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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Don't Blame Obama

By [ROSS DOUTHAT](#)

Throughout the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama's most loyal constituencies were the national press corps and the left wing of the Democratic Party.

Those on the left loved him because they thought he was one of them. They tolerated all the happy talk about bipartisanship because they were sure that deep in his community-organizing heart Obama shared their premises, their passions and their goals.

The media loved him because he was a great story and a great campaigner. The press favors dreamy liberals, but it worships success, and Obama was the best of both worlds — a soaring rhetorician with a ruthlessly competent political machine.

But now both groups are turning on him. As the health care debate enters its decisive weeks, the left doubts President Obama's commitment, and the press doubts his competence.

For MSNBC-watching, Huffington Post-devouring liberals, the administration's fancy footwork on a public health care plan (maybe it's out, maybe it's in, but either way it's negotiable) is just the latest example of the president's unseemly unwillingness to steamroll the opposition. He has been too solicitous to Republicans, too hands-off with Democrats, too detached and technocratic — even as a once-in-a-generation opportunity is passing liberalism by.

Where the left sees betrayal, the press sees ham-fistedness. The White House's messages have been mixed — fiscal hawkery one day, moralism the next. The administration has allowed distractions like the Skip Gates affair to crowd out his agenda. It has overlearned the lessons of the Clinton-care debacle and given Congress too much leeway. It has underlearned the lessons of the Bush-era Social Security debacle and gone to war before there's an actual piece of legislation on the table.

Some of this is true — but some of it is overstated. And at its worst, it's an example of the bipartisan derangement that Gene Healy of the Cato Institute has dubbed ["the cult of the presidency."](#)

To the disciples of this cult, the president is the government. "He is a soul nourisher," Healy writes, "a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns and spiritual malaise." Anything that happens on his watch happens because of him. And just as important, anything that doesn't happen can be pinned entirely on his mistakes.

President Obama has been turning these quasi-messianic expectations to his advantage since he first entered national politics. But that doesn't make them any less unrealistic.

To listen to the chatter about where his administration has gone wrong, you would think that the rest of the Democratic Party had no agency — that Democratic office-holders are slaves to poll numbers that only the White House can control, and that the way a Max Baucus, a Ben Nelson or a Blanche Lincoln votes is entirely determined by whether the president of the United States twists the right arms and hits the right rhetorical notes.

In reality, the health care wrestling match is less a test of Mr. Obama's political genius than it is a test of the Democratic Party's ability to govern. This is not the Reagan era, when power in Washington was divided, and every important vote required the president to leverage his popularity to build trans-party coalitions. Fox News and Sarah Palin have soapboxes, but they don't have veto power. Mr. Obama could be a cipher, a nonentity, a Millard Fillmore or a Franklin Pierce, and his party would still have the power to pass sweeping legislation without a single Republican vote.

What's more, health care reform is the Democratic Party's signature issue. Its wonks have thought longer and harder about it than any other topic. Its politicians are vastly better at talking about the subject than Republicans: if an election is fought over health care, bet on the Democrat every time. And for all the complexity involved, it's arguably easier to tackle than other liberal priorities. It's more popular than cap and trade, it's less likely to split the party than immigration and it's more amenable to technocratic interventions than income inequality.

If the Congressional Democrats can't get a health care package through, it won't prove that President Obama is a sellout or an incompetent. It will prove that Congress's liberal leaders are lousy tacticians, and that its centrist deal-makers are deal-makers first, poll watchers second and loyal Democrats a distant third. And it will prove that the Democratic Party is institutionally incapable of delivering on its most significant promises.

You have to assume that on some level Congress understands this — which is why you also have to assume that some kind of legislation will eventually pass.

If it doesn't, President Obama will have been defeated. But it's the party, not the president, that will have failed.

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