



THE LONG GAME

THE RIGHT CALLS HIM A SOCIALIST, THE LEFT SAYS HE SUCKS UP TO WALL STREET, AND INDEPENDENTS THINK HE'S A WIMP. **ANDREW SULLIVAN** ON HOW THE PRESIDENT MAY JUST END UP OUTSMARTING THEM ALL.



You hear it everywhere. Democrats are disappointed in the president. Independents have soured even more. Republicans have worked themselves up into an apocalyptic fervor. And, yes, this is not exactly unusual.

A president in the last year of his first term will always get attacked mercilessly by his partisan opponents, and also, often, by the feistier members of his base. And when unemployment is at remarkably high levels, and with the national debt setting records, the criticism will—and should be—even fiercer. But this time, with this preSident, something different has happened. It's not that I don't understand the critiques of Barack Obama from the enraged right and the demoralized left. It's that I don't even recognize their description of Obama's first term in any way. The attacks from both the right and the left on the man and his poliCiesaren't out of bounds. They're simply-empirically-wrong.

A caveat: I write this as an unabashed supporter of Obama from early 2007 on. I did so not as a liberal, but as a conservative-minded independent appalled by the Bush administration's record of war, debt, spending, and torture. I did not expect, or want, a messiah. I have one already, thank you very much. And there have been many times when I have disagreed with decisions Obama has made—to drop the Bowles-Simpson debt commission, to ignore the war crimes of the recent past, and to launch a war in Libya without Congress's sanction, to cite three. But given the enormity of what he inherited, and given what he explicitly promised, it remains simply a fact that Obama has delivered in a way that the unhinged right and purist left have yet to understand or absorb. Their short-term outbursts have missed Obama's long game—and why his reelection remains, in my view, as essential for this country's future as his original election in 2008.

The right's core case is that Obama has governed as a radical leftist attempting a "fundamental transformation" of the American way of life. Mitt Romney accuses the president of making the recession worse, of wanting to turn America into a European welfare state, of not believing in opportunity or free enterprise, of having no understanding of the real economy, and of apologizing for America and appeasing our enemies. According to Romney, Obama is a mortal threat to "the soul" of America and an empty suit who couldn't run a business, let alone a country.

Leave aside the internal incoherence—how could such an incompetent be a threat to anyone? None of this is even faintly connected to reality—and the record proves it. On the economy, the facts are these. When Obama took office, the United States was losing around 750,000 jobs a month. The last quarter of 2008 saw an annualized drop in growth approaching 9 percent. This was the most serious downturn

