

BARACK OBAMA AND POLITICAL WISDOM

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As President Obama prepares to seek reelection later this year, it is fitting to examine to what extent he manifests political wisdom. In two previous essays, [one long and with full citations](#) and the other a [much briefer version without notes](#), I dealt with political wisdom generally and its virtues or values. The present essay is sort of a case study to see how such wisdom applies to our current president. Readers desiring to know more about the wisdom values I deal with here should consult one of my earlier general essays mentioned on the subject.

No political leader exercises political wisdom all the time. Even our greatest presidents, like Lincoln, sometimes acted unwisely. So the primary question is not whether President Obama has always acted wisely (or unwisely) during his first three years in office, but the *extent* to which he has displayed political wisdom.

Such judgments, however, are difficult. To earn respect they should be circumspect and take into consideration many factors. One should also recognize that before making major policy decisions, President Obama usually has access to, and often considers, a wide range of the best available information on the topic under consideration. Few private citizens are as well informed as he is on any policy matter. Although this does not mean he is immune from making unwise decisions, it should make us aware that we often make our judgments about his policies based on more limited information.

Obama's Political Goals and Wisdom Values

Like Aristotle and many others, President Obama recognizes that the primary goal of our politics should be obtaining “the common good” and that exercising certain virtues and values is necessary to do so. In his pre-presidential *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama often mentions wisdom and many of the virtues and values that Aristotle and others have identified with it—realism, compassion, empathy, humility, tolerance, the need to compromise, temperance, self-control, passion, courage, justice, and freedom.

In his chapter entitled “Values” Obama writes, “I think that Democrats are wrong to run away from a debate about values.” He goes on to insist that the question of values should be at “the heart of our politics, the cornerstone of any meaningful debate about budgets and projects, regulations and policies.”¹ In his convincing examination of the sources of Obama’s ideas, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (2011), Harvard historian James T. Kloppenberg states that “among the most striking facts about Obama’s intellectual formation” is that the history of the Founding Fathers as he learned it emphasized not only

¹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 9, 52-53; for more on Obama’s pre-presidential view of wisdom, see my “Obama, McCain, Bush, Age, Experience, and Wisdom,” at <http://hnn.us/articles/52853.html>. (All web sites referred to in this essay were accessed from Nov. 2011 to Feb. 2012.)

freedom and rights, but “the importance of community, the centrality of obligations, and the shaping influence of civic virtue in American democracy.”²

Wisdom scholar Copthorne Macdonald in an essay entitled “[The Centrality of Wisdom](#),” sounded a similar note regarding wisdom in general when he wrote that “values are at the heart of the matter.” Since becoming president, Obama has often indicated that he continues to appreciate most of the values he mentioned in *The Audacity of Hope*, though to what extent he has demonstrated them in his actions is open to debate. And that is important, for political wisdom involves not only thinking (and feeling) but action.

One prominent contemporary wisdom researcher, Robert Sternberg, states that wisdom is “the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good.”³ He also [maintains](#) that “there are certain values—honesty, sincerity, doing toward others as you would have them do toward you—that are shared the world over by the great ethical systems of many cultures.” In a June 2009 speech in Cairo, the president [said](#) something very similar: “There’s one rule that lies at the heart of every religion—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples—a belief that isn’t new; that isn’t black or white or brown; that isn’t Christian or Muslim or Jew. It’s a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world.”

Idealism and Realism in Foreign and Domestic Policies

In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama sounds like Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), whose thinking he greatly admires, when he writes, “I imagine they [ordinary citizens] are waiting for a politics with a maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point. They don’t always understand the arguments between right and left, conservative and liberal, but they recognize the difference between dogma and common sense, responsibility and irresponsibility, between those things that last and those that are fleeting.” He also criticized any ideology that overrides facts.⁴

In their *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role* (2006), Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman advocate an idealistic realism of the type championed by Niebuhr and two other political theorists, George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau, and maintain that all three men “shared a belief in the values of modesty, prudence, moderation, and tolerance, leading in practical terms to a preference for negotiation over violence whenever possible, and a belief in peace as the necessary basis for human progress.” The authors of this work also emphasize that

² James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 43-44.

³ Robert J. Sternberg, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*, (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.

⁴ Obama, 42, 59.

such an ethical realism stresses the importance of the consequences of actions and not just good intentions.⁵

Soon after he assumed office as a U. S. senator in early 2005, Obama impressed Samantha Power, who soon became an important foreign policy adviser. “Obama did not strike Power as a liberal interventionist or a Kissingerian realist or any other kind of ideological ‘ist’ except maybe a ‘consequentialist.’ In foreign policy, Obama said, he was for what worked.”⁶

The same could be said for his domestic policy. Kloppenberg emphasizes that “the philosophy of pragmatism that originated over a century ago in the writings of William James and John Dewey . . . has provided a sturdy base for Obama's sensibility.” This type of pragmatism “challenges the claims of absolutists—whether their dogmas are rooted in science or religion—and instead embraces uncertainty, provisionally, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation,” in order to see what works.⁷

