

The First 100 Days: A Whole That Is Greater Than Its Parts

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The first hundred days of the Obama presidency have been an extraordinary time for our country and our president. Evaluating the president with a letter grade, even for an old academic like me, seems like a banal approach to a rich and complex story, but the world, and even the Huffington Post, is not UC Santa Cruz in the 1980s anymore, so I will do my best. Before evaluating the president, it is helpful to know what courses he took during this period. As I see it, President Obama can be most usefully evaluated for his work in three courses: Foreign Policy, The Economy and Politics. None of these were easy courses, but President Obama, on balance, has done well in most of them.

Foreign Policy

President Obama may have gotten a little lucky in this area. The test for which, in Vice-President Biden's unfortunate words from the campaign, we were supposed to gird our loins, never really came. The war in Gaza ended before Obama became president; the North Korean missile landed harmlessly in the sea; Russia and Georgia did not go to war again; Al Qaeda did not try another terrorist attack in the US. All of this made Obama's first hundred days, while not without incident or concern, somewhat easier.

In foreign policy, some of the biggest successes are often the hardest to see because they are preventative. Obama's reintroducing America tour, in which he has been ably assisted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, built up a reservoir of goodwill towards the US which will be an extremely valuable asset as the hard work of foreign policy goes on. Already, for example, Obama's new popularity has made it much tougher for other countries to blame the US for this global recession, which is what many leaders from Moscow to Europe and beyond would like to do.

The jury is still out on a number of other issues. The administration's efforts to reset relations with Russia have not been sufficiently fleshed out; and in this particular case the devil is very much in the details, but already the administration seems to have cooled tensions with Russia from what they were last fall when many spoke about the possibility of a new Cold War.

Major issues like Afghanistan or AfPak as it is increasingly frequently called, are not showing marked improvement. There is a real likelihood that region will suffer from increased state collapse, more power in Islamist hands and a more tenuous security environment. It is too early to tell whether or not Obama's plan of increased US presence in Afghanistan will work, but there is reason for concern.

The broader Middle East remains a very difficult challenge. The administration seems to be moving toward some kind of dialog with Iran, but it is not yet known what will come of that. The notion that the surge in Iraq worked is a bit of conventional wisdom left over from the previous

administration, but it is still not clear what that means. Iraq could move forward towards stability but it could just as easily collapse entirely. Obama's policy towards Iraq is also suitably ambiguous, combining a drawdown of troops with a commitment to stay in Iraq for several years.

Venezuela, Israel/Palestine, Cuba, Darfur and China are among the other foreign policy challenges with which this administration has begun to grapple. Clearly foreign policy is a four year colloquium which is difficult to grade after only the first semester. However, Obama's major successes include the G20, laying the foundation for useful dialogs with a number of allies and non-allies, keeping our country safe from the attack which many Republicans warned would be inevitable if Barack Obama became president, and reinvigorating key alliances. These are important, but not earth shattering accomplishments. Obama has not yet achieved any of the almost impossible tasks such as bringing peace between Israel and Palestine, stabilizing Iraq or Afghanistan or creating a working relationship between Russia, the US and Europe, so we will have to wait a while before giving a final grade. **Preliminary grade: B+**

The Economy

This is the most difficult area on which to evaluate president Obama. He has some substantial accomplishments here which are the most significant and concrete of his presidency. The stimulus bill which he passed in the first weeks of his presidency, while perhaps not big enough, was within the context of what was possible, an impressive and helpful piece of legislation. The stimulus bill was the biggest legislative accomplishment in the first year of a presidency since at least the Reagan administration. More importantly, it set a tone that the Obama administration was going to confront the recession directly and began to put money into the economy in a useful way.

Unfortunately, the rest of Obama's economic program has not been as strong. Timothy Geithner's Treasury Department has failed to bring vision or a meaningful plan to righting our deeply troubled banking and finance sectors. Not surprisingly, the administration's biggest problems, thus far, have been in this area. Geithner's Wall Street background, while clearly providing him with a fluent understanding of finance, has made it extremely difficult for him to understand the depth of the problem or to think creatively about solutions. Geithner has continued to shovel money at the banking and finance sector while being far less enthusiastic about holding the banks accountable or implementing any serious structural changes and reforms in those areas. This has been a real drag on an administration which began with such a positive stimulus bill.

Obama's performance on the economy has also been disappointing because he has only vaguely touched on the major, if often overlooked, question of what comes next. Once we staunch the economic bleeding, we need to build the next American economy, one that is fairer, less environmentally destructive and based on sounder economic thinking than the one which recently collapsed. It is not clear the administration has done any real work in this area.

It is difficult to give Obama a grade on the economy because he has had some very impressive accomplishments and some real disappointments. **Grade: B**

Politics

If I may depart from the extended academic metaphor, Obama has hit it over the fence here.

Doing the politics well is not a trivial or unimportant thing. This work has been part of the foundation for all of the accomplishments Obama has achieved in his first 100 days and will contribute to all the future successes of his administration.

Practically speaking, Obama has two major political accomplishments. First, he has reduced the Republicans, or perhaps more accurately, stood by as the Republican have reduced themselves, to a fringe party of backward looking, red baiting, tea party throwing, hate mongers, led by angry, belligerent, but highly compensated media figures, bizarrely incompetent governors and assorted other extremists. It is possible that Obama has been lucky in the opposition he has faced both during his campaign and during his presidency, but a more realistic look at the picture must give credit to the President as well as to Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod and others who have succeeded in ensuring that the President is perceived as a moderate, never taking the bait from the extremists and continuing the magical hold that the Obama White House still seems to have for so many Americans.

Obama's second major political accomplishment is less obvious, but perhaps more significant. Obama, like the last two Democratic presidents before him, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, got elected with substantial Democratic majorities in both houses of congress. Clinton and Carter, however, were unable to exploit the political situation to push through any meaningful legislation. Instead, they did not work well with congress, alienated many of its leaders and had nothing to show for the first parts of their presidencies. The Carter and Clinton presidencies are, of course, history, but the Obama administration read that history well and did not repeat those mistakes. Instead, the administration has worked well with congress and passed at least one very significant piece of legislation with more on the way. Moreover, relations between the Democratic White House and the Democratic controlled congress have remained strong. Fears that Rahm Emanuel would try to strong arm congress have proven unfounded as Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid have both positioned themselves as supporters of the White House, but held on to their institutional independence.

Grading Obama on the politics is easy. **Grade A**

Overall

Placing Obama's first 100 days in context is important because for the first 100 days, at least, the whole outweighs the sum of its parts. Not only have Obama's first 100 days been by far the best of any president of my lifetime, but they began not a day too soon. The country was reeling economically, directionless in foreign policy, losing credibility and support abroad and suffering a crisis of confidence at home when Obama became president. Obama has begun to turn all of this around. Moreover, even though Obama has not been a constant optimist in the White House he has restored confidence both abroad and domestically as most Americans believe our new president is, for the most part, leading us in the right directions. There have also been a range of less high profile issues including stem cell research, national service, allowing science back into policy and, frankly, bringing a sense of normalcy back to Washington, for which Obama also deserves credit. Ultimately, what stops Obama from getting an A is his approach to addressing finance and banking issues, so his final grade is A-.