

economic opinion-makers would eventually result in predictable financial disaster. Was it mere greed as the Dow went up and up? Or was it driven by the repetitive manic-depressive cycle that the U.S. and perhaps the world economy seem to regularly need, a modern potlatch designed to purge us of our "sins" of pleasure and prosperity as suggested by Lloyd deMause some 35 years ago, or is it a pattern driven by the periodic need for us to seek a fantasy "Heroic Savior," or both?

No doubt the economic crisis helped Obama get elected. There is of course more to it than that. One central role of the American media's portrayal of Obama in 2007-2008 was as the nation's Savior, which I wrote about in *Clio's Psyche's* March 2009 issue. In times of crisis, groups both large and small typically look toward a charismatic leader from outside to arrive from nowhere to "save" the group. In 2008, Obama was the "One."

Typically (and predictably) this can only last until the leader demonstrates the impossibility of resolving everyone's problems and his halo begins to fade—the typical decline of presidential popularity as chartered by poll takers and pundits. One question that needs answering is: Why was Obama willing to take on this group-fantasy role in the first place?

Additionally, the group called the U.S. made sure the process would accelerate by placing in Obama's path a group of non-compromising Tea Party Republicans devoted to sabotaging his policies. Why did we collectively create such a congressional impasse? Thus, it is not only Obama's failure to recognize that his typical administrative style as Mediator wasn't going to work. It was also that naïve misjudgment (his "blind spot") joined by a collective wish from the electorate to make sure he wouldn't succeed, or would succeed only in part.

In addition, part of Obama's decline in popularity was of his own devising as he played the role of accomplice by shifting the policy focus from saving the country's economy to taking on a difficult and hate-producing effort to create medical insurance for everyone. That may be an admirable goal for the U.S. in the long run, but was a tactical disaster in the short run, one that helped to tarnish Obama's rapidly fading halo. This change in focus was Obama's

personal decision, as made clear by Professor Fuchsman, decided on his own and against the advice of his advisors.

Was it arrogance, narcissism, idealism, his quest to be fondly remembered by posterity? Or was it self-defeating behavior, an arrogant narcissism tinged with idealism driven by a need to become again the Outsider destined to prove the racist critics right? It seems to me there's more here than meets the eye. What is needed is a full-scale study of Obama's long-term behavior from childhood that may help reveal deeper patterns, a full psychobiographical analysis based on documentary evidence that disentangles the combination of complicated motives at work in him, which goes beyond the scope of a symposium paper.

Professor Fuchsman makes a good start on that enterprise, highlighting what were clearly significant abandonment issues, father-relationship issues, maternal issues, and matters of identity and race, both within Obama and impacting him from the outside world. Google "Obama as Hitler" to be shocked at the extraordinary number of vile images produced over the years to gauge what millions of our fellow Americans are really feeling. How does he handle this vituperative onslaught? Where is the anger, where is the ego-strength that allows him to soldier on? Ken Fuchsman's paper, like all good symposium pieces, raises these questions in me and starts us on a long-term journey of discovery.

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## Obama's Political and Institutional Constraints

Brian D'Agostino—Int. Psychohistorical Association

Ken Fuchsman's article presents two clear theses. First, that President Obama did not adequately meet the challenge of the Great Recession and second, that he was too accommodating to his

political adversaries. After making a well-documented case for this picture, the article concludes with possible psychobiographical explanations for Obama's behavior.

In my opinion, the limitations of this article apply to much psychohistorical writing. While it is hard enough to determine the unconscious motivations of behavior, the psychohistorian has the added burden of first establishing the pattern of behavior to be explained. If we are mistaken about the pattern, as I believe is the case with this article, then we end up explaining things that don't exist.

The first task in any undertaking of this sort is to identify a fair and meaningful standard against which presidential performance can be measured. All presidents operate under political and institutional constraints that must be assessed before we can analyze the actions and omissions of the individual holding the office. Was it politically possible for Obama to enact more robust policies for ameliorating the 2009 economic crisis? Fuchsman answers yes on the grounds that the Democrats held both houses of Congress in the first two years of Obama's presidency. I am less sure how to answer this question, but there are two other factors that must be considered.

First, a governing party needs more than both houses of Congress and the White House before it can enact legislation with a free hand. It also needs a supermajority of 60 votes in the Senate in order to override a filibuster. Given the implacable hostility of the Republicans from day one toward the Obama administration—which Fuchsman himself notes—the threat of filibusters was a major constraint on the President's legislative agenda. He was held back further by a substantial block of conservative Democrats elected in red states who, for all intents and purposes, vote like Republicans on legislation.