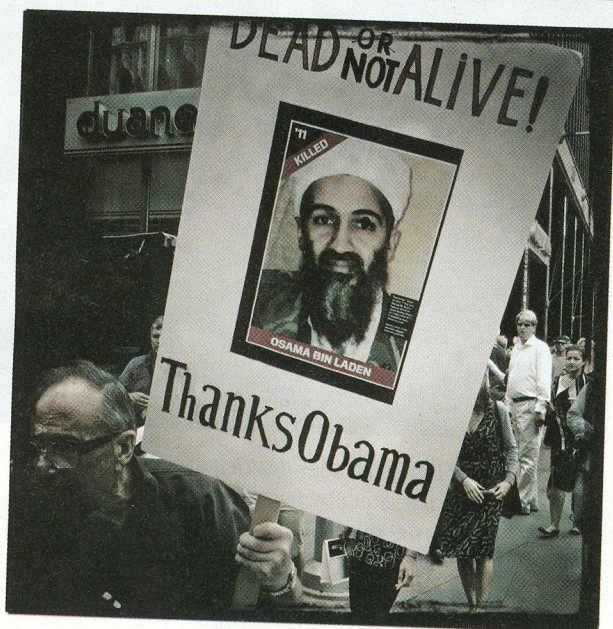
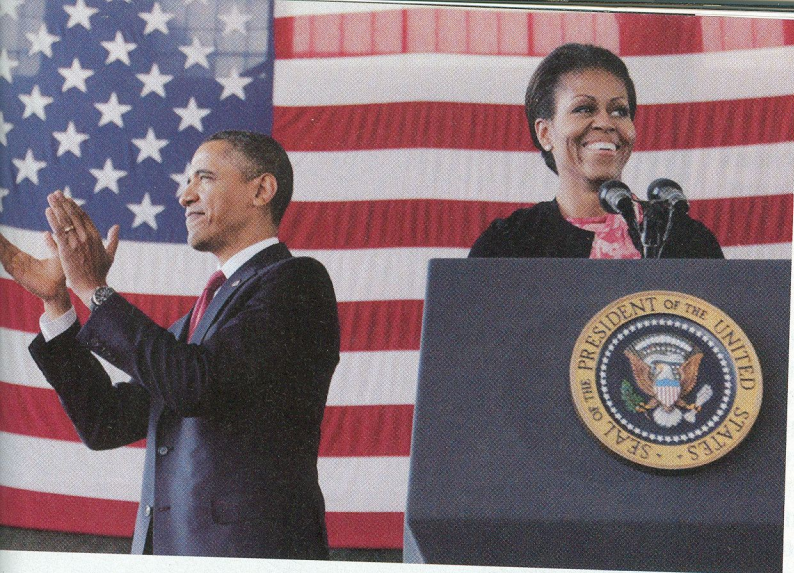
since the 1930s, there was a real chance of a systemic collapse of the entire global financial system, and unemployment and debt-lagging indicators were about to soar even further. No fair person can blame Obama for the wreckage of the next 12 months, as the financial crisis cut a swath through employment. Economies take time to shift course.

But Obama did several things at once: he continued the bank bailout begun by George W. Bush, he initiated a bailout of the auto industry, and he worked to pass a huge stimulus package of \$787 billion.

All these decisions deserve scrutiny. And in retrospect, they were far more successful than anyone has yet fully given Obama the credit for. The job collapse bottomed out at the beginning of 2010, as the stimulus took effect. Since then, the U.S. has added 2.4 million jobs. That's not enough, but it's far better than what Romney would have you believe, and more than the net jobs created under the entire Bush administration. In 2011 alone, 1.9 million private-sector jobs were created, while a net 280,000 government jobs were lost. Overall government employment has declined 2.6 percent over the past 3 years. (That compares with a drop of 2.2 percent during the early years of the Reagan administration.) To listen to current Republican rhetoric about Obama's big-government socialist ways, you would imagine that the reverse was true. It isn't.

The right claims the stimulus failed because it didn't bring unemployment down to 8 percent in its first year, as predicted by Obama's transition economic team. Instead, it peaked at 10.2 percent. But the 8 percent prediction was made before Obama took office and was wrong solely because it relied on statistics that guessed the economy was only shrinking by around 4 percent, not 9. Remove that statistical miscalculation (made by government and private-sector economists alike) and the stimulus did exactly what it was supposed to do. It put a bottom under the free fall. It is not an exaggeration to say it prevented a spiral downward that could have led to the Second Great Depression.

You'd think, listening to the Republican debates, that Obama has raised taxes. Again, this is not true. Not only did he agree not to sunset the Bush tax cuts for his entire first term, he has aggressively lowered taxes on most Americans. A third of the stimulus was tax cuts, affecting 95 percent of taxpayers; he has cut the payroll tax, and recently had to fight to keep it cut against Republican opposition. His spending record is also far better than his predecessor's. Under Bush, new poliCies on taxes and spending cost the



OBAMA IS A SHOW-DON'T TELL POLITICIAN. WHAT MATTERS TO HIM IS WHAT HE CAN GET DONE, NOT WHAT HE CAN TAKE CREDIT FOR.

taxpayer a total of \$5.07 trillion. Under Obama's budgets both past and projected, he will have added \$1.4 trillion in two terms. Under Bush and the GOP, nondefense discretionary spending grew by twice as much as under Obama. Again: imagine Bush had been a Democrat and Obama a Republican. You could easily make the case that Obama has been far more fiscally conservative than his predecessor—except, of course, that Obama has had to govern under the worst recession since the 1930s, and Bush, after the 2001 downturn, governed in a period of moderate growth. It takes work to increase the debt in times of growth, as Bush did. It takes much more work to constrain the debt in the deep recession Bush bequeathed Obama.

