Review of "The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects"

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It undermines Maureen Dowd’s entire reason for existence, but one can construct a perfectly good model of the Obama administration with no reference at all to the personality of the chief executive. One draws that lesson from this volume, especially Christopher Foreman’s essay on the administration’s domestic agenda. Foreman sees the Obama administration as primarily a product of (1) crisis—the inheritance of two wars and an economic crisis; (2) ambition—the policy preferences of the Democratic Party; and (3) polarization—an intensely partisan context. The Obama Presidency has the usual assets and liabilities of its genre: the edited volume reviewing a new administration at midterm. Inevitably, some important events fall between publication and the reader’s encounter, while others were clearly added in a hurry just before the book hit the presses. Robert Singh’s essay on Obama’s foreign policy must inevitably omit or give short shrift to three of Obama’s leading accomplishments: the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the ouster of Muammar el-Gadhafi, and the formal withdrawal from Iraq. David Yalof’s coverage of the judiciary could have benefited from the mounting evidence that Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan are reliable members of the liberal bloc on the Supreme Court.

Different authors bring different perspectives: Lawrence Jacobs’ essay on the interest-group politics of the administration offers the opinion of those critics on the left who think Obama has compromised too often, while James Campbell offers a countering view that Obama has positioned himself too far away from a basically center-right electorate. From the conclusion by Bert Rockman, Eric Waltenburg, and Colin Campbell, one finds Obama’s governing personality is characterized by a disciplined operating style and a resolve to enact the typical policy priorities of a center-left Democrat, even when purely political calculations might have dissuaded him. One does not find an Obama ideology or an Obama Doctrine or an Obama Treatment.

Obama famously ran as an agent of “change,” but that change took different forms in the minds of different individuals. For many voters, “change” meant ending the Iraq War and restoring the economy to health. The first has been accomplished, the second much less so. For the American Left that provided much of Obama’s base during the Democratic nomination struggle, “change” meant policy change that went well beyond the incrementalism of Bill Clinton. While this constituency has often been dissatisfied (especially with the response to the economic crisis and the maintenance of many Bush-era policies in the war on terror), Obama has been able to deliver on a remarkable array of progressive policy outcomes: a far-reaching economic stimulus package, greater regulation of financial markets, open service by lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the military, appointment of two liberal justices to the Supreme Court, and, above all, the long-sought enactment of universal health care coverage.

Essays by Foreman, Barbara Sinclair, and M. Stephen Weatherford all remind us that, during the two years of Democratic control of Capitol Hill, the 60-vote Senate stood as the most serious barrier to the enactment of Obama’s agenda. Without the persistent threat of a Republican filibuster, the stimulus would have been larger (and less dependent
on tax cuts), a second stimulus would have been passed when the first proved inadequate, health care reform would have included a "public option," the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau would have been more independent, and climate change legislation would have been enacted. But this could well have been more "change" than the American public would accept. After all, health care reform, Obama's signature accomplishment, proved unpopular enough to significantly add to Democratic losses at the 2010 midterm. The 60-vote Senate also meant that health care reform required the huge Democratic majorities produced in 2006-08; shelving it in the summer of 2009 (as many of Obama's advisors privately urged) might have been giving it up for many years.

For those who imagined partisan division to be the product of ephemeral misunderstandings, "change" meant the healing of the national wounds opened through three decades of polarized politics. This "change" has emphatically not been realized, and what one questions is whether this is an achievable goal. Outstanding essays by Gary Jacobson (on the American electorate) and Barbara Sinclair (on Congress) show that polarization is deeply rooted in the American polity. Indeed, Obama added to this division, even before he entered the White House, for reasons mostly beyond his control: his racial background, his exotic-sounding name, conservative media's need for a bogeyman. Jacobson, Foreman, and George Edwards all note that few Republicans had any reason, whether out of ideological predisposition or political self-interest, to bargain with Obama. Indeed, most hailed from constituencies where many voters saw Obama as a secret Muslim or a radical leftist (a perception that began long before Election Day), and where any let-up in opposition might lead to a Tea Party-backed primary challenge.

