

Obama
and his
family on
election
night, 2008

OBAMA: PASS OR FAIL?

When a president runs for a second term, the election is usually about the job he's done so far. What grade will voters give President Obama?

BY DÁVID E. SANGER IN WASHINGTON, D.C.



It seems hard to remember now that election night a little more than three years ago, when tens of thousands of people gathered in Chicago's Grant Park to hear President-elect Barack Obama declare that "change has come to America."

The excitement that the 2008 election would lead to a new era in which lawmakers would heed Obama's call for bipartisan compromise and tackle the country's biggest problems has largely evaporated. Today, the White House, Senate Democrats, and House Republicans seem more divided than ever, unable to agree on what should be done to revive the economy or to cut the country's huge debt. And President Obama's approval rating has fallen to 44 percent, which, history tells us, is in the danger zone for an incumbent seeking re-election.

That's not to say President Obama can't win a second term in November. So far, very little about the Obama presidency has followed the usual

political rules. When he announced his candidacy in 2007, it seemed unlikely the United States was about to elect its first black president, much less a senator from Illinois with just two years in office.

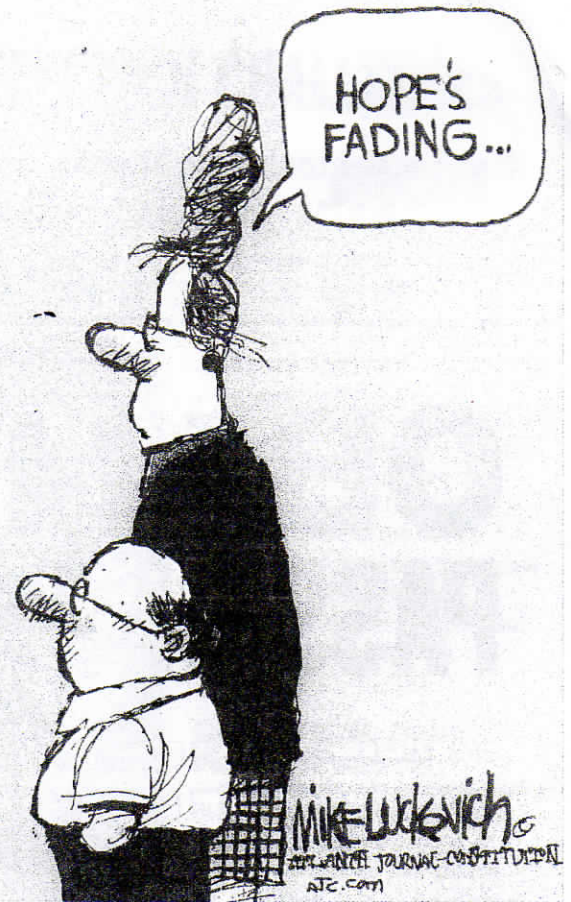
But Obama's historic 2008 campaign captured the imagination of millions of Americans, and young people in particular, who turned out in record numbers and helped propel him to the White House. The conditions facing the country were equally historic when he took office in January 2009: The U.S. was reeling from the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression, not to mention fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Expectations were so high; emotions were so high," says Lee Edwards, of the conservative Heritage Foundation, which has been among Obama's biggest critics. "Once the honeymoon was over and we got down to living together, that's proved to be a whole different thing."

Despite the widespread frustration, the president has actually chalked up a number of accomplishments. Obama took a huge gamble on trying to rescue the U.S. auto industry—loaning billions to General Motors and Chrysler—and it seems to have paid off. Thousands of jobs were saved, especially in states like Michigan and Ohio, and some automakers are hiring again. He eventually pushed health care reform through Congress, and his foreign policy record probably deserves an A-. It was on Obama's watch that American commandos found and killed Osama bin Laden, the world's most wanted terrorist, and he brought U.S. troops home from Iraq.

'It's the Economy, Stupid!'

But overshadowing all of these accomplishments is the president's inability to get the economy back on track. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, at 8.6 percent. For young people, many of whom are



graduating from college with record levels of student-loan debt and having a hard time finding jobs, the picture is even worse: The unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds is 18 percent.

As the 2012 elections approach, the Republicans vying for their party's nomination—including Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Perry—are arguing that Obama has failed at his No. 1 job: putting Americans back to work.