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has noted that “the battle between realists and idealists is the fundamental fault line of the American foreign-policy debate.” In an insightful review of Obama’s foreign policy in *The New Yorker*, Ryan Lizza quotes these words of Haass and goes on to say that “American values and interests are woven together, and no President is always either an idealist or a realist.”⁸ One of the leading proponents of the “realist camp,” Henry Kissinger (secretary of state, 1973-77), in a review of a book about diplomat and political theorist George Kennan, has recently also mentioned the “perennial debate between a realism stressing the importance of assessing power relationships and an idealism conflating moral impulses with historical inevitability.” He thought that with George Kennan “it was complicated by . . . [his] tendency to defend on occasion each side of the issue.” But even Kissinger admitted that “stable orders require elements of both power and morality.”⁹

When President Obama assumed office in January 2009, he inherited wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, continuing terrorist threats, and strained relations with Russia and some traditional U.S. allies who opposed President Bush’s policies in Iraq. Moreover, the U.S. was in the midst of

⁵ *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), xvii-xviii, 61.

⁶ David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). For brief comments on consequentialist ethics, see my “[Political Wisdom](#).”

⁷ Kloppenberg, , xi-xii. In his [review](#) of this book historian Alan Brinkley disagrees with Kloppenberg and writes that “Obama is perhaps only a halfway pragmatist—he still has at least one foot in the soil of moral conviction.” I think, however, that moral conviction is not contrary to pragmatism and that William James, for example, displayed it in abundance. In 1898 he was, for instance, opposed to the annexation of the Philippines, partly on moral grounds. See his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life, in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. See also Sasha Abramsky, “Inside Obama’s Brain,” at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-abramsky/inside-obamas-brain_b_386673.html, where the author writes of Obama’s “blend of pragmatism and idealism.”

⁸ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *The New Yorker* (May 2, 2011), at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, “The Age of Kennan,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 2011), at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/books/review/george-f-kennan-an-american-life-by-john-lewis-gaddis-book-review.html>.

the Great Recession, its greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression; and as compared with the average yearly government deficit during the Clinton presidency, the average in the George W. Bush era had increased more than sixfold.¹⁰

The new president's [Inaugural Address](#) was realistic in assessing the problems he faced, but also idealistic. "We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. . . . To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders, nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect."

In late 2009, in [his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech](#), he again reiterated his desire for a mix of idealism and realism. In speaking of his concern for Human Rights, he declared: "And within America, there has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists—a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world. I reject these choices. I believe that peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please; choose their own leaders or assemble without fear. Pent-up grievances fester, and the suppression of tribal and religious identity can lead to violence. We also know that the opposite is true. Only when Europe became free did it finally find peace. America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are governments that protect the rights of their citizens. No matter how callously defined, neither America's interests—nor the world's—are served by the denial of human aspirations."

In its October 2009 [press release](#) announcing the peace prize, the Nobel Committee emphasized the idealistic side of Obama's policies:

Obama has as President created a new climate in international politics. Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play. Dialogue and negotiations are preferred as instruments for resolving even the most difficult international conflicts. The vision of a world free from nuclear arms has powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations. Thanks to Obama's initiative, the USA is now playing a more constructive role in meeting the great climatic challenges the world is confronting. Democracy and human rights are to be strengthened.

Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future. His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by the majority of the world's population.

Most political commentators, however, have stressed Obama's realism. In December 2009, *Newsweek* columnist (now a *Time* columnist) and former managing editor of *Foreign Affairs* Fareed Zakaria [wrote](#), "Obama is a realist, by temperament, learning, and instinct. More than any president since Richard Nixon, he has focused on defining American interests carefully, providing the resources to achieve them, and keeping his eyes on the prize." During Obama's second year as president (2010) foreign-policy realism remained dominant. As Lizza wrote,

¹⁰ Frank Loy, "Obama Abroad: Ambitious Realism," *World Affairs* (May/June 2011), at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/obama-abroad-ambitious-realism>.

“Most of the foreign-policy issues that Obama emphasized in his first two years involved stepping away from idealism. . . . Obama’s aides often insist that he is an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works. He is, one says, a ‘consequentialist.’” Throughout most of 2011 many other commentators continued to emphasize his realism.¹¹

Although realism meant dealing with the specific problems he had inherited, Obama also wished to deal with broader priorities like restoring the economy and preparing it for the challenges of the twenty-first century, as well as dealing with the rise of China and the issues of global nuclear proliferation and climate change.¹² But events in 2011 and early 2012 in the Middle East and North Africa presented new difficulties and choices for him. First, there was Egypt. Should the U. S. continue to support Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, an authoritarian ruler but one who maintained relations with Israel and suppressed any radical Islam, or should the U. S. support the pro-democracy protestors against his oppressive regime? Later that year, there was Libya. The big question there was how to support Libya’s pro-democracy protestors against the dictatorial Muammar el-Qaddafi.