The great conservative bugaboo, Obamacare, is also far more moderate than its critics have claimed. The Congressional Budget Office has projected it will reduce the deficit, not increase it dramatically, as Bush's unfunded Medicare Prescription Drug benefit did. It is based on the individual mandate, an idea pioneered by the archconservative Heri-

tage Foundation, Newt Gingrich, and, of course, Mitt Romney, in the past. It does not have a public option; it gives a huge new client base to the drug and insurance companies; its health-insurance exchanges were also pioneered by the right. It's to the right of the Clintons' monstrosity in 1993, and remarkably similar to Nixon's 1974 proposal. Its passage did not preempt recovery efforts; it followed them. It needs improvement in many ways, but the administration is open to further reform and has agreed to allow states to experiment in different ways to achieve the same result. It is not, as Romney insists, a one-model, top-down prescription. Like Obama's Race to the Top education initiative, it sets standards, grants incentives, and then allows individual states to experiment. Embedded in it are also a slew of cost-reduction pilot schemes to slow health-care spending. Yes, it crosses the Rubicon of universal access to private health care. But since federal law mandates that hospitals accept all emergency-room cases requiring treatment anyway, we already obey that socialist principle—but in the most inef-

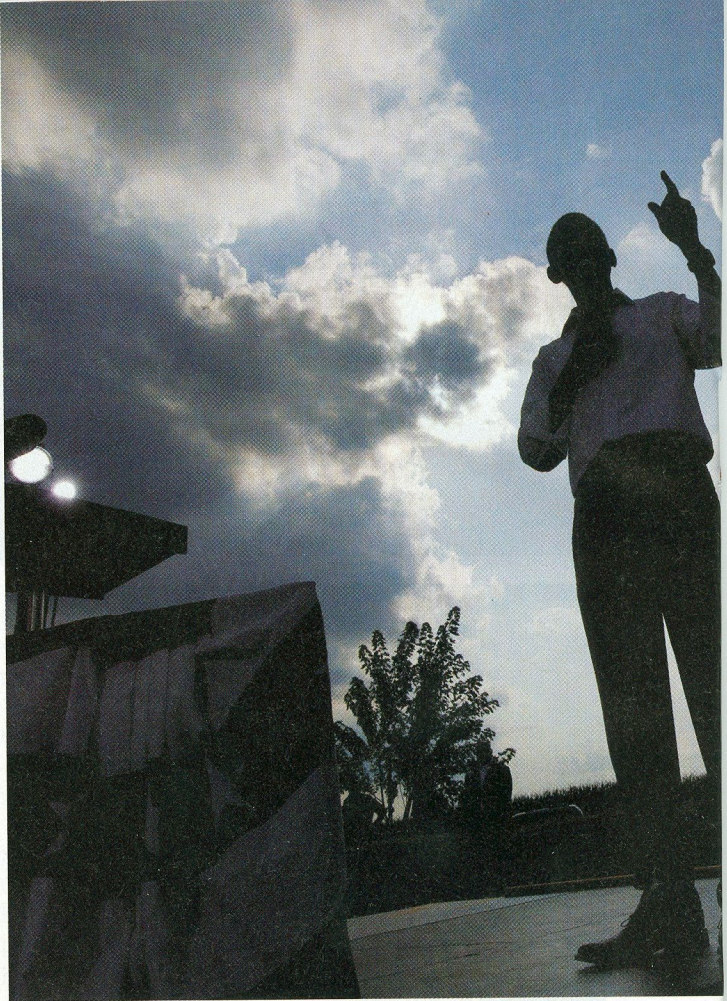
ficient way possible. Making 44 million current free-riders pay into the system is not fiscally reckless; it is fiscally prudent. It is, dare I say it, conservative.

