

# The Magnetic President

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With a smile as warm and broad as any of his predecessors, a charisma that brought seas of humanity shoulder-to-shoulder to light their candles of hope from his torch, and a way of engaging the issues that was so calm, inspirational and intelligent that his opponents derided it as "just words" from an empty suit, candidate Barack Obama was hailed as the New Great Communicator.

So why, ever since then, has President Obama's message gotten so drowned in the static of partisan noise and distracted media? How did he lose his political mojo?

It may be instructive to compare Obama with the original Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan. The former actor's gift for delivering a well-rehearsed line rarely failed to win the hearts of his audience. As Reagan championed the causes of his base--from Jerry Falwell's moral oversight in the bedroom to tax cuts in the boardroom, from axe cuts in virgin forests to nuclear brinkmanship in Europe--the conservative movement came to identify itself more and more as proud Reaganites.

Talk about a conservative Messiah! Here was a right-wing president who could transcend his Hollywood lifestyle to connect with Joe Six-Pack, even if most of his shtick was ripped from Barry Goldwater, old movie scripts and the pages of *Reader's Digest*.

Despite his ruthless advancement of conservative ideology, Reagan always emerged from controversies unscathed by his own involvement. With the aid of blocking from his White House "handlers" and from Republican politicians and compliant media (precious [few journalists excepted](#)), the Gipper won a free pass to be president of the United States without having to actually be accountable for anything his White House did that was unethical, bad for the country or downright illegal. And for his remarkable ability to avoid being tarred by his own slime, Reagan earned the title of The Teflon President.

Obama may be the nation's first Magnetic President, for he attracts blame like a steel rod gripped in the electrified coil of his opposition. Even the strongest facts seem to fail at repelling the unmerited negative charges directed against him and his agenda.

Obama's slowly declining approval ratings mirror those of Reagan's at this point in his first term, and so offer no particular evidence that Obama commands less popularity than Reagan did. But approval ratings can't measure the difference between Reagan's stick-free surface and Obama's inability to shed the lowest partisan mud.

Obama is savaged by conservatives for adding to the national debt in a time of economic meltdown and two major wars. Tea partisans say he should have pulled the plug on the life support that jump-started the economy's recovery--that Obama should cut spending like Japan's leadership did in the '90s and FDR did in the '30s, when each caved to deficit hawks and pushed their economies back into the toilet face-first. Many across the political spectrum say Obama should have broken up the banks that caused the mess and thrown their CEOs in prison. (On the other hand, conservatives don't want the government intruding on private enterprise, and progressives claim to be huge fans of due process.)

And Reagan's economic record? He [tripled the national debt](#) in a time of relative peace while cutting taxes on the rich, and he did *all* this without seriously ruffling the GOP's feathers. Reagan's trickle-down, voodoo economics took three years to marginally lift the country out of a run-of-the-mill recession. In other words, Americans waited twice as long as they've waited under Obama for Reagan to deliver comparable relief from an economic downturn not half as bad as the utter collapse Bush left for Obama to avert. And no, Obama has not tripled, doubled or even added 50 percent to our national

debt since he took office. The sharp rise in deficit spending Obama's first year is largely the [result of the Bush FY 2009 budget](#), according to a surprising source and unlikely ally: the libertarian Cato Institute think tank.

That Reagan's agriculture department listed ketchup as a vegetable to trim costs in the federal school lunch program was seen as just some gov'mint bean counter's stupidity, not a logical consequence of Reagan's draconian cuts in anti-poverty spending.

Under Obama, government assistance programs have been expanded to provide some measure of relief for millions of unemployed and hungry citizens, nearly all of whom were left unemployed and hungry by Bush policies that spilled over into Obama's lap and **more than 75 percent of whom were left unemployed and hungry during Bush's actual tenure in the White House**. Moreover, Obama's economic policies actually are creating jobs for the first time in two years, much to the chagrin of those who offer no ideas beyond the resumption of failed Reagan/Bush policies.

That Reagan's Interior Secretary, [James G. Watts](#), was so rabidly anti-environmental that he once declared "trees cause pollution" never became a real problem for the Great Communicator. Watts slashed conservation programs, resisted private land donations to the national parks and refuge portfolio and boasted of opening "a billion acres" to offshore drilling, all with the president's blessing. Reagan finally threw Watts under the bus in 1983--not for perverting his duties as chief steward of the environment, but for causing an uproar by mocking affirmative action with his description of a coal-leasing panel: "I have a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent," he said. If there was any doubt about Watts' contempt for the environment, he eliminated them in 1991 when he told a Wyoming cattlemen's association, "If the troubles from environmentalists cannot be solved in the jury box or at the ballot box, perhaps the cartridge box should be used."

And Obama's environmental record? Well, he's failed to single-handedly save the planet, a tall order for any mortal in any case. But it's not for lack of trying. And as disastrous as the Gulf oil spill is, it's important to remember that BP caused it, Bush-era de-regulatory policies allowed it, and once again, Obama has to act as W's janitor. The climate and energy legislation that Obama has supported is DOA in the newly filibuster-prone Senate, and the GOP is dancing on its body. But intransigent facts won't stop progressives from bashing Obama from the left. Nor will the facts stop the coal, oil and gas industries from promoting the lie that the president supports an "energy tax" on consumers.

Progressives paint Obama as a warmonger, despite the fact that the U.S. troop pull-down in Iraq is proceeding on schedule while a stumbling Iraqi government raises doubt about the policy's wisdom. Americans on the left and the right are growing weary of nearly nine years of U.S. military involvement--not to say engagement--in Afghanistan. Progressives want a withdrawal now. Conservatives want an open-ended declaration of our commitment to prosecute the war. Obama is somewhere in the middle, taking political flak from both sides for wars that everyone but Michael Steele knows were started by Bush and Cheney.

Reagan? He went in search of conflicts, inserting Marines into Beirut and pulling them out three months after Islamic Jihad detonated two car bombs that [killed 241 American](#) and 58 French servicemen--by far the worst one-day casualty count suffered by America forces since the Tet Offensive. It wasn't until Ollie North and the Iran-Contra Affair that Reagan took any responsibility for the heat in the mess hall.

But the saddest evidence of the president's magnetic personality comes from attitudes still prevalent among the GOP and, particularly, its militant tea party wing. Three years after the lies were thoroughly debunked, the GOP still tolerates the ideas that Obama is a secret Muslim, a Manchurian president of foreign birth and a Socialist at heart. He is, according to Colorado gubernatorial candidate and former GOP congressman Tom Tancredo, a bigger threat to the nation than all the terrorists of al

Qaeda put together.

According to Fox News and most teabagger websites, the president and his attorney general, Eric Holder, may be coordinating a veiled campaign to discriminate against whites nationwide. Shirley Sherrod was supposed to be evidence of that, just as Van Jones and ACORN were victims of the same right-wing propaganda.

Despite the extraordinary multiplication of the challenges he faces and the enormous progress he has made, the b.s. keeps coming Obama's way. For as much as Obama inspires hope, he also inspires fear in those who refuse to see him as he is, beneath all the mud they feel compelled to heap upon him.