

Newsweek

Obama Is Doing Just What He Said He Would Do

By James T. Kloppenberg | 11/18/10 at 3:41 PM

Every old-fashioned American amusement park had a fun house with mirrors that exaggerated your features. One mirror lengthened your legs, another widened your middle, a third made your face a wavy mask. If you stood in the right place, you vanished into endless distorting reflections. Nowadays, the political stage has become America's communal fun house, and nobody looks stranger than Barack Obama.

The president's critics on the right deride him as a radical socialist seething with anti-American rage. To them, he's a frightening success who has transformed the federal government, ruined the economy, and undermined national security. To the left, Obama is a tragic failure who squandered his chance for dramatic change: no single-payer health-care plan, no heated battle against Wall Street, and endless war in Afghanistan. If the president is struggling these days, the critics say, it's perhaps because he's out of touch with Americans, and even at odds with his own principles.

Yet Obama is doing exactly what he said he would do. Perhaps the critics should read—or reread—the president's own books. *Dreams From My Father* (1995) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) are the most substantial works written by anyone elected president since Woodrow

Wilson (who wrote several books before he won election in 1912). In laying out his philosophy, Obama contrasts the GOP's excessive individualism with the ideal of "ordered liberty" and the rich traditions of civic engagement typical of America in the 18th and 19th centuries. He also criticizes orthodox Democrats for too quickly dismissing market solutions and too often defending failed government programs. Above all, he criticizes the hyperpartisan atmosphere of contemporary public life.

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Almost everything you need to know about Obama is there on the printed page. In contrast to the charges coming now from right and left, Obama is neither a rigid ideologue nor a spineless wimp. The Obama who wrote *Dreams* and *Audacity* stands in a long tradition of American reform, wary of absolutes and universals, and committed to a Christian tradition that prizes humility and social service over dogmatic statements of unbending principle. A child of the philosophical pragmatists William James and John Dewey, Obama distrusts pat formulas and prefers experimentation.

Throughout his career, Obama has refused to demonize his opponents. Instead, he has sought them out and listened to them. He has tried to understand how they think and why they see the world as they do. His mother encouraged this sense of empathy, and it's a lesson Obama learned well. Since January 2009, Obama has watched his efforts at reconciliation, experimentation, and -consensus--building bounce off the hard surfaces of political self-interest and entrenched partisanship, but there is no reason to think he will abandon that strategy now. He knows that disagreement is a vital part of the American fabric, and that our differences are neither shallow nor trivial.

Although Obama's reform agenda echoes aspects of those advanced by many Democrats over the last century, he has admitted—and this is the decisive point in understanding his outlook—that his opponents hold principles rooted as deeply in American history as his own. "I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush's eyes, no matter how much I may disagree with him," he wrote in *Audacity*. "That's what empathy does—it calls us all to task, the conservative and the liberal ... We are all shaken out of our complacency." Obama rejects dogma, embraces uncertainty, and dismisses the fables that often pass for history among partisans on both sides who need heroes and villains, and who resist more-nuanced understandings of the past and the present.

The shrill tone of Obama's critics makes reading his books especially illuminating today. In *Audacity*, Obama explained why, because of our national traditions, the United States would never have a single-payer health-care system and would have to find a distinctively American

hybrid relying on existing insurance plans. That's what we have now. He explained why, although he favors regulation to protect against abuses, he rules out socialism and remains firmly committed to a market economy. His financial reforms follow that pattern. Finally, he explained why, although he opposed the war in Iraq, he supported war in Afghanistan for -different—and legitimate—reasons. Now that he must bring that war to a conclusion, he has made clear that the decision will be based on evidence, not blind adherence to a predetermined course of action.

After almost two years as president, Obama has failed to satisfy the left for the same reason that he has antagonized the right. He does not share their self-righteous certainty. Neither his personal restraint nor the achievements of his administration should surprise anyone who has read his books. In the domains of health care and economic regulation, and in his approach to Afghanistan, Obama has followed his script: substantial but incremental reforms growing organically from American experience rather than hewing to party orthodoxy. In November 2010, President Obama remains the man who wrote *Dreams* and *Audacity*, a resolute champion of moderation, experimentation, and deliberative, nondogmatic democracy. It's just that the distorting mirrors of political commentary in America's fun house can make it hard to recognize him.

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