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Economist

Lexington

The courage factor

Has Barack Obama ever been brave? Perhaps more pertinently, will he ever be?

Mar 17th 2011 | from the print edition

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IT IS hard to see risk-free options for outside intervention in Libya. And as Colonel Muammar Qaddafi closes in on the pro-democracy rebels, Barack Obama, as is his wont, is erring on the side of caution; carefully considering, as he has for weeks, what, if anything, he ought to do. But this prompts a question about the president. Has he, at any point in his presidency so far, demonstrated real political courage? It is surprisingly hard, more than two years in, to think of an unambiguous example.

True, he went to the wire on health reform, but by the time he got round to doing so it would have been even riskier for him to accept defeat than to press forward. He spent nearly \$1 trillion on economic stimulus and bailed out the car companies. But although they were controversial he had plenty of support for both decisions, which makes them bold rather than truly brave. If political courage is taking a clear stand against the majority on some gut instinct or principle, it is much easier to list the cases where Mr Obama has chosen discretion over valour.

He has left Guantánamo open, despite promising to close it. He reinforced the troops in Afghanistan, but set a date to start withdrawing, a careful bit of bet-hedging. He pushed for peace in Palestine, but retreated at the first whiff of domestic opposition. He created a bipartisan commission on the deficit, but then distanced himself from its recommendations. He said he would let the Bush-era tax cuts expire for the rich, but backed down after the mid-term elections. His support for gay rights has been a study in caution, like his position on gun control. He declined to criticise the treatment of Private Bradley Manning, the alleged WikiLeaks informant, whom the Marine Corps holds in solitary confinement and who has to stand naked outside his cell every morning. He fired an official who did speak out.

If Mr Obama is not brave, is he a coward? That is too harsh: politics, being the art of the possible, is not always about drawing a line and making a stand. Courage is a virtue in a president, but so are cool calculation and risk-aversion. If these are the president's dominant traits, some will say that they are a welcome corrective after the martial impetuosity of his predecessor.

Besides, one interpretation of that list is that Mr Obama is calculating, not craven. Guantánamo? While the terrorist threat continues, a case can be made that there is still a place for detention

without trial. Palestine? Maybe the obstinacy of the local actors makes peace unattainable no matter how hard he pushes. Taming the deficit while the re-energised Republicans refuse to increase taxes looks nigh impossible; better, perhaps, to try again after his hoped-for re-election. Taxing the rich? Did he not have to back down once the Democrats lost the House of Representatives, and at least he extracted more spending on the poor from the Republicans in return. As for gay rights, he did eventually repeal the ban on gays serving openly in the military and is relaxing his opposition to gay marriage. On guns, he happens, conveniently, to agree with most Americans that the second amendment guarantees an individual right to bear arms—though he wants stronger efforts to keep guns out of dangerous hands.

The dream versus the calculation

In all these ways Mr Obama has clung to the middle ground, cutting deals where possible and sidestepping fights he judges he cannot win. It is all very practical, very realistic. But remember that he campaigned on the slogan that “we can”. The fact that in so many instances he has not has deflated the ardent supporters who wanted a “transformational” president. The only people calling him that now are those absurd conservatives who claim he is transforming America into a secular-socialist dystopia.

Perhaps the expectations were the problem. Teddy Roosevelt thought presidents should “kindle the people with the fire from their own burning souls”. In truth, few presidents change America all that much. That is the hemmed-in nature of the office, though voters habitually forget this. This “Cult of the Presidency” was explored brilliantly in a book of that name in 2008. Its author, Gene Healy, observed then that despite the disappointment of the Bush years, Americans were once again intoxicated by the aura of hope surrounding Mr Obama. He predicted that they would once again have cause to regret their infatuation with “the false promise of presidential power”.

And so they have. In domestic politics especially, the president is checked and balanced at every turn. A British finance minister unveils his budget in the House of Commons and it is law. When Mr Obama sends his budget to Congress it is only pawn to king four: the opening move in a long game which the president has no guarantee of winning. This is the excuse his defenders offer to those who detect a want of courage in Mr Obama: he inherited a mess, his power is constrained and he has only reached the middle of the game. Have a heart, cut the man some slack. Sometimes, after all, discretion really is the better part of valour.

There is a danger here of letting Mr Obama off too lightly. He made hope and audacity his running mates, so he should answer for their defection. With the exception of health reform the big fights—on global warming, immigration and the deficit—have been put on hold and many of the smaller ones ducked.

Political courage is hard to define. But you know it when you see it. The senior George Bush increased taxes and paid with his job. Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act even though he knew it would cost the Democrats the South. The much-maligned younger Mr Bush showed a moment of true grit, when he defied almost everyone and refused to leave Iraq to chaos in 2007. Maybe Mr Obama will find the same raw courage when at last he thinks it warranted. All one can say is that it has not happened yet. Meanwhile, Libya and Bahrain burn.

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from the print edition | United States