On foreign policy, the right-wing critiques have been the most unhinged. Romney accuses the president of apologizing for America, and others all but accuse him of treason and appeasement. Instead, Obama reversed Bush's policy of ignoring Osama bin Laden, immediately setting a course that eventually led to his capture and death. And when the moment for decision came, the president overruled both his secretary of state and vice president in ordering the riskiest-but most ambitious-plan on the table. He even personally ordered the extra helicopters that saved the mission. It was a triumph, not only in killing America's primary global enemy, but in getting a massive trove of intelligence to undermine al Qaeda even further. If George Bush had taken out bin Laden, wiped out al Qaeda's leadership, and gathered a treasure trove of real intelligence by a daring raid, he'd be on Mount Rushmore by now. But where Bush talked tough and acted counterproductively, Obama has simply, quietly, relentlessly decimated our real enemies, while winning the broader propaganda war. Since he took office, al Qaeda's popularity in the Muslim world has plummeted.

Obama's foreign policy, like Dwight Eisenhower's or George H.W. Bush's, eschews short-term political hits for long-term strategic advantage. It is forged by someone interested in advancing American interests-not asserting an ideology and enforcing it regardless of the consequences by force of arms. By hanging back a little, by "leading from behind" in Libya and elsewhere, Obama has made other countries actively seek America's help and reappraise our role. As an antidote to the bad feelings of the Iraq War, it has worked close to perfectly.

But the right isn't alone in getting Obama wrong. While the left is less unhinged in its critique, it is just as likely to miss the screen for the pixels. From the start, liberals projected onto Obama absurd notions of what a president can actually do in a polarized country, where anything requires 60 Senate votes even to stand a chance of making it into law. They have described him as a hapless tool of Wall Street, a continuation of Bush in civil liberties, a cloistered elitist unable to grasp the populist moment that is his historic opportunity. They rail against his attempts to reach a Grand Bargain on entitlement reform. They decry his too-small stimulus, his too-weak financial reform, and his too-cautious approach to gay civil rights. They despair that he reacts to rabid Republican assaults with lofty appeals to unity and compromise.

They miss, it seems to me, two vital things. The first is the simple scale of what has been accomplished on issues liberals say they care about. A depression was averted. The bailout of the auto industry was amazingly successful. Even the bank bailouts have been repaid to a great extent by a recovering banking sector. The Iraq War-the issue that made Obama the nominee-has been ended on time and, vitally, with no troops left behind. Defense is being cut steadily, even as Obama has moved his own party away from a Pelosi-style reflexive defense of all federal entitlements. Under Obama, support for marriage equality and marijuana legalization has



crested to record levels. Under Obama, a crucial state, New York, made marriage equality for gays an irreversible fact of American life. Gays now openly serve in the military, and the Defense of Marriage Act is dying in the courts, undefended by the Obama Justice Department. Vast government money has been poured into noncarbon energy investments, via the stimulus. Fuel-emission standards have been drastically increased. Torture was ended. Two moderately liberal women replaced men on the Supreme Court. Oh, yes, and the liberal holy grail that eluded Johnson and Carter and Clinton, nearly universal health care, has been set into law. Politifact recently noted that of 508 specific promises, a third had been fulfilled and only two have not had some action taken on them. To have done all this while simultaneously battling an economic hurricane makes Obama about as honest a follow-through artist as anyone can expect from a politician.

What liberals have never understood about Obama is that he practices a show-don't-tell, long-game form of domestic politics. What matters to him is what he can get done, not what he can immediately take credit for. And so I railed against him for the better part of two years for dragging his feet on gay issues. But what he was doing was getting his Republican defense secretary and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs to move before he did. The man who made the case for repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" was, in the end, Adm. Mike Mullen. This took time-as did his painstaking change in the rule barring HIV-positive immigrants and tourists-but the slow and deliberate and unprovocative manner in which it was accomplished made the changes more durable. Not for

DOUG MILLS-NEW YORK TIMES-REDFIX



the first time, I realized that to understand Obama, you have to take the long view. Because he does.