Another "change" that Barack Obama promised was ending "politics as usual" through employment of communication and mobilization techniques used in his presidential campaign. Diane Heith provides an excellent summary of how Obama employed "new media" both on the campaign trail and in the White House, before reaching a not-entirely-supported claim that his innovations have alienated the traditional press and, through it, the general public. While Obama put great faith in his rhetorical abilities, Edwards recites the grim evidence that presidents actually cannot move public opinion significantly under most cases. Andrew Rudalevige shows that Obama's ambition to create a "team of rivals" within the White House mostly has not come to fruition; but the president did produce a stable, pragmatically minded group of advisors that were generally able to present him with a variety of policy options.

Indeed, Rudalevige, Singh, and Joel Aberbach mostly paint a picture of an administration that has exuded button-down competence. Headed by an intelligent, "no-drama" chief executive comfortable with policy detail, staffed by political veterans (drawn mostly from the Clinton administration, Capitol Hill, and liberal think tanks) and technocrats (particularly in foreign policy and at the Treasury Department), the Obama administration sometimes seems like the Democratic answer to the George H. W. Bush presidency. (His foreign policy owes much to the first Bush's realism and has abandoned the second's grandiose ambition). "No-drama Obama" especially compares favorably to the sturm und drang of Bill Clinton's first two years. But in M. Stephen Weatherford's opinion, Obama has produced legislative outcomes as significant as those achieved by Lyndon Johnson or Ronald Reagan. He also inherited crises as serious as
those faced by Gerald Ford, with the mediocre approval ratings and bad luck (a Japanese earthquake! An oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico!) to match.

A book as wide-ranging as *The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects* inevitably has some weaknesses. One encounters the same events repeatedly, most notably, the legislative history of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Given that Obama had never served in an executive position, and drew much of his staff from Capitol Hill, the criticism that he has been a “legislative presidency,” inattentive to the other branches of government, deserves some attention. Perhaps there could have been more discussion of some areas of economic affairs, including housing (normally a backwater, but no longer), international economic policy, and, above all, monetary policy and the Federal Reserve.

Barack Obama has brought much “change,” but far less “hope” than advertised. While the economic stimulus headed off the worst effects, recovery from the Great Recession remains agonizingly slow. Shortly after the election, Secretary of the Treasury-designate Timothy Geithner allegedly told Obama that the economic crisis would constrain him, that his legacy would be “preventing the second Great Depression.” Obama responded, “That’s not enough for me” (Jackie Calmes, “Spotlight Fixed on Geithner, A Man Obama Sought to Keep,” New York Times, November 12, 2011). At times, both Edwards and Campbell suggest that Obama might have chosen to abandon “ambition” in favor of a tighter focus on “crisis.” But instead he pursued an expansive agenda, and accomplished much of it, even at great political cost. To use the phrasing of Sidney Hook, history seemed to cast Obama as an *eventful* leader, even as he yearned to be an *event-making* one. History’s verdict on Obama’s choices has yet to be written, but the first draft should come in November 2012.

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Sara L. Sale’s biography of Bess Truman is the latest in the Modern First Ladies series edited by Lewis L. Gould. Surprisingly, this is the first biography from a historian dedicated solely to Bess Truman, and only the second overall, after daughter Margaret Truman’s *Bess W. Truman* (Macmillan, 1986). Using a wide array of secondary sources along with correspondence and oral histories from Truman’s staffers and friends, Sale argues that historians have overlooked the importance of this First Lady until recently. Despite Bess’s “passion for anonymity,” she was “one of the most influential” presidential spouses (p. 103). Sale supports her argument effectively in this concise work that will appeal primarily to the general public but will also interest scholars of Harry Truman’s presidency.

*Bess Wallace Truman* is organized into six chapters. The book opens with a summary of Bess’s early life, her courtship with Harry, and their life together from the