

## For This Libertarian, Obama's First Year Looks Grim

by DAVID BOAZ



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Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images

US President-elect Barack Obama approaches the podium to speech at the 'We Are One' concert, one of the events of Obama's inauguration celebrations, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on January 18, 2009.

January 20, 2010

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David Boaz is the Executive Vice President of the [Cato Institute](#) and author of 'Libertarianism: A Primer and The Politics of Freedom'.

Happy anniversary, Mr. President. Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts is a rude ending to a year marked by falling poll ratings and growing opposition to his signature policy initiatives.

President Obama took office on a wave of good feeling. The country was glad to be rid of George W. Bush and appreciated Obama's promise to move beyond old battles. But Obama and his team overinterpreted their victory. A desire for change didn't translate into support for a sweeping statist agenda. Beginning with his February 24 speech to Congress, Obama began to overreach.

His administration sought to use the financial crisis to implement an agenda that wouldn't have been plausible in calmer times. "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste" was Rahm Emanuel's keynote. Robert Higgs in *Crisis and Leviathan* and Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine* had examined how crises often lead to dramatic changes in policy, but never before had senior officials declared the shock doctrine as their strategy.

For further insight into facets of President Obama's rookie year, be sure to read what experts [Brian Darling](#) and [Kenneth Roth](#) have to say about year one.

There were of course plenty of actual emergency measures taken in the final months of the Bush administration, and a few more in Obama's first weeks. But President Obama implausibly tried to present his proposed federal takeovers of health care, education, and energy as measures to get us out of the financial crisis. The public never bought this argument, and the health care and energy proposals ran into serious opposition. Levels of trust in government are now at record lows, and the president's approval ratings have fallen steadily.

As a libertarian I'm sorry that President Obama has not moved to repeal the Defense of the Marriage Act, to ratchet down the drug war, or to actually end the war in Iraq, the issue on which he rose to prominence. I think it's fair to say that his real ambition was to dramatically expand the size, scope, and power of the federal government and that he saw these other issues as distractions.

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Courtesy of the Cato Institute  
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By pressing such a big-government program, President Obama has energized a small-government element in the electorate that had been demoralized and pushed aside by a big-government Republican president. Right now that movement looks likely to turn a lot of Democrats out of office this fall.

The American economy usually recovers from recessions, and we may see evidence of recovery by this fall. But the economy wasn't bad in 1994, so a stronger economy is not a guarantee of a strong Democratic performance if people remain dissatisfied with the president's policies. Some people point out that Ronald Reagan had low approval ratings after a year. But his policies then produced a strong recovery, and there's no reason to expect that imposing more burdens on a struggling economy will have good results.

President Obama has several models to choose from: He could reverse his tax-spend-and-regulate policies and hope for the same economic and political results that Reagan achieved. He could, like Bill Clinton, recognize the political obstacles to

his sweeping ambitions and learn to work with Republicans on modest reforms. He may well end up like Lyndon Johnson, with an ambitious domestic agenda eventually bogged down by endless war. But I don't think his wished-for FDR model — a transformative agenda that is both popular and long-lasting — is in the cards.

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**Your Government (DNCandRNC)** wrote:

With the election of Brown, I believe that states right is starting to become an issue. Many Mass. citizens didn't want to pay for two different healthcare plans, they've already got one- why pay for two? Healthcare should be left up to the individual states. The federal government should be removing those road blocks. Such roadblocks include the restriction of inter-state purchase of health insurance, the monopoly of drugs in which foreign drugs are not allowed, thus reducing competition.

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**Your Government (DNCandRNC)** wrote:

"I think it's fair to say that his real ambition was to dramatically expand the size, scope, and power of the federal government and that he saw these other issues as distractions."

Bingo. Good point.

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