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Obama: So much promise... but has he delivered?

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By Claire Prentice in New York

ONE year ago, Barack Obama had a mandate for change and the world in his hands. What does the US think of him now?

TYRONE Banda and a group of fellow street vendors are talking politics in the shadow of the iconic Apollo Theatre in Harlem, where a host of black stars including Ella Fitzgerald, Michael Jackson and James Brown got their big break. Against a backdr

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op of boom-boxes and roaring traffic, the conversation grows heated as the group discuss the progress made by America's first black president in the year since his election.

"My mom was rushed into hospital with a heart attack last week and she ain't got health insurance," said Duane Jackson. "Obama is going to get us all healthcare," added his brother Bill. "Is he?" yelled a man on the neighbouring stall, adding: "He's a politician, they all lie." Duane Jackson recently lost his job as a security guard and is trawling the stores and fast food joints along 125th Street looking for work.

Banda said: "Obama's a good guy and he's doing a good job. He inherited a bad situation from George Bush but he's got this country back on track." Marylue Matmungal stops beside Banda's DVD stall. She has been unable to find a job in social work since graduating earlier this year. She said: "I voted for Obama and I'm not impressed. He talks about change but what's changed?"

Across rural and inner-city America, many people are asking the same question. Figures from Pew Research Center show Americans' approval of Obama's job performance is down from 64 per cent in February to 52 per cent. With US unemployment reaching 9.8 per cent last month – the highest since July 1983 – ordinary Americans are hungry for the promised change.

Student Janet Watson had high expectations of Obama but said she is enough of a realist to know he couldn't fix all the country's ills overnight. She said: "People in America look for instant gratification. We are a capitalist country that wants results today. People are running out of patience."

Though the people of Harlem are feeling the pain of the recession, approval of Obama remains high in this African-American corner of Manhattan. "He's a very good role model. He's done a lot to make the black community feel good about itself," said street vendor Joe Dekes.

A year ago, Barack Obama came into office as the most popular American president in recent memory, a visionary acclaimed at home and across the world with a mandate to kick-start the failing American economy, overhaul healthcare, close Guantanamo Bay and end unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But though the 44th president of the United States has just received the Nobel Peace Prize, he is a profoundly divisive figure, loathed as much as he is loved in the US.

Elaine Kamarck, former adviser to Bill Clinton and Al Gore and lecturer in public policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, believes Obama's continued personal popularity will buy him time to push through key policies. She said: "American people continue to trust and like him and that's a huge strength. I can't remember a president who won such an astounding victory and inherited such a dysfunctional opposition."

The stakes for any incoming president are high. When that incoming president enjoys unprecedented popularity and is replacing an almost universally unpopular predecessor, at a time of war abroad and economic catastrophe at home, the stakes go from high to sky high. And all to be dealt with while the First Family is under intense personal scrutiny. Every detail of Obama's life with his wife Michelle, daughters Sasha and Malia, and dog Bo is pored over by Americans. The First Family appears on YouTube, on talk shows and in the pages of magazines, from *People* to *Vogue*. There are 334 Facebook groups devoted to the Obamas. If Michelle Obama wears shorts or bares her arms, the media goes mad and the whole world wades in with opinions on the internet.

It's hardly surprising then that from the streets of New York to the snow fields of Alaska to the think tanks of Washington DC, ordinary Americans and experts are quick to pass verdict on the man who runs their country.

On one side are Democrats who, left demoralised by the undisciplined excesses of the Clinton era, have responded to Obama's calm authority and self-control. A small group of "Blue Dog Democrats" have peeled away in reaction to the president's healthcare plans, but his party in Congress and Senate has been remarkably coherent in its analysis of America's ills and determination about what to do next.

On the other side, Republicans often respond to Obama with barely concealed fury. Within Capitol Hill, a new generation of national leadership is yet to emerge. But across the country, fringe right-wing groups on the internet and on television and radio talk shows have been allowed to ferment a feverish set of theories about the president. According to some, he is not an American citizen and therefore cannot legally be president. Others openly refer to him as "Comrade Obama". And his proposals for healthcare reform, which in a European context seem unremarkable, have led to suggestions that government-sanctioned death panels will decide when old people have lived long enough.

