

Barack Obama and Ernie Shore

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: January 11, 2009 | 08:50 AM (EST)

Perhaps the best model for Barack Obama as he begins his presidency is an obscure pitcher named Ernie Shore who threw his last pitch in 1920 and is remembered by only the most intense baseball historians and sabrmetricians. More than 90 years ago, Ernie Shore was brought in to a game after the starting pitcher, whose first name coincidentally was George, had give up a walk to start the game. Shore proceeded to pick the runner off first base and retire the next 26 batters, essentially throwing a perfect game. This remains the greatest single relief pitching performance in baseball history and a task comparable to the one that now faces Obama. To continue the baseball imagery, if George H.W. Bush was, as Jim Hightower famously described him, a man who was born on first base and thinks he hit a triple, than Barack Obama is like a relief pitcher who was brought in to pitch with his team down by about ten runs and is somehow expected to lead his team to victory.

Cleaning up after George W Bush was never going to be easy. When Obama won his historic election in November, many analysts and observers were quick to point out the daunting challenges facing President-Elect Obama. Those voices sound almost quaint now. The challenges which were facing the country in November pale compared to what Obama will have to confront when he takes office next week. Today, those halcyon pre-Madoff, Mumbai attack, Operation Cast Lead, Russian gas crisis days, when the condition of the economy was merely disastrous rather than catastrophic, feel like a distant and simpler time. While these events have occurred around the world, President Bush seemed to be invigorated by Obama's victory and has stepped up his unique blend of arrogance and obliviousness during the last two months of his presidency.

Accordingly, the Obama administration will take office with less room for error than any administration in recent history. The consequences for making the kind of mistakes, such as, failing to pass a major and highly anticipated piece of legislation, getting bogged down in difficult confirmation hearings, not heeding serious warnings from the outgoing administration or taking a few months to figure out how the presidency really works, that presidents often make early in their first term, will be far more dire for Obama than for any of the last few presidents.

It is not just Obama, however, who will have to operate under these unforgiving circumstances, but the Democratic congress confronts a similar challenge. The good news, however, is that this moment is an extraordinary opportunity for the party. The Democratic Party dominated American politics for a generation, and congress for almost three generations, because, current right wing ranting notwithstanding, of the successful work Franklin Roosevelt did in ending the depression and ushering in a period of sustained prosperity and restructuring our foreign policy. If Obama is able to achieve success even approaching that of Roosevelt, the benefits for the Democratic Party will be enormous.

If, however, Obama is unable to pass a stimulus bill, reform health care or achieve other significant goals, it will be unfair to place all the blame on the White House. Congress will have earned some of the blame as well. This means that the Democratic leadership in congress will have to seek a balance between working with the administration to pass legislation while maintaining their own institutional strength and independence. When the Democratic congress and president were unable to work together in 1993, it was the Democrats in congress who paid for it as they lost control of both houses of congress in the midterm elections of 1994. President Clinton, however, went on to win reelection handily in 1996, put together, on balance, a pretty good presidency and solidify his family's control of the party for almost a generation.

The stakes are much higher this time as failure to work together now, or to provide genuine solutions to the myriad problems we face, may not yield such immediate electoral reprisals for either congress or the president, but will probably cause more serious longer term problems for the Democratic Party. The next few months represent a test for the relevance of the Democratic Party. If the party demonstrates an inability to govern, yet again, the question of what is the point of the Democratic Party will not be easily avoided. Like most things in politics, and life, this doesn't feel fair. It was after all, Bush and the Republicans, who got us in this 10 run hole, to return to the baseball analogy, but who needs a relief pitcher who takes a ten run deficit and turns it into a 13 run deficit, even if he is better than the guy before him.