By February 2012, President Obama was facing two other major problems in the region: (1) How to deal with growing concerns that Iran was developing a nuclear weapon capability and that Israel was threatening military steps to prevent it, and (2) whether to aid Syrian rebels in their fight against the brutal regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In analyzing Obama’s policy toward Iran (mainly imposing and strengthening sanctions against it) and Israel (urging it to give Iranian sanctions a chance to work), [one analyst described](#) the “Obama doctrine” regarding force as follows: “Mr. Obama is willing to use unilateral force when America’s direct national interests are threatened—the bin Laden raid is the most vivid example. But when the threat is more diffuse, more a matter of preserving global order, his record shows that he insists on United Nations resolutions and the participation of many allies.”

Despite having already thought about how to balance realism and idealism in the region—in August 2010 he had asked his foreign policy advisers to brainstorm and comment on a memorandum he sent them entitled “Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa”—Obama proceeded cautiously, too cautiously for some of his critics. “Realists” such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Advisor to President Carter) criticized him for not giving more support to Mubarak, who resigned in favor of transitional military control in February 2011. But “Obama’s instinct was to try to have it both ways. He wanted to position the United States on the side of the protesters,” but he also “wanted to assure other autocratic allies that the U.S. did not hastily abandon its friends, and he feared that the uprising

¹¹ Lizza at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all. For 2011 see, e.g., Loy, at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/obama-abroad-ambitious-realism>; Ross Douthat, “Obama the Realist,” *The New York Times* (February 6, 2011), at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/07/opinion/07douthat.html>; and Robert Kaplan, “Libya, Obama and the Triumph of Realism,” *Financial Times* (August 28, 2011), at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a76d2ab4-cf2d-11e0-b6d4-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1eeUbJ57B>. For a conservative, and I think mistaken, view that Obama has adopted Samantha Power’s “passionately ideological humanitarian interventionist” beliefs but hides them under a screen of realism, see Stanley Kurtz, “Presidential Reticent,” *National Review Online* (March 22, 2011), at <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/262725/president-reticent-stanley-kurtz>.

¹² In Richard Haass’s “Re-Orienting America” (November 14, 2011), at <http://www.cfr.org/us-strategy-and-politics/re-orienting-america/p26490>, he praises the president’s refocusing on China and Asia. The refocusing was demonstrated by the president’s eight-day trip to the Asia-Pacific region in mid November 2011.

could spin out of control.” Ultimately “Obama’s political interests—needing to be seen as on the side of the protesters—aligned with the policy views of the idealists,” and he generally sided with the protestors, displeasing some of his more conservative allies in the region.¹³

In Libya, President Obama practiced the multilateral diplomacy that the Nobel Peace Committee had praised him for by working to get United Nations Security Council approval for military action to prevent an “imminent massacre” of anti-Qaddafi forces. The strategy worked, resulting in a March 2011 UN resolution. The Washington director of Human Rights Watch, stated that “it was, by any objective standard, the most rapid multinational military response to an impending human rights crisis in history.”¹⁴

Despite domestic criticism by some in the months ahead that he was over-committing U.S. resources, and by others that he was under-committing, President Obama quickly relinquished control of bombing and missile attacks in Libya to NATO, with France and Britain performing most of the air strikes against Qaddafi forces. The U. S. military contribution centered mainly on aiding midair refueling, aerial surveillance, and providing pilotless drones. At the end of August, Robert Kaplan concluded that “Obama—by taking part in the Libyan operation but not leading it—has been nothing if not a realist.”¹⁵

In October, Qaddafi was captured by anti-Qaddafi rebels and killed. Senator John Kerry perceived the death as the start of a new era for Libya and declared that “the United States demonstrated clear-eyed leadership, patience, and foresight by pushing the international community into action Though the Administration was criticized both for moving too quickly and for not moving quickly enough, it is undeniable that the NATO campaign prevented a massacre and contributed mightily to Qaddafi’s undoing without deploying boots on the ground or suffering a single American fatality.”

By the end of 2011, President Obama had withdrawn the last combat troops from Iraq and 10,000 troops from Afghanistan, with another 23,000 scheduled to leave by the end of summer 2012—thus reducing troop levels to what they were before he added 33,000 “surge” troops to those already deployed there.¹⁶ Nevertheless, at the end of 2011 Afghanistan remained the major test of Obama’s foreign policy wisdom. Some commentators have called it another Vietnam and believed it threatens to harm Obama’s overall policies, foreign and domestic, just as Vietnam had harmed those of Lyndon Johnson. Other critics have pointed to the failed Soviet experience in Afghanistan from 1979-1989 as a lesson we should heed about unwinnable military actions.¹⁷ During 2011 a minority of the Republican presidential candidates for 2012, like Ron Paul and John Huntsman (Obama’s former ambassador to China), criticized the president for continuing the war there.

¹³ Lizza at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all.

¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid*.

¹⁵ Kaplan, at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/a76d2ab4-cf2d-11e0-b6d4-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1eeUbJ57B>.

¹⁶ The White House Web Site on “Foreign Policy,” at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy> provides more information.

¹⁷ The best treatment of the Russians in Afghanistan is Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (2011)—see my review of it at <http://www.miwsr.com/2011-045.aspx>.

His main stated rationale for increasing American troops in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 was (as the president's National Security adviser wrote in a memo) to "deny safe haven to Al Qaeda and to deny the Taliban the ability to overthrow the Afghan government."¹⁸ To defeat Al Qaeda, responsible for the September 2001 and other terrorist attacks against the United States, Obama also authorized military actions against selected Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan and elsewhere. Consequently, U. S. forces killed two major Al Qaeda leaders in 2011, Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May, and Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen in September.