Railing about a broken economy has always been a powerful way for challengers to defeat incumbent presidents (see "Re-election Challenges," p. 15). In 1980, when Ronald Reagan ran against President Jimmy Carter as inflation was crippling the U.S. economy, he famously asked voters, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" In 1992, during another recession, "It's the economy, stupid!" became the catchphrase of Bill Clinton's successful campaign against President George H.W. Bush (the father of George W.

Bush, President Obama's predecessor).

In addition to the economy, Obama's problem now is that many of the initiatives he campaigned on in 2008 are dead in the water.

Bringing down the national debt?

Republicans and Democrats can't agree on how to do it: Republicans want budget cuts only, while Democrats insist on also raising taxes on the rich.

Dealing with climate change? Obama didn't press for legislation to reduce

WHAT VOTERS WILL HEAR

Some key points President Obama and his Republican opponent are likely to make during the campaign

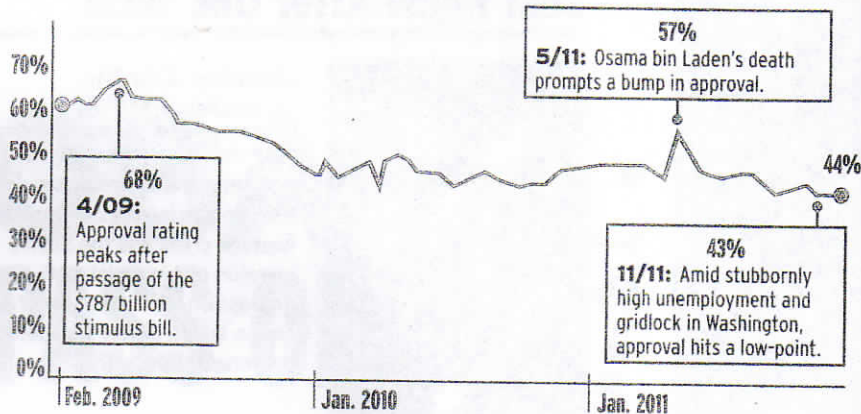
Barack Obama

- Prevented economic meltdown
- Rescued U.S. auto industry
- Passed health care reform
- Killed Osama bin Laden
- Ended Iraq War; making progress in Afghanistan

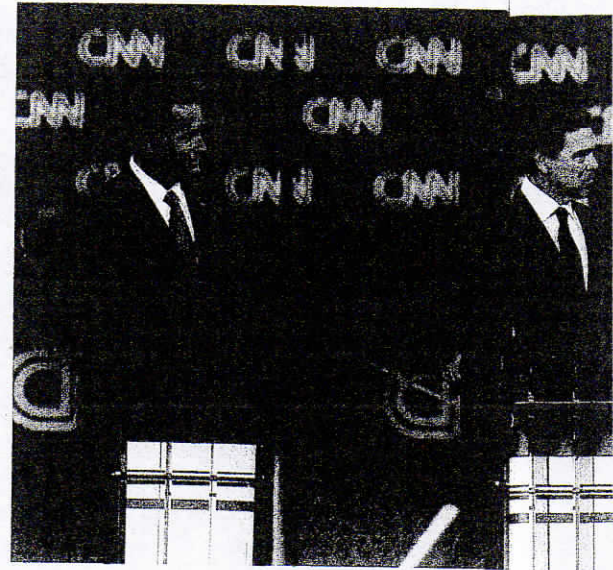
Republican Opponent

- Economy still struggling
- Government spending and growth out of control
- Washington gridlock persists
- Weak response to nuclear threats from Iran & North Korea

Obama's Approval Rating Percentage of Americans who say they approve of how the president is handling his job



SOURCE: NEW YORK TIMES/CBS NEWS POLLS



carbon emissions during his first two years in office—when Democrats controlled the House and the Senate. Now it's too late, to the delight of conservatives and the despair of Obama's supporters.

Shutting down the Guantánamo prison? Two years past Obama's self-imposed deadline, the prison for terrorism suspects remains in operation—and is likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. (See *Debate*, p. 30)

A 'Do Nothing Congress'

In a troubling sign for Obama's re-election bid, many of the young people who dedicated themselves to his 2008 campaign are more lukewarm in 2012.

"I don't have as much enthusiasm this time as I did last time," says Sarah Farr, 20, who volunteered tirelessly for Obama four years ago when she was a student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

"His challenge will be to inspire young people again," says E.J. Dionne of the Brookings Institution. "I don't think anyone who's been elected has depended more on the votes of young people than Barack Obama did."

