and one of the most far-reaching changes in American social policy in decades",¹³⁷ or, as the *New York Times* put it in a headline, *Legacy on Line in Fierce Drive on Health Law*.¹³⁸ However, it is a very tenuous position for a president who seems himself as a "transformative" and "great" leader to rest his presidency and his legacy on a single legislative bill that has had such controversial legislative origins and such a mixed reception among the American public.

X. What Really Went Wrong: Hope and the Disappointment of Expectations

The 2008 election of *Barack Obama*, an American of African descent, to the presidency was "a strikingly symbolic moment in the evolution of the nation's fraught racial history, a breakthrough that would have seemed unthinkable just

134 *Alter, J.*, op.cit., 244 (emphasis added).

135 *Rockman, B.A./Waltenburg, E.*, op.cit., 192.

136 *Montopoli, B.*: Obama to McCain: "The Election's Over", in: CBS News, 25.02.2010.

137 *Nather, D.*: For Obamacare, it's finally showtime, in: Politico, 01.01.2014.

138 *Shear, M.D.*: Legacy on Line in Fierce Drive on Health Law, in: New York Times, 23.07.2013.

two years ago”.¹³⁹ It was a milestone about which all Americans, whatever their political leanings, could be proud, and most were. However beyond that the meaning of Mr. *Obama's* election was murky.

In 2008, *Barack Obama* ran against *George W. Bush* and won. Before the election in 2007, 74% of respondents in one national survey said that the next president “should take a different approach than *George Bush* has”,¹⁴⁰ and Mr. *Obama* promised to do so. In contrast to the fatigue and disappointment that many felt at the end of the *Bush* presidency, Mr. *Obama* offered a message of emotional and political renewal – “hope and change”. As one reporter put it: “The election of Mr. *Obama* amounted to a national catharsis – a repudiation of a historically unpopular Republican president and his economic and foreign policies, and an embrace of Mr. *Obama's* call for a change in the direction and the tone of the country.”¹⁴¹

Catharsis is both a feeling of relief and an expression of the hope that the tensions that made catharsis necessary will not return. In that respect Mr. *Obama's* campaign theme of “hope and change” was the near pitch perfect embodiment of the public’s psychology. Americans wanted “change” but it was not clear they all wanted the same kind of change. Some wanted to renew America’s image abroad. Some wanted to leave Iraq quickly. Others wanted to do so only after completing the war’s mission. Many, tired of the increasingly harsh partisan confrontations that seemed to develop over every issue, wanted more political comity. Almost all Americans wanted the economy to be fixed.

If Americans varied with respect of what they wanted from the new *Obama* presidency, the response of most political commentators was uniformly enthusiastic and almost idealizing. One reporter wrote that “maybe, just maybe, something new has arrived: A post-partisan approach to governing, founded on the *Obama* Coalition, fuelled by young and minority voters, powered by the 21st century technologies that helped turn a first-term senator from Illinois into a historic lodestone”.¹⁴² An editor at *Newsweek* described *Obama* as “above the country, above the world; he’s sort of God”.¹⁴³ In the *New York Times* *Judith Warner* wrote a column about her dreams of *Obama* including the fantasy of

139 *Nagourney, A.*: Obama Elected President as Racial Barriers Fall, in: *New York Times*, 05.11.2008.

140 NBC/WSJ Poll, November 2007, Question 12.

141 *Nagourney, A.*, op.cit.

142 *Fournier, R.*: Obama’s transcendence is beyond race, in: *USATODAY*, 05.11.2008.

143 *Goldberg, J.*: Is Obama God?, in: *The Atlantic*, 08.06.2009.

having him with her in the shower. After launching a set of email inquiries she found that “[m]any women – not too surprisingly – were dreaming about sex with the President”.¹⁴⁴ Mr. *Obama* was proposed for a place on Mt. Rushmore before he took the oath of office.¹⁴⁵ And planning began for a national holiday honouring the new president immediately after his election.¹⁴⁶ He appeared on so many magazine covers that the American Society of Magazine Editors created a special cover award for those covers that depicted him.¹⁴⁷

As a candidate and in his early presidency *Barack Obama* inspired unprecedented and almost rapturous responses from a number of his supporters. *The Economist*, not given to rhetoric excess, wrote: “Mr. *Obama* has inspired more passionate devotion than any modern American politician. People scream and faint at his rallies. Some wear T-shirts proclaiming him ‘The One’, a title bestowed on him by *Oprah Winfrey* on national television,¹⁴⁸ and others perhaps mimicking the views of *Obama*’s aides wore T-shirts noting that ‘Jesus was a community organizer.’”¹⁴⁹ *Obama* became not only an icon, but also a celebrity. Paparazzi “snapped pictures of a buff and shirtless *Barack Obama*.”¹⁵⁰