"He is doing a remarkably poor job. He's combined the worst of the Bush administration's foreign policy and the worst of the Democrats' domestic policy," said Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. "We've seen massive spending and debts, a government takeover of the banks, the auto industry and now the healthcare system. There's talk of sending more troops to Afghanistan, the practice of rendition is continuing, the Patriot Act is being renewed and Guantanamo Bay is still open. I don't see the change we'd hoped for on foreign policy."

William Galston, senior fellow with the Washington DC think tank the Brookings Institution, said: "If I was grading him I'd give him an incomplete in virtually every subject, aside from the economy where the Obama administration did succeed in averting a total meltdown of the US and global financial system."

Some commentators have criticised Obama for what they perceive as excessive meddling in the economy. Others have criticised the president's \$787 billion economic stimulus package for not fixing the economy fast enough.

The news last week that banks and other financial firms are planning to bring back mega bonuses running into tens of billions of dollars, while the government continues to extend a massive bailout to the industry, has angered many people on Main Street. Goldman Sachs, which has repaid its bailout money, announced it is setting aside roughly \$16bn to pay out 2009 year-end bonuses.

White House senior adviser David Axelrod called the Wall Street bonuses "offensive". In New York last week Obama used a fundraiser speech to press the financial industry to work with Washington to pass

regulatory reform.

"If he can pass healthcare legislation, which I believe he can, and follow that up with financial regulation reform then we could soon be looking at a very different picture," said Stephen Hess, a veteran staffer of the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations and an adviser to presidents Ford and Carter.

Commentators are watching the upcoming gubernatorial elections in Virginia and New Jersey with interest, looking for signs that the populace is growing weary of waiting for the Democrats to make a mark. They include John Bolton, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and the US ambassador to the UN under George W Bush. He said: "A lot of Republicans believe at this point that Obama could well be a one-term president."

"You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." So said Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel last November, adding: "This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before." It quickly became the mantra of the Obama administration. But the president's desire to capitalise on both his popularity and the sense of urgency provided by the global economic meltdown and push through as many measures as possible has not been universally popular. According to a recent Pew poll, 45 per cent of Americans believe Obama is trying to address too many issues at once.

Though Obama divides opinion at home, he seems to be enjoying a prolonged honeymoon period in Europe. The Nobel Peace Prize, which surprised and delighted allies but further convinced his opponents that the American President was a European-style socialist, is an indication of the high status he still enjoys in Northern Europe. If only he could persuade the rest of the world to see it his way: Obama excites abuse from Iran, thinly disguised contempt from Moscow and exasperation from the Israelis, America's traditional allies in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the drawn-out wars in Iraq and Afghanistan show little sign of coming to an end soon, despite the new commander-in-chief.

Even his allies sometimes worry about his ubiquity. This is a president who leads from the front in televised press conferences, podcasts, YouTube broadcasts and interviews on talk shows. New York University journalism student Francis Poon said: "I think it's great that he's going on to YouTube, Twitter and Facebook and taking time to reach out to ordinary people."

The contrast with his tongue-tied predecessor could not be clearer but there are signs that much of America is wearying of the smooth, super-rational man leading them through this time of uncertainty, paranoia and fear. When he addressed schoolchildren recently, with an anodyne message which seemed to most people to amount to "stay in school and don't take drugs", he was criticised for politicising education. "He's set an entirely new standard in the African-American community, going in to schools to talk about the importance of getting an education and of marriage, things that needed to be discussed," said Kamarck.

Downtown and a million miles from Harlem, it's the lunchtime rush on Wall Street. Brokers, bankers and other finance workers negotiate their way through camera-toting tourists and the obligatory TV crews.

Outside the New York Stock Exchange, standing among a group of traders having a cigarette break, Pete Traynor said: "All Obama's done is go on a huge spending spree. Anyone could do that."

A recent Pew poll found that 54 per cent of Americans think it is too early to tell whether Barack Obama will be a successful president in the long run. The man who set himself up as the unifier of a divided nation still has much work to do to solve the country's many ills. Marylue Matmungal summed up the views of many. She said: "You can do a lot in four years. If he can pass universal healthcare, get the troops out of Afghanistan and get America back to work then I'll vote for him again."