Obama's strategy now appears to be to blame Republicans for running a "do-nothing Congress," an argument that

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President Harry S. Truman (also behind in the polls after he succeeded FDR) made in 1948, and squeaked by to re-election. Obama has also begun adopting some of the language of the Occupy Wall Street movement, railing against the "one percent"—the nation's top earners—who, the president says, need to pay "their fair share" in taxes to help reduce America's debt.

Other recent presidents who seemed to be in trouble have come back to win second terms. In fact, incumbents usually do win re-election, often because their opponents can't command the world stage or raise huge amounts of money as easily. Obama is an impressive campaign fund-raiser—this could be the first billion-dollar campaign—and he has a well-established grassroots organization.

Presidential historian Michael Beschloss says anyone who's pointing to high unemployment numbers and saying Obama is finished will discover that statistics don't tell the whole story.

"He's going to have a very tough time," Beschloss says, "but tell me who the opponent is going to be."

So far, Republican voters haven't settled on a front-runner. Conservative voters, who are more likely than moderates to vote in primaries and caucuses, aren't excited about Mitt Romney, who had a fairly liberal record as governor of

Massachusetts and is trying to become the first Mormon in the Oval Office. And many Republicans fear that former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who has recently surged in the polls, is too volatile to run a disciplined campaign against Obama.

Foreign policy could turn out to be a bright spot for the president. Here, Obama has a far better story to tell than he does about the economy.

Bin Laden's death was a triumph for the C.I.A., which had been hunting him since even before he pulled off the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington that killed almost 3,000 people. Obama made the risky decision to send in commandos to find him—and, if he did not surrender, kill him. Other key Al Qaeda leaders have been killed or captured, and the terror group that plotted the 9/11 attacks appears to be reeling.

Foreign Policy Successes

Obama seems to have carefully navigated his way through the mess of the Arab Spring, the uprisings that have thrown out several of America's strongman allies in the Middle East, including Egypt. And Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi was forced out of office with the help of American airpower.

Obama can also point to winding down the war in Iraq, in which more than 4,000 Americans have been killed

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MICHAEL GRECCO/GETTY IMAGES (CARTER); JEAN LOUIS ATLAN/CORBIS (BUSH); BETTMANN/CORBIS (REAGAN); WALLY MCNAMEE/CORBIS (CLINTON)



Potential Nominees:
Republican candidates (left to right) Mitt Romney, Rick Perry, and Newt Gingrich at a debate in November

RE-ELECTION CHALLENGES

How four recent presidents fared with voters after tough first terms

Sent Home After One Term

Jimmy Carter Democrat; 1977-81

With "inflation" crippling the U.S. economy and Carter appearing weak in the face of the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the overall impression for voters was of a nation adrift. Carter was defeated by Ronald Reagan in 1980.



George H.W. Bush Republican; 1989-93

Bush's popularity plummeted when the economy soured. It didn't help that he had broken his "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge as part of a deal to reduce the federal deficit. Bush was defeated by Bill Clinton in 1992.



Recovered to Win Re-election

Ronald Reagan Republican; 1981-89

Despite high unemployment during a severe recession, Reagan "stayed the course," and gave the steps he'd taken to boost the economy time to work. The economy rebounded, and he was re-elected in a landslide in 1984.



Bill Clinton Democrat; 1993-2001

After his failed attempt to reform health care and a Republican takeover of Congress, Clinton shifted his focus to more centrist issues like welfare reform. He was easily re-elected in 1996.



and which cost U.S. taxpayers nearly \$1 trillion. Meanwhile, U.S. casualties continue in Afghanistan, where Obama sent additional troops to try to turn the tide. Obama has said all U.S. troops will be withdrawn by 2014.

Ending the war in Afghanistan without letting the country slip back into the hands of the radical Taliban or other extremists will be just one of many challenges the president—whoever it is—will face in the coming years. Other critical issues will include the rise of China, Iran's nuclear threat, immigration reform, and, of course, the economy.

In the end, many voters won't cast their ballots on economic growth rates, or fears about China's rise, or even in protest of a dysfunctional Congress. They'll hold a referendum on the president's performance, perhaps voting more on emotion than on facts.

Stephen Wayne, a professor of government at Georgetown University, says that it's hard for any president seeking re-election to live up to the idealized image of themselves that they presented during their first campaign.

"The real star on the horizon for President Obama is that soon he's going to be running against a real person," says Wayne. "Then he's not going to be compared to the 2008 Obama; he'll be compared to a particular Republican—who has strengths and weaknesses." ◊

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