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President Barack Obama listens to a question as he speaks at town hall meeting about health care, Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2009, at Portsmouth High School in Portsmouth, N.H. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Friday, August 14, 2009

Editorial: Obama the secretive

Transparency candidate governs more like Bush.

An Orange County Register editorial

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It should hardly come as a surprise that once in office elected politicians forget about, abandon, or fudge on promises made to get elected. President Barack Obama's record on transparency and openness, however, is more disappointing than most such instances.

During the campaign, candidate Barack Obama promised an unprecedented degree of openness and transparency, in contrast to the notoriously secretive Bush White House. Regarding health care, he said: "We'll have the negotiations televised on C-SPAN so the people can see who is making argument on behalf of their constituents and who are making arguments on behalf of the drug companies or the insurance companies."

Once in office, however, the administration quietly cut a deal with Big Pharma not to allow Medicare to grind drug companies for lower drug prices, in exchange for a promise to voluntarily reduce prescription prices by some \$80 billion over 10 years. The news has trickled out and there's some question whether the deal will be honored, but it wasn't exactly shown on C-SPAN, nor was the White House the first to tell us.

During the campaign candidate Obama promised that pending legislation would be put up on the Internet for at least five days before bills were signed so the general public would at least have a chance to see what devils might be buried in the details. So far, as the libertarian Cato Institute's Jim Harper, who has been keeping score, notes, the president has kept this promise once out of 46 chances. The pork-laden \$787-billion "stimulus" bill, arguably the most significant and certainly the most expensive bill he has signed, was signed within a day of being presented to him, with no Internet presence.

Candidate Obama criticized President George W. Bush (rightfully so) for his practice of attaching "signing statements" to bills, which sometimes spelled out parts of the legislation he considered unconstitutional or which he didn't necessarily intend to enforce. President Obama, however, has continued the practice. You might think that his signing statements would be available on WhiteHouse.gov, but according to the Sunlight Foundation they're not to be found there. A private attorney has made a list with links to signing statements publicly available (www.coherentbabble.com/listBHOall.htm), but not the White House.

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The Obama administration has just filed an appeal with the Supreme Court appealing a decision by a lower court that the government must release photos of prisoners allegedly abused in Iraqi prisons. The administration has invoked "state secrets" to keep a case involving warrantless electronic surveillance out of court. These decisions mirror the approach of the allegedly uniquely secretive Bush administration.

President Obama is hardly the first president to prefer to keep much of what goes on in the White House under wraps unless and until it is seen as politically advantageous to make public disclosure. In his case, however, the gap between rhetoric and reality is especially wide.

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