AFGHANISTAN

AS PRESIDENT Obama and his war cabinet deliberate a new strategy for Afghanistan, polls show Americans evenly divided over whether he should send 40,000 more troops, as requested by the top US

commander on the ground. Most Democrats are opposed to sending more troops, while a majority of Republicans are in favour of honouring the request. The troop decision is one of the most important strategic security choices of Obama's term of office, with huge political implications.

The president, who has conducted a lengthy review of his Afghanistan strategy, has been accused of dithering by critics at a time when decisive action is required. The White House is expected to announce a decision on a revised strategy and troops within weeks.

Supporters praised the news last week that Afghan president Hamid Karzai had agreed to a run-off election as evidence of Obama's impact on the country. But a new Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 67 per cent of Americans said the administration lacked a clear plan for the war in Afghanistan.

ECONOMY

BY THE time Obama took office, the United States was in the midst of its biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression. He responded with a \$787 billion (£480bn) economic stimulus package, a mixture of education, health and infrastructure investment, tax cuts and expanded social security spending.

Some commentators have criticised Obama for excessive meddling in the economy. But with unemployment hitting 9.8 per cent last month, many people want to see the administration doing even more.

However, the president has significant support, with 59 per cent of Americans polled by the Pew Research Centre saying they have confidence in him to fix the economy.

After last week's news that banks and other financial firms are planning to pay out bonuses running into tens of billions of dollars, Obama called on the financial industry to work with Washington to pass regulatory reform. If he succeeds, the measure could be a major vote winner in 2012.

A survey by Sun Life Financial shows 65 per cent of Americans no longer believe they can retire when they had previously expected to, before the financial crisis hit.

RACE/EQUALITY

IN JULY, African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates jnr returned to his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to find the door had jammed. His subsequent arrest after a passer-by called police to report a break-in led to a feverish debate about race and policing, which quickly embroiled the president. It was a sign that race remains a hot topic in the US.

Obama's selection of Sonia Sotomayor as his nominee to the Supreme Court was a milestone, but her selection was dogged by a clip of her referring to herself as a "wise Latina woman".

It took former president Jimmy Carter to put into words what many Americans believe privately, when he said: "I think an overwhelming portion of the intensely demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black man."

Obama's approval rating in the black community remains high, but another minority group is becoming increasingly aggrieved – gays. The man who ran on a ticket pledging to overturn the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military, and whom many believed supported gay marriage, has been curiously silent on both issues. High-profile gay figures on the left (author Armistead Maupin) and right (historian Andrew Sullivan) have criticised him for his equivocation.

HEALTH REFORMS

OBAMA'S healthcare reform plans have inspired feverish rhetoric. From the "Death Panels" that some Republicans argued would be prematurely dispatching American OAPs to the afterlife, to this summer's

televised attacks on the British NHS, health has been responsible for raising the blood pressure of the American body politic. Angry town hall meetings on healthcare over the summer were blamed by many commentators for the sharp drop in Obama's favourability rating in recent months. In September, a Californian supporter of healthcare reform even had a finger bitten off by an opponent.

And yet Obama has already achieved more than any other president in pressing reform of the US healthcare system. On 13 October, a key hurdle was passed as the Senate finance committee voted to send its version of the legislation to the Senate floor after months of deliberations. The vote saw Republican Olympia Snowe break with her party to support the \$829 billion (£505bn) bill. Now Obama has set his sights on another Republican senator, Susan Collins, from Maine, who has indicated she may side with the Democrats on the issue. Technically, Obama has the 60 votes needed to break a filibuster in the Senate, if every Democrat and the chamber's two independents stick with him. But such a fragile margin, together with the president's desire for bipartisan support, could make Snowe and Collins crucial crossovers.

A recent Pew Research Centre poll found 50 per cent of Americans were confident in Obama's ability to deal with healthcare reform, while 48 per cent said they were not.

Currently, healthcare is being thrashed out in political horse-trading. One key issue is over the so called "public option" – a government-run health plan. Democrats are discussing a range of different models. Time will tell which one, if any, makes it to a full vote.

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