



Mixed grade for Obama's first term

Bold initiatives, but a failure to sell them

By: Kevin C. Peterson – January 15th, 2013

Barack Obama's first term was marked by daunting political realities.

Upon entering office, he faced an economic crisis unmatched since the Great Depression. The banking system teetered on the verge of collapse. The automobile industry in Detroit was tanking. The nation was hemorrhaging 70,000 jobs each month.

Despite all this, some said there were reasons for optimism.

According to this narrative, the new president was not confronting a Herculean challenge with disastrous traps all around.? Instead, he was facing a colossal opportunity, with many Americans feeling that Obama's election uniquely positioned him to recast the economy, rebuild the country's infrastructure, and recalibrate the national political process that had stalled into gridlock.

A post-election image on the cover of Time in late 2008 supported this perspective, depicting Obama as a reincarnation of Franklin Roosevelt and predicting that the new president would, like FDR, rescue a dysfunctional nation with high-minded elocution, pep talks, and a steady diet of innovative programs and reinvigorating policies.

Obama's response to the political and economic chaos he encountered upon entering office was indeed remarkable. Within a month of his election, he signed the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—the stimulus bill—that would invest deeply in new technologies, alternative energy production, and massive infrastructure repair. Obama would also pass a national health care law, repeal an anti-gay military policy, curtail the excesses of Wall Street with financial reforms, and approve a high-risk operation that eliminated Osama bin Laden.

These first-term efforts were great but reflected only a “halfway New Deal,” according to Theda Skocpol, in her most recent book, *Obama and America's Political Future*, which presents a nuanced assessment of Obama successes and missteps during his first term. The book posits that had Obama acted differently, his victories would have been vastly more substantial. (Michael Grunwald's *The New New Deal*, also published recently, focuses in great detail on the domestic policy and programs ushered into

existence through the stimulus bill, emphasizing the far-reaching impact the bill will have for decades to come.)

For the most part Skocpol, a Harvard University political scientist, delivers a trenchant analysis of Obama's presidency to date, interpreting his victories on a variety of bold policy initiatives that will dramatically reorder the way Americans look at energy, the environment, college education, and health care. At the same time, Skocpol notes that Obama was unable to clearly translate his victories to the American public and use the presidency as a "bully pulpit" to push through additional key legislation following his historic election. This was a failure that led inevitably to intensified partisan warfare between Democrats and Republicans.

"A new New Deal of sorts was successfully launched by President Obama," writes Skocpol. "But much of what happened was either invisible or ominously incomprehensible to the majority of American citizens."

In other words, Obama squandered opportunities he possessed to use the office of the presidency as an effective forum for clarifying to the American people the enormous and "transformative" nature of the policies he had passed into law. This was compounded, says Skocpol, by the administration's lack of public focus on a jobs bill in the early days of his administration. Only after the 2010 elections did the administration push a jobs plan, which has never passed.

The failure to clearly communicate to the public cost Obama politically. Public anxiety about high unemployment gave Republicans fodder to relentlessly attack Obama as an overspending liberal unconcerned about job creation. Mobilized public discontent eventually gave way to the formation of the Tea Party movement and the rise of "the conservative entertainment industry" led by Fox News and such personalities as Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, and Glenn Beck. Obama's setbacks continued with a huge loss of Democratic seats in the 2010 mid-term election that flipped control of the House to the GOP and stalled the president's agenda.

Skocpol says Obama's inability to project strong presidential power to shape America's political direction was his major downfall during the first term. Nonetheless, she is mostly positive about Obama, lauding him on "big policy accomplishments" and his capacity to forge "further significant changes through the federal bureaucracy" in such areas as labor law reform and immigration.

Skocpol's book is an expanded version of The Alexis de Tocqueville Lectures on American Politics, delivered at Harvard in early 2012, and it includes responses from other academics that give it added weight and richer intellectual perspective. Vanderbilt professor Larry M. Bartels calls Skocpol's conclusions that Obama represented the second coming of FDR a "fantasy" from the start, arguing that the transformative policies advanced by Obama merely reflected pragmatic responses to various crisis that needed resolution. Obama's first-term policies do not signal a massive realignment of governance that substantively changes the welfare state, says Bartels.

Mickey Edwards, a former Oklahoma Republican congressman, chides Skocpol for misreading Obama's 2008 election as a mandate for change. Such notions caused the Obama administration to overreach, says Edwards, and unleashed the conservative backlash that cost Democrats 63 House seats in 2010.

Cornell professor Suzanne Mettler agrees mostly with Skocpol on the emergence of the new New Deal forged by Obama, but notes how much of the new policy regime is "submerged" in the tax code and education reform that is mainly decipherable only to policy wonks.

What is most valuable in the book is its analysis of the rise of the Tea Party movement, now the recalcitrant and hard-right wing of the Republican Party. Skocpol chronicles its emergence, centered on the anxiety of upper-middle class older white males, and the exuberant policy support it receives from the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and personalities such as the Koch brothers, whose belief in less government encouraged them to donate millions to ultra-conservative causes advanced by successful Tea Party candidates in 2010.

As the second Obama term begins, the future of American politics remains largely unclear. The conventional wisdom holds that second-term presidents pursue an exaggerated agenda, falter, and then quickly slip into lame duck status. One imagines that Skocpol, whose book was published before the election, views Obama's reelection as an opportunity to securely anchor the big initiatives he launched and make the case for them clearer to American citizens. His path, however, hardly looks unimpeded. Obama's efforts, according to the liberal-leaning Skocpol, are likely to be hampered by obstinate libertarian-like Tea Partiers who, for the time being, at least, are also continuing to have a big say.

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