Or take the issue of the banks. Liberals have derided him as a captive of Wall Street, of being railroaded by Larry Summers and Tim Geithner into a too-passive response to the recklessness of the major U.S. banks. But it's worth recalling that at the start of 2009, any responsible president's priority would have been stabilization of the financial system, not the exacting of revenge. Obama was not elected, despite liberal fantasies, to be a left-wing crusader. He was elected as a pragmatic, unifying reformist who would be more responsible than Bush.

And what have we seen? A recurring pattern. To use the terms Obama first employed in his inaugural address: the president begins by extending a hand to his opponents; when they respond by raising a fist, he demonstrates that they are the source of the problem; then, finally, he moves to his preferred position of moderate liberalism and fights for it without being effectively tarred as an ideologue or a divider. This kind of strategy takes time. And it means there are long stretches when Obama seems incapable of defending himself, or willing to let others to define him, or simply weak. I remember those stretches during the campaign against Hillary Clinton. I also remember whose strategy won out in the end.

This is where the left is truly deluded. By misunderstanding Obama's strategy and temperament and persistence, by grandstanding on one issue after another, by projecting unrealistic fantasies onto a candidate who never pledged a lib-

eral revolution, they have failed to notice that from the very beginning, Obama was playing a long game. He did this with his own party over health-care reform. He has done it with the Republicans over the debt. He has done it with the Israeli government over stopping the settlements on the West Bank and with the Iranian regime, by not playing into their hands during the Green Revolution, even as they gunned innocents down in the streets. Nothing in his first term—including the complicated multiyear rollout of universal health care—can be understood if you do not realize that Obama was always planning for eight years, not four. And if he is reelected, he will have won a battle more important than 2008: for it will be a mandate for an eight-year shift away from the excesses of inequality, overreach abroad, and reckless deficit spending of the last three decades. It will recapitalize him to entrench what he has done already and make it irreversible.

Yes, Obama has waged a war based on a reading of executive power that many civil libertarians, including myself, oppose. And he has signed into law the indefinite detention of U.S. citizens without trial (even as he pledged never to invoke this tyrannical power himself). But he has done the most important thing of all: excising the cancer of torture from military detention and military justice. If he is not reelected, that cancer may well return. Indeed, many on the right appear eager for it to return.

Sure, Obama cannot regain the extraordinary promise of 2008. We've already elected the nation's first black president and replaced a tongue-tied dauphin with a man of peerless eloquence. And he has certainly failed to end Washington's brutal ideological polarization, as he pledged to do. But most Americans in polls rightly see him as less culpable for this impasse than the GOP. Obama has steadfastly refrained from waging the culture war, while the right has accused him of a "war against religion." He has offered to cut entitlements (and has already cut Medicare), while the Republicans have refused to raise a single dollar of net revenue from anyone. Even the most austerity-driven government in Europe, the British Tories, are to the left of that. And it is this Republican intransigence—from the 2009 declaration by Rush Limbaugh that he wants Obama "to fail" to the Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's admission that his primary objective is denying Obama a second term—that has been truly responsible for the deadlock. And the only way out of that deadlock is an electoral rout of the GOP, since the language of victory and defeat seems to be the only thing it understands.

If I sound biased, that's because I am. Biased toward the actual record, not the spin; biased toward a president who has conducted himself with grace and calm under incredible pressure, who has had to manage crises not seen since the Second World War and the Depression, and who as yet has not had a single significant scandal to his name. "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle," George Orwell once wrote. What I see in front of my nose is a president whose character, record, and promise remain as grotesquely underappreciated now as they were absurdly hyped in 2008. And I feel confident that sooner rather than later, the American people will come to see his first term from the same calm, sane perspective. And decide to finish what they started. **nw**