

The Examiner

Let them eat hope

July 16, 2012

[Gene Healy](#)

After much soul searching, Barack Obama has figured out where his presidency has gone wrong -- and he shared it with CBS's Charlie Rose and viewers across the fruited plain Sunday morning.

"The mistake of my first term -- couple of years," the president allowed, "was thinking that this job was just about getting the policy right." At times, Obama confessed, he'd forgotten that "the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times." He needed to do "more explaining, but also inspiring."

"Because hope is still there," the first lady added.

There you have it. Contemplating the policy wreckage that surrounds him, the president has concluded that what this country needs is a fresh injection of presidential hope. Like "more cowbell" in the old "Saturday Night Live" skit, it's the magic ingredient that makes everything better.

Obama considers himself a sophisticated and nuanced guy, so you wouldn't think his descent into self-parody would be quite so unsubtle.

Anyone else out there for the explanation that a lack of storytelling, explaining and inspirational speeches was the great sin of the Obama presidency? According to CBS's Mark Knoller, in his first two years in office, the president clocked 902 speeches and statements and gave 265 interviews. Anybody who talks that much runs the risk of saying too much. Case in point, this gem from the president's speech Friday in Roanoke: "If you've got a business -- you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen." Inspiring!

To be fair, Obama didn't invent the juvenile notion of the president as inspirer in chief. But he has served as its *reductio ad absurdum*, relentlessly stoking irrational public expectations for presidential salvation, raising hopes that no human institution could possibly fulfill.

Some political scientists attribute declining presidential popularity to the "expectations gap" -- the vast distance between what the public expects of the president and what he can realistically

deliver. No chief executive in modern memory has done more than the Yes We Can president to boost expectations and widen that gap. Obama seems oblivious to the fact that those irrational public expectations are a large part of his political problem.

It's a bigger problem for the rest of us. Our investment of hope in a presidential savior leads us to do less for ourselves. It encourages a dangerous concentration of power in an office primarily designed for faithful execution of laws passed by Congress. Frustrated by his inability to deliver the miracles he's promised, the modern president continually pushes the limits of his authority.

Obama began his unlikely rise to power with an inspiring speech: "Hope -- hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!" It's "God's greatest gift to us," then-state Sen. Obama proclaimed in his 2004 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, this "belief in things not seen."

That was always a silly notion, and it seems sillier still in hindsight. Leaving theology out of it, our ability to observe, reason and judge seems a sounder and safer guide to presidential performance.

On the campaign trail last time around, Obama pledged, among other things, to provide "a cure for cancer in our time," to deliver "a complete transformation of the economy," "end the age of oil in our time," and, perhaps most quixotically, to "fundamentally change the way Washington works."

Three and a half years into Obama's tenure, you can see why he'd rather "tell a story to the American people" and hope for "the belief in things not seen."

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."