Despite these successes, by December 2011 the situation in Afghanistan was far from satisfactory. One main problem continued to be U. S.-Pakistani relations. For the Russians in Afghanistan during the 1980s one of their major problems was that seven major Afghan parties operated in Pakistan attempting to direct rebel mujahedin opposition inside Afghanistan. During the twenty-first century Pakistan continued to provide a haven for both Al Qaeda and Taliban forces and leaders, as bin Laden's residence in Abbottabad, Pakistan demonstrated. Any real overall U. S. success in Afghanistan depended on Pakistani cooperation. Shortly before his inauguration in January 2009, Obama sent his soon-to-be vice-president, Joe Biden, to impress this assessment upon the Pakistani president and to let him know that U. S. taxpayers would not continue to support financial aid to Pakistan if it allowed Al Qaeda and Taliban forces "to operate from Pakistani sanctuaries." Moving on to Afghanistan, Biden became more convinced than ever that the heart of the Al Qaeda problem was primarily in Pakistan and not Afghanistan.¹⁹

More than a year and a half later, however, after Obama had made the crucial decision to add 33,000 "surge" troops in Afghanistan, the Pakistani problem of providing havens seemed no closer to a solution. Toward the end of Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* he relates the thinking in mid 2010 of Obama's National Security Advisor, retired General James Jones: "I think the strategy is correct. But it was predicated on the fact that Pakistan would be coerced into moving more than they have been. . . . The Taliban war in Afghanistan was being run from these safe havens. And hundreds, if not thousands, of fighters were pouring across the border. The Taliban was taking full advantage of the safe havens to rest and train fighters before rotating them into Afghanistan for combat. In those circumstances, 'You can't win. You can't do counterinsurgency. It is a cancer in the plan.'"²⁰

In 2011 the killing of bin Laden in Pakistan, U. S. drone strikes against militants in tribal regions there, and misdirected UN airstrikes (on November 26) killing 26 Pakistani soldiers near the Afghan-Pakistani border, all worsened U. S.-Pakistani relations. After the last incident, the Pakistani government ordered (at least temporarily) the closing of the two main NATO supply routes into Afghanistan and the ending, within 15 days, of U. S. drone operations at an air base in western Pakistan. By the end of 2011 Pakistan was reevaluating its whole relationship with the United States, a process that continued into the first few months of 2012.

¹⁸ "President Obama's Final Orders for Afghanistan Pakistan Strategy, or Terms Sheet," in Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 385.

¹⁹ Woodward, 63, 71.

²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 379.

Woodward's 2010 book and subsequent events relating to Afghanistan do not make Obama look like a wise statesman. Although there is no denying the extremely difficult position he inherited, his decision in late 2009 to increase U. S. troops there did not seem driven by any comprehensive and realistic assessment of what good they would do, how cooperative Pakistan would be, or how devoting more lives and resources to Afghanistan was in the long-range interest of the United States. Rather the decision owed more to candidate Obama's desire to deliver on his promise to switch anti-Al Qaeda military efforts from Iraq to Afghanistan, and the influence that top-ranking military people and their supporters such as Cabinet Secretaries Gates and Clinton exercised in the decision-making process.

In October 2011, *Time* magazine asked six knowledgeable commentators to assess the U. S. position in Afghanistan and suggest steps to be taken before the planned withdrawal of U. S. combat troops by the end of 2014.²¹ (In early 2012, the Obama administration announced plans to end U. S. troops combat operations earlier, in 2013, and shift its focus to training and advising Afghan forces.) One commentator [proposed](#) more emphasis on negotiating with the Taliban—the Obama administration had already demonstrated a willingness to do so, but here again Pakistani help was crucial—and one [praised](#) the past year implementation of the Village Stability Operations program, and concluded, “If the Afghan government is to have a chance of defeating the Taliban, its national-security forces must successfully leverage the country's many competing factions, village by village. They cannot succeed on their own.”

But overall, the assessments were bleak. Anthony Cordesman [wrote](#): “The U.S. is now in the 10th year of a war for which it seems to have no clear plan and no clear strategic goal. The new strategy that President Obama outlined in 2009 is in tatters. There are no clear prospects for stable relations with Pakistan or for getting more Pakistani support. The Karzai government barely functions. New elections must come in 2014, but the U.S. combat forces needed to support those elections are scheduled to withdraw that same year.” Richard Haass [stated](#):

The Afghan war has claimed nearly 1,800 American lives and caused an additional 14,000 casualties. Direct costs are in the range of \$400 billion and are increasing at the rate of \$2 billion every week. . . .

The aim of U.S. policy is to create a competent Afghan government backed by capable army and police forces who can prevail over the Taliban or persuade them to give up. Alas, neither goal is likely to be achieved, given Afghanistan's ethnic divisions, its tradition of a weak center and Pakistan's provision of a sanctuary to the Taliban, many of whom are determined to fight on.