During the campaign, Mr. *Obama*’s aides were taken aback by the “blind faith in and passion for *Obama*” though they appeared to share it. These same aides referred to him as the “Black Jesus”.¹⁵¹ This idealization extended into the very highest level of the President’s senior staff. *David Axelrod*, *Obama*’s chief political advisor, stated that it was “like you are carrying this priceless porcelain vase through a crowd of people and you don’t want to be the guy who drops it and breaks it”.¹⁵² Of course, having your most intimate advisors think of you in terms that parallel god’s son or as something rare and priceless has its problems. After all, who would dare to tell even a symbolic reincarnation of Jesus that he shouldn’t do something?

144 *Warner, J.*: Sometimes a President is Just a President, in: *New York Times*, 05.02.2009.

145 *Touré*: And Next: Mt. Rushmore?, in: *The Daily Beast*, 11.11.2008.

146 *Planning* under way for Obama holiday, in: *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 09.11.2009.

147 <http://www.magazine.org/asme/2009-best-magazine-cover-winners-finalists.aspx>.

148 *Johnson, S./Crowley, C.*: Winfrey tells Iowa crowd: Barack Obama is “the one”, in: *CNN*, 08.12.2007.

149 *Lexington*: The Obama Cult, in: *The Economist*, 23.07.2009.

150 *Brown, C.B./Henderson, N.*: Paparazzo Snaps Shirtless Obama, in: *Politico*, 23.12.2008.

151 *Heilemann, J./Halprin, M.*: Game Change. Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime, New York, 2010, 32; see also *Avlon, A.*: Irrational Obama Exuberance, in: *The Daily Beast*, 26.11.2008.

152 Quoted in *Mendell, D.*: Obama. From Promise to Power, New York, 2007, 7.

One of the President's chief political advisors, *Valerie Jarrett*, had this to say of the President:

“He knows how perceptive he is. He knows what a good reader of people he is. And he knows that he has the ability – the extraordinary, uncanny ability – to take a thousand different perspectives, digest them and make sense out of them, and I think that he has never really been challenged intellectually [...] So what I sensed in him was not just a restless spirit but somebody with such extraordinary talents that had to be really taxed in order for him to be happy [...] He's been bored to death his whole life. He's just too talented to do what ordinary people do.”¹⁵³

The combination of the general public's mixture of relief, pride, and hopefulness coupled with their vague or very different expectations was a political time bomb for the President. So was the fervent idealization of his closest advisors, a view that was consistent with the President view of himself as a “transformative” historical figure and a “great” president.

In that set of circumstances, the national press and their political commentators might have operated as an “honest broker” between the idealization of the President by his senior advisors, the substantial ambitions of the President, and the hopeful but also varied expectations of the public. However, their own enthusiasm for the administration kept them from playing that role. As a result, the ambitions of the President, buttressed by the fervent support and validation of his most senior advisors and encouraged, for the most part, by a supportive national press were given free reign and encouragement.

XI. Conclusion: *Obama's Choice*

At this point in his presidency, one year before the critical 2014 Congressional elections, President *Obama* is, again, facing the same basic choice that he has faced four other times before. And his present circumstances raise the same question: “Does he focus on trying to craft compromises with Republicans to show sceptical voters he is making Washington work? Or does he work around Congress, striking out on his own with executive actions, while attacking the GOP for failing to cooperate?”¹⁵⁴

At every point in the past that President *Obama* could have made a choice to turn toward the centre – after his initiation election, just before and after the disas-

153 *Remnick, D.*: *The Bridge. The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, New York, 2010, 274.

154 *Seib, G.F.*: *Obama Seeks Way to Right His Ship*, op.cit.

trous results of the 2010 off-year election in which Republicans took control of the House, after his re-election in 2012 – he chose to continue and push even harder for his clearly very liberal transformative agenda. There are indications that this time his choice will be no different. The appointment of *John Podesta* is one indication. Another is the report of a recent background meeting for reporters at which a senior official said “that while Congress is important [...] he [the President] will increasingly look to his pen to take executive actions”.¹⁵⁵

He almost certainly will, and that should not be surprising. The basic fault of the *Obama* presidency has always been clear. His personal ambitions are focused on greatness and his political ambitions on transformation. The public's hopes and expectations, however, are much more prosaic. They have wanted since the beginning of his presidency, above all, a growing economy that would allow them to live the lives they hoped for.

