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# Obama looks inward at a defining moment for his presidency

**By: [Julie Mason](#)****Examiner White House Correspondent****January 27, 2010**

The week between the Massachusetts Senate race that dashed his hopes for passing an ambitious health care plan and his first State of the Union address has become a defining moment for President Obama.

"Obama's big problem is that the public can't figure him out," said Jeffrey Cohen, a political scientist at Fordham University. "He is full of contradictions and he changes from month to month -- just look at his economic policies."

In the days leading up to his first State of the Union address, President Obama has shown an uncharacteristic desire to discuss himself and his own mistakes, and his handlers have worried about how to regain the magic of the 2008 campaign.

In a series of interviews heading into the State of the Union, Obama has expressed a range of frustration, doubt and anxiety unusual for presidents, but especially for the famously detached 44th.

"I'd say I probably make a mistake a day, maybe two," Obama told ABC News. "But I think in terms of over the course of the year, as I said before, we've been so focused on just getting things done that I think that we stopped giving voice to the frustrations that people have about the process here in Washington."

But Obama's central challenge for the speech will be outlining a consistent policy framework that also tracks public priorities -- something he so far has been unable to do.

Just 50 percent said they believe Obama agrees with them on issues they most care about -- down from 68 percent after his 2008 election.

Obama this week brought David Plouffe, his 2008 campaign manager, back into his inner circle while the administration attempts a post-Massachusetts course correction. Among other things, reigniting Obama's spark

with voters is part of the strategy.

But the administration, much like the president, appears to be in a message crisis, especially on health care. While the White House insists it is moving forward with reform, it has yet to articulate how it will do it.

"The cynic in me looks at everything he has said and everything his advisers have said since Massachusetts, and the cynic says they are trying to act like they got it, like 'Hey -- message received,' " said Michael Cannon, a health care policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute.

But even trying to embrace consistency at this late date carries a political risk for Obama, who must deliver for the Democratic Party in November's midterm elections.

Until now, Obama's fiscal policies have hinged on the idea that massive federal spending is the way to help the economy. In a philosophical about-face, his speech will include a call to freeze non-security-related discretionary federal spending.


The proposal has angered liberals who support many federal spending programs, while conservatives scoff that his plan addresses a fraction of total federal outlays and is a meaningless gesture.

Independents, who are expected to play a key role in the midterms, long ago hardened against Obama's economic policymaking, according to several polls.

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