Second, policy-making is restricted by powerful special interests. Most notably, as a candidate Obama received more campaign money from Wall Street than John McCain did in 2008. It is hard to know how important a role this money played in the election outcome, but policy-makers cannot ignore important campaign donors when they govern. This is a sad commentary on the coun-

try's system of plutocracy, but it is virtually a law of American politics at the present time. It is not an accident that Obama chose Larry Summers, a neoliberal economist with ties to Wall Street, to head his economic team, rather than someone like Joseph Stiglitz or Paul Krugman, who would have fashioned more interventionist economic policies.

Given all these constraints, could Obama nevertheless have assembled a more progressive policy team and enacted more robust anti-recessionary legislation than he in fact did? Perhaps, especially given the popular opprobrium towards Wall Street that prevailed when Obama assumed office. That said, Fuchsman's comparison of Obama unfavorably with Franklin D. Roosevelt is not a fair one. In the 1930s, there was considerably less plutocracy in American politics, the unemployment rate was significantly higher, and there was a militant left that included a largely organized industrial working class, small but highly active socialist and communist parties, and popular politicians like Huey Long calling for the redistribution of wealth, all in the larger ideological context of an international communist movement led by the Soviet Union, an emerging superpower.

No such tidal wave of political pressure for systemic reform has existed in the United States in recent years. On the contrary, a president seeking such reform must contend with an ideological climate shaped by more than three decades of relentless Republican government bashing. Obama's militant opposition came from the Tea Party and from pundits like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, not from the left. Fuchsman's comparison of Obama with Roosevelt is both unfair and ahistorical.

The article's other thesis is that the President was blindsided by the implacable nature of his political opposition and failed to respond appropriately. This overlooks the fact that Obama ran in 2008 and 2012 on a post-partisan rhetoric and was elected on that basis. The thesis also assumes, problematically in light of the foregoing analysis, that Obama had the political luxury of making a confrontational partisan response to Republican intransigence while still being able to get his legislative agenda passed.

There are two reasons, I would argue, why Obama's best

strategy was in fact to seek bipartisan cooperation, which is precisely what he did. First, in so doing, he positioned himself on high moral ground as the champion of a post-partisan ethos that the electorate wanted, leaving his adversaries in the mud of partisan obstructionism. Opinion data suggests that this worked, since voters re-elected Obama in 2012 in part on the perception that the Republicans, not the President, were more responsible for the gridlock in Washington.

Second, a bipartisan strategy was the best hope for enlisting the cooperation of some Republican lawmakers, which would both enable him to pass legislation and divide the Republican Party. There was no way to know *a priori* how difficult this would be, but in any case it was successful enough that Obama was able to get the Affordable Care Act through Congress. This legislation was the largest and most significant expansion of the welfare state since Johnson's Great Society programs, an achievement that had eluded the Clinton administration. It is unlikely it could have been achieved had Obama adopted a strategy of partisan confrontation.

Given the picture I have sketched here, it is highly plausible that the limitations of President Obama's economic policies reflected political and institutional constraints beyond his control, and that his bipartisan governing strategy was neither as naïve nor as unsuccessful as Fuchsman's article indicates. Based on an inadequate analysis of politics and policy-making, this article makes unwarranted assumptions about Barack Obama's personality and constructs psychohistorical explanations for personal failures that most likely did not exist.

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## Disappointed Expectations: A Presidential Psychobiographer's Reflections

Paul H. Elovitz—The Psychohistory Forum

For almost four decades I have proudly thought of myself as a presidential psychobiographer. However, disappointed expectations, Washington gridlock, and the negativism of American national politics have frustrated and worn me down. Fortunately, Ken Fuchsman's joining me in endeavors to write about Obama on the pages of *Clio's Psyche* and elsewhere helped to raise my domestic political psychology spirits. Having a colleague to discuss and debate the issues and publish with brought new energy to the project. Still, it remains frustrating to closely follow American politics because of the enormous gap between the rhetoric and the reality: the hopes engendered and the painful political realities.

The Founding Fathers of America not only swept slavery under the rug while writing our constitution, they created a system based on checks and balances—which has become gridlocked—as a way of protecting the fragile infant republic from one-man rule. Ultimately, their white landowners' republic grew into a white male democracy in 1829. At the cost of over 600,000 lives in 1861-1865, slavery was abolished and (in theory) freed men were given the vote. Of course, we know that most African-Americans were not effectively allowed to vote until Johnson gave his support to it in the 1960s. That is Lyndon Baines Johnson rather than Andrew Johnson—Lincoln's successor who had done his best to keep the former slaves economically and politically subservient to Southern whites. Change is slow, but in my lifetime racist laws, customs, and Saturday night lynchings have given way to the election of a biracial President, but not without ambivalence and resistance.

Barack Hussein Obama Jr. was elected President in 2008 amidst dangerous economic realities and totally unrealistic expectations. Much of the American media and public engaged in the fantasy that he had become President and would save the country from its woes even before his inauguration, two-and-a-half months after