A more realistic policy would seek to make sure Afghanistan does not again become a base for global terrorists. This could mostly be done with drones and a much smaller troop presence that does some advising and training and conducts raids along the lines of the recent operation that killed Osama bin Laden. The U.S. is on course to put such a policy in place by the end of 2014; it could do so much sooner without jeopardizing the final outcome.

There is still more to be said about what President Obama's Afghan policy decisions reveal about his political wisdom, but we shall postpone consideration of that until after we examine his attitude toward other values and virtues besides realism and idealism.

His attempts to balance idealism and realism in domestic politics can be seen in such actions as his health care and financial reform packages as well as his environmental policies. Historian Alan Brinkley [points out](#) that “his stewardship of his controversial health-care bill

²¹ See <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2096478,00.html> for links to the six commentaries.

reveals both sides—pragmatism and idealism—of his political and philosophical beliefs. He spent many weeks and months encouraging ‘deliberative democracy,’ attempting to recruit Republican support and urging Congress itself to make the compromises necessary for a bipartisan bill . . . [but] won only a single Republican House member.” Kloppenberg puts Obama’s compromises in historical perspective when he [writes](#) (in June 2011) “I think that those of us on the left sometimes forget that the current President of the United States, no matter how powerful he appears to be, is as powerfully constrained by the United States Congress as were Wilson and FDR.” And “the most substantial progressive reforms of the twentieth century were achieved when FDR and Lyndon Johnson enjoyed overwhelming Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate, not the perilously slim Democratic majorities, weakened further by the large number of blue-dog Democrats elected in 2008, that passed the watered-down legislation on health care and financial regulation in 2009 and 2010.”

Empathy and Compassion

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama writes of his admiration of former Illinois senator Paul Simon and his “sense of empathy.” It is a quality, says Obama, “that I find myself appreciating more and more as I get older. It is at the heart of my moral code, and it is how I understand the Golden Rule—not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes.” He says that he had learned empathy from his mother and grandfather, and that he found himself “returning again and again to my mother’s simple principle—‘How would that make you feel?’—as a guidepost” for his politics. And he believes that “a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggles are our own. If we fail to help, we diminish ourselves.”²²

In a July 2007 [speech](#) to the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Senator Obama told his audience what type of Supreme Court judges he would select if he became president and had the opportunity to do so: “We need somebody who’s got the heart—the empathy—to recognize what it’s like to be a young teenage mom. The empathy to understand what it’s like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old.”

In May 2009, announcing the retirement of supreme Court Justice Souter, President Obama [said](#) about him, “He approached judging . . . “with a feverish work ethic and a good sense of humor, with integrity, equanimity, and compassion—the hallmark of not just being a good judge but being a good person.” The president then went on to speak about the type of person he would select to replace him: “I will seek somebody with a sharp and independent mind, and a record of excellence and integrity,” and “I will seek someone who understands that justice isn’t about some abstract legal theory or footnote in a case book, it is also about how our laws affect the daily realities of people’s lives, whether they can make a living, and care for their families, whether they feel safe in their homes, and welcome in their own nation. I view that quality of empathy, of understanding and identifying with peoples hopes and struggles as an essential ingredient for arriving at just decisions and outcomes.” Later that month he nominated Sonia

²² Obama, 66-68.

Sotomayor to fill Souter’s vacancy and indicated that she was such a person as he had earlier described.

Obama’s comments on the importance of empathy in a Supreme Court justice and his selection of Sotomayor and, a year later, Elena Kagan, stimulated an extensive debate on to what extent empathy was an important quality for a Supreme Court justice to possess. Many conservative Republicans insisted that an emphasis on empathy might weaken judicial impartiality. A more liberal approach insisted that to “say that justices should decide cases based on ‘objective’ legal rules was misleading” because “rarely is there a clear right or wrong answer to issues before the Supreme Court. The Constitution is filled with broad language, such as ‘cruel and unusual punishment,’ ‘due process of law’ and ‘equal protection of the law.’ How justices interpret these words is a function of their values and not any objective methodology.”²³ What this debate suggests is clashing values and the necessity of political wisdom to sort them out, a topic we will return to after considering additional values.

In May 2009, giving a [commencement address](#) at the University of Notre Dame, the president spoke again of the Golden Rule—” the call to treat one another as we wish to be treated. The call to love. To serve. To do what we can to make a difference in the lives of those with whom we share the same brief moment on this Earth.” It was, he said, “one law that we can be most certain of, it is the law that binds people of all faiths and no faith together. It is no coincidence that it exists in Christianity and Judaism; in Islam and Hinduism; in Buddhism and humanism.”

Of course, for politicians words and actions do not always mesh. In a commencement speech at Catholic University on May 14, 2011, Speaker of the House John Boehner told the graduates, “I was asked if there’s a special prayer I say before going into meetings with the president. Well, I always ask God for the courage and wisdom to do his will and not mine. Serving others —that’s not just how I lead in the Congress, it’s how I lead my life.” But some Catholic University students declared (in a letter to the university’s president) that he “was an inappropriate keynote speaker because the fiscal 2012 budget resolution that he had championed severely cut funding for food assistance, programs for low-income children and help for the homeless.” At the graduation ceremony itself, one graduate in social work who had a sign pinned to her (“Where’s the compassion, Mr. Boehner?”) was part of a group of social work students opposed to Boehner’s speech. Another letter from professors said that “the speaker had ignored his moral obligation to make protecting the poor a priority. The letter called his legislative record of helping the poor ‘among the worst in Congress.’”²⁴ A defender of Speaker Boehner might counter that he is sincere in trying to “serve others,” but that he goes about it in different ways.