At this point, neither the President nor the American public has what they wished for. And it is very unlikely that the President, at least, will fulfill his ambitions by the end of his term. Even so, at this stage in his life and in his presidency, it would be psychologically very difficult for Mr. *Obama* to give up on his view of himself as a transforming figure. That difficulty is compounded by the strength of the President's convictions that on the array of major issues on which he has based his presidency – those dealing with economic fairness domestically and a much smaller American leadership presence abroad – he is essentially correct and his opponents extremely misguided. For those reasons, if transformation can still be achieved, even in part, with executive orders, the President will issue them.

This is not the behaviour of a “moderate”. Indeed, the wish to be a great leader who transforms his country is not a moderate ambition. Nor is the willingness to negotiate necessarily a reflection of moderation. Every president must negotiate – with Congress, with issue stakeholders, with interest groups. Negotiations are built into the nature of the American system of checks and balances and overlapping responsibilities. Negotiating the terms of transformation is very different from finding real common ground with your opponents that recognize the legitimacy of their positions.

There is no doubt that Republican opposition to President *Obama's* economic, health care and other policies has been intense. The President is and has been

155 *Dennis, S.T.*: White House Looks Past Congress for Its Agenda, in: ROLL CALL, 07.01.2014.

since his first days in public life a very liberal (or progressive, if you prefer) Democrat, and his policies have reflected that stance. The GOP has over the last decade become more conservative, mirroring the Democratic Party's becoming more liberal. So fierce debate and opposition were to be expected and opposition intensified because neither the President's stimulus bill nor his massive health care legislation were common ground negotiations. They were efforts to bargain over the terms of surrender to the President's transformative vision. There is nothing illegitimate about this approach to governance, but it was a strategy suited to transformative ambitions, not moderate, centrist ones that responded more appropriately to the repeated concerns of the American public. Smart presidents and good government are not synonymous. In part, this is because a leader's intelligence is almost always put in the service of his ambitions. And it is the relationship between leadership ambitions and public support of them, in a democracy, that helps to define effective governance.

The gap between the President's grand visions and ordinary concerns of most Americans were nowhere more evident than in the President's massive, complex transformation of American healthcare. The effects of that legislation, some intended, many others unanticipated, were all put into effect without adequately preparing the public. As a result, the dislocations caused by the new legislation have cascaded across the country causing continuing waves of confusion, anxiety and in many cases anger. It is unclear whether people can keep their health care plans or have to get new ones, whether they can keep their doctors or not, whether they can go to the hospitals they have used or not, whether they can afford the policies they are mandated to buy or not, and which of the many rules that have been delayed or modified they are really responsible for. This is the President's transformative vision at ground level and it is unlikely to cement his legacy as a "great" president.

Conservative critics like to point to "The Collapse of the *Obama* Presidency",¹⁵⁶ but they are mistaken. More realistic, less wishful commentators have noted:

"Obviously no modern presidency is 'finished' so long as its occupant retains the use of his faculties and the command of speech: The office has too much power to be simply politically sidelined, a range of tools for exercising that power (especially in foreign policy, but through the federal bureaucracy as well) survive even when Con-

156 *Wehner, P.*: The Collapse of the Obama Presidency, in: *Commentary*, 12.09.2013.

gress is entirely uncooperative, and new crises that demand an executive response can re-empower even the most unpopular president.”¹⁵⁷

The *Obama* presidency has not ‘collapsed’; it is not ‘the end of the presidency’. It has not ‘failed’, except by the stand of its own ambitions.

It is, however, a diminished presidency and likely to remain one for the remainder of the President’s term of office. And the fault for that does not lie in the stars. It does not lie in “second term curses” or Republican opposition to the President’s transformative ambitions, but in the basic fault of those very ambitions themselves.

In a survey of presidential planning for second terms, *Lizza* wrote: “A key challenge for a second-term President lies in managing the delicate balance between what he wants [...] and what he thinks the public wants [...] – and taking care not to confuse the two.”¹⁵⁸ This has been a psychological and political issue for the President from the start. Will he master this challenge? Summing up the prospects for the President’s second term in these pages last year, *Rockman* wrote: “*Obama’s* achievements in the second term will fall far short of his aspirations.”¹⁵⁹ Given the transformative level of those ambitions that is, without doubt, an accurate prediction.

157 *Douthat, R.*: Obama and the Doomsayers, in: New York Times, 09.12.2013.

158 *Lizza, R.*: The Second Term, op.cit.

159 *Rockman, B.A.*: President Barack Obama’s Second Term: Prospects and Constraints, in: ZSE, 1 (2013), 66.