²³ This quote is from Erwin Chemerinsky (dean of the UC Irvine School of Law) in a debate with Ilya Somin (an assistant professor at George Mason University School of Law) over the desirability of reflecting empathy in making judicial decisions, at http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinionla/la-oww-chemerinsky-somin28-2009may28_0_4921073.story. See also http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinionla/la-oww-chemerinsky-somin29-2009may29_0_5707507.story for a continuation of the debate.

²⁴ The quotes are from *The Washington Post* reporting of the letters and ceremony, as cited in my “Boehner, Day, and Obama: Contrasting Christian Approaches to Society and Politics” at www.laprogressive.com/progressive-issues/boehner-day-obama/.

Nevertheless, in the case of President Obama there does seem to be a stronger connection between his emphasis on virtues like compassion and empathy and his political actions. We see it not only in his Supreme Court appointees, but also in other instances. When on March 23, 2010, he signed into law health care legislation, among those in attendance were 11-year-old Marcelas Owens and members of Natoma Canfield's family. In his remarks the president said, "Marcelas lost his mom to an illness, and she didn't have insurance and couldn't afford the care that she needed. . . . Natoma had to give up her health coverage after her rates were jacked up by more than 40 percent. She was terrified that an illness would mean she'd lose the house that her parents built. So she gave up her insurance, and now she's lying in a hospital bed as we speak, faced with just such an illness [cancer], praying that she can somehow afford to get well without insurance."²⁵ Empathy and compassion for those without insurance seemed to motivate, at least to some extent, the president's persistent efforts to enact what his opponents labeled "Obamacare." And his American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 (stimulus package) and automobile industry bailout (expanded from earlier President Bush actions) displayed concern with both virtues by saving or creating several millions jobs.²⁶

Humility and Humor

In trying to reconcile pragmatic compromise with a passion for justice, Obama referred to President Lincoln's humility. "I'm left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation." Lincoln demonstrated that "we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side; and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence." Obama concluded: "That self-awareness, that humility, led Lincoln to advance his principles through the framework of our democracy, through speeches and debate, through the reasoned arguments that might appeal to the better angels of our nature. It was this same humility that allowed him, once the conversation between North and South broke down and war became inevitable, to resist the temptation to demonize the fathers and sons who did battle on the other side, or to diminish the horror of war, no matter how just it might be."²⁷

One of the great ego traps for any president is being surrounded by "yes men and women" who tell him (and maybe someday her) that he is always right. In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama wrote of an occasion when President Bush's "eyes became fixed, his voice took on the agitated, rapid tone of someone neither accustomed to nor welcoming interruption. His easy affability was replaced by an almost messianic certainty. As I watched my mostly Republican Senate colleagues hang on his every word, I was reminded of the dangerous isolation that power

²⁵ "Obama's Remarks at the Health Care Bill Signing," *The New York Times*, Mar. 23, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/us/politics/24health-text.html?pagewanted=all&ref=policy>.

²⁶ "Several million jobs" based on figures (for ARRA) from Congressional Budget Office and three private economic analysis companies, as cited at the Website of PolitiFact, the reputable fact checking service at <http://www.politifact.com/virginia/statements/2011/oct/21/national-republican-senatorial-committee/national-republican-senatorial-committee-ad-says-s/> and (for auto bailout) at the nonpartisan [Center for Automotive Research](http://www.centerforautomotivere.com).

²⁷ Obama, 97-98.

can bring, and appreciated the founders' wisdom in designing a system to keep power in check."²⁸

To avoid the isolation trap, Obama has taken a number of steps. Even before picking his vice president, he indicated that he wanted someone who was independent minded and would tell him when he was wrong. And Vice President Biden has not hesitated to express his opinions to the president—in the discussions in 2009 about future actions in Afghanistan, for example, he voiced serious doubts about sending as many troops as the president eventually did. More than most presidents, Obama has welcomed diversified views that might challenge his own. In nominating Elena Kagan as a Supreme Court justice, he praised her for her “openness to other viewpoints and skill in working with others to build consensus” as dean of Harvard Law School.

In a [commencement address](#) at the University of Michigan on May 1, 2010, he told the graduates of reading ten letters per day from “ordinary Americans,” labeling it as his “modest effort to remind myself of why I ran in the first place.” He added that “some express gratitude, some express anger. I’d say a good solid third call me an idiot, which is how I know that I’m getting a good, representative sample.” His advice to “seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs” in order to “begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from” also suggests possessing enough humility to realize that any of us, including him, could be wrong.

One appraisal of the president’s foreign policy states that “the one consistent thread running through most of Obama’s decisions has been that America must act humbly in the world. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Obama came of age politically during the post-Cold War era, a time when America’s unmatched power created widespread resentment. Obama believes that highly visible American leadership can taint a foreign-policy goal just as easily as it can bolster it.”²⁹ His “leading-from-behind” approach to Libya in 2011 was an example of a humbler foreign policy approach.

One of America’s most prominent thinkers on political ethics, Reinhold Niebuhr, perceived a close connection between humility and humor. “Humor is a proof of the capacity of the self to gain a vantage point from which it is able to look at itself. The sense of humor is thus a by-product of self-transcendence. People with a sense of humor do not take themselves too seriously. They are able to ‘stand off’ from themselves, see themselves in perspective, and recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions. All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little funny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions.” Niebuhr also thought that “All men betray moods and affectations, conceits and idiosyncrasies, which could become the source of great annoyance to us if we took them too seriously. It is better to laugh at them. A sense of humor is indispensable to men of affairs who have the duty of organizing their fellowmen in common endeavors. It reduces the frictions of life and makes the

²⁸ Ibid., 45-46.

²⁹ Lizza at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all.

foibles of men tolerable. There is, in the laughter with which we observe and greet the foibles of others, a nice mixture of mercy and judgment, of censure and forbearance.”³⁰

Niebuhr especially advocated self-deprecating humor and not any cruel, haughty humor aimed at others. Although President Obama is not particularly known for his humor—Alan Brinkley [wrote](#) that Obama “shares some of John Kennedy’s cool, pragmatic temperament, but not (publicly at least) his wit and his sense of humor”—in a March 30, 2010 [article](#) on the president’s “surprising sense of humor,” CBS News described it as “mordant, self-deprecating, deeply ironic,” and gave several examples of it. The article added, that “the lion’s share of Obama’s humor is aimed not at his foes, but at himself.”

Tolerance and Compromise

Tolerance and compromise are intertwined with humility, wisdom, empathy, and compassion. Because wise and humble people realize they do not have all the answers they tend to be more tolerant than most people; they recognize that we all are struggling to cope with life as best we can. In turn, this realization makes wise people more empathetic and compassionate. They are more likely than most to follow the advice of Philo of Alexandria, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

In a chapter entitled “Our Constitution” in *The Audacity of Hope* Obama displayed the basis of his tolerance and willingness to compromise when he wrote: “It’s not just absolute power that the founders sought to prevent. Implicit in its structure, in the very idea of ordered liberty, was a rejection of absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or ‘ism,’ any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single, unalterable course.”³¹ Because no one has a lock on truth and we are all seekers, tolerance and compromise are necessary.

Although President Obama has sometimes been criticized by the Left for being too willing to compromise, such a willingness—if exercised on the right occasions—is not a fault but a strength, not a vice but a virtue. And it reflects, under the proper circumstance, another virtue—tolerance.

In his *Profiles in Courage*, John Kennedy (then still a senator) eloquently stated the value of political compromise, while balancing it with principle.

The fanatics and extremists and even those conscientiously devoted to hard and fast principles are always disappointed at the failure of their Government to rush to implement all of their principles and to denounce those of their opponents. . . . Some of my colleagues who are criticized today for lack of forthright principles—or who are looked upon with scornful eyes as compromising “politicians”—are simply engaged in the fine art of conciliating, balancing and interpreting the forces and factions of public opinion, an art essential to keeping our nation united and enabling our Government to function.³²

³⁰ “Humour and Faith,” in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (1945), 115, 119-20, at http://www.archive.org/stream/discerningthesig011931mbp/discerningthesig011931mbp_djvu.txt.

³¹ Obama, 93.

³² John Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Pocket Books, 1960), 4-5. See my “[Political Wisdom](#)” for more on Kennedy’s views.

Any careful reader of *The Audacity of Hope*, will come away from it with the impression that the then Senator Obama desired more political toleration and working together between Democrats and Republicans than then (2006) existed. In a passage difficult for many Leftists to relate to, he wrote about President George W. Bush: “I find the president and those who surround him pretty much like everybody else, possessed of the same mix of virtues and vices, insecurities and long-buried injuries, as the rest of us. No matter how wrong headed I might consider their policies to be . . . I still find it possible, in talking to these men and women, to understand their motives, and to recognize in them values I share.”³³

Throughout, the first few years of his presidency, Obama continued to attempt balancing his principles with the necessities of compromise. In his 2009 Notre Dame [commencement address](#) he said, “We must find a way to reconcile our ever-shrinking world with its ever-growing diversity—diversity of thought, diversity of culture, and diversity of belief. In short, we must find a way to live together as one human family.” He spoke specifically of the importance of people with domestic political differences, for example on the question of abortion, working together for the common good, and he quoted a past Notre Dame president, who stated that “differences of culture and religion and conviction can co-exist with friendship, civility, hospitality, and especially love.”

But Republicans had little tolerance for genuine compromise. As the president said at a 2010 [Labor Day speech](#) in Milwaukee: “When it comes to just about everything we’ve done to strengthen our middle class, to rebuild our economy, almost every Republican in Congress says, no. Even on things we usually agree on, they say, no. If I said the sky was blue, they say, no. If I said fish live in the sea, they’d say, no. They just think it’s better to score political points before an election than to solve problems. . . . You know, I heard—somebody out here was yelling ‘Yes, we can.’ Remember, that was our slogan? Their slogan is ‘No, we can’t.’ No, no, no, no.”

That previous May, at a University of Michigan commencement, the president [eloquently expressed](#) the importance of political tolerance and compromise.

We can’t expect to solve our problems if all we do is tear each other down. You can disagree with a certain policy without demonizing the person who espouses it. You can question somebody’s views and their judgment without questioning their motives or their patriotism. Throwing around phrases like “socialists” and “Soviet-style takeover” and “fascist” and “right-wing nut” that may grab headlines, but it also has the effect of comparing our government, our political opponents, to authoritarian, even murderous regimes. . . .

. . . The problem is that this kind of vilification and over-the-top rhetoric closes the door to the possibility of compromise. It undermines democratic deliberation. It prevents learning — since, after all, why should we listen to a “fascist,” or a “socialist,” or a “right-wing nut,” or a left-wing nut?”

It makes it nearly impossible for people who have legitimate but bridgeable differences to sit down at the same table and hash things out. It robs us of a rational and serious debate, the one we need to have about the very real and very big challenges facing this nation. . . .

. . . Part of what civility requires is that we recall the simple lesson most of us learned from our parents: Treat others as you would like to be treated, with courtesy and respect. . . .

. . . If we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country.

But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from. . . .

³³ Obama, 48.

... If you're somebody who only reads the editorial page of the *New York Times*, try glancing at the page of the *Wall Street Journal* once in a while. If you're a fan of Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh, try reading a few columns on the Huffington Post website. It may make your blood boil; your mind may not be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship. It is essential for our democracy.

Temperance and Self-discipline

According to Isaiah Berlin (1909–97)—a political philosopher who has written of political wisdom—temperance (or moderation) and self-discipline are closely connected to humility, tolerance, and a willingness to compromise. One who has studied his ideas carefully has written that he “insisted that while pragmatism was necessary, action must be guided by ethical considerations . . . but he also recognised that the pursuit of political purity was delusive. Politics involves tough choices, compromises, and sacrifices. . . . Berlin’s work also cautions against the self-righteousness of all who claim to have a monopoly on virtue, whether they be rulers or dissidents. It also condemns the . . . intolerance of those who think differently from oneself. It thus suggests that even when we encounter policies that we feel confident in condemning—and that Berlin’s principles suggests we should condemn—we should do so moderately and humbly, while retaining doubts about our own program and resisting the lure of our own certitudes.”³⁴ Concerning self-discipline, Berlin wrote in his “Two Concepts of Liberty,” “Freedom is self-mastery,” overcoming obstacles such as one’s “ungoverned passions.”³⁵

In his *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama praised such virtues as moderation and self-control. About such values as self-improvement, discipline, temperance, and hard work, he wrote that “these values are rooted in a basic optimism about life and a faith in free will—a confidence that through pluck and sweat and smarts, each of us can rise above the circumstances of our birth. But these values also express a broader confidence that so long as individual men and women are free to pursue their own interests, society as a whole will prosper. Our system of self-government and our free-market economy depend on the majority of individual Americans adhering to these values.” Later on, he wrote “because federal judges receive lifetime appointments and often serve through the terms of multiple presidents, it behooves a president—and benefits our democracy—to find moderate nominees who can garner some measure of bipartisan support.”³⁶

Many observers of the president have commented on his temperance and self-discipline. Kloppenberg mentions that already as an undergraduate at Columbia University the “moderation that has become his trademark was already apparent.” A National Public Radio (NPR) program on him a few months before he was elected president stated that his “temperament is famously unflappable” and that his campaign mantra was “No Drama Obama.” In researching his book

³⁴ Joshua Cherniss, “Isaiah Berlin: A Defence,” *The Oxonian Review of Books* 5 (Spring 2006), at <http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/5-2/5-2cherniss.html>; see also Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, “Isaiah Berlin,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/berlin/>. Berlin’s thoughts on political wisdom are found mainly in his “Political Judgment,” in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 40-56.

³⁵ In Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), at http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin_twoconceptsliberty.pdf.

³⁶ Obama, 54-55, 82.

Inside Obama's Brain (2009), journalist Sasha Abramsky talked to over a hundred people who knew Obama and reported that “during the election campaign Obama almost never got upset, or panicked, by day-to-day shifts in momentum, by the ups and downs of opinion polls.” Almost a year into his presidency, Abramsky referred to the president as “a voice of moderation in a corrosively shrill, partisan political milieu.”³⁷

In December 2011, as part of the ongoing competition to gain the Republican nomination for president in 2012, Mitt Romney [suggested](#) that Newt Gingrich was a “loose cannon,” unlike himself— “I will exercise sobriety, care, stability”—and did not possess the temperament to be president. He also said that “zany is not what we need in a president,” and “a leader needs to be someone of sobriety and stability and patience and temperance,” again suggesting he was such a person. As *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins [wrote](#) after quoting these words, “perhaps Romney was worried that all those even-keeled virtues sounded too much like Barack Obama, because he veered off into an attack on the current administration’s foreign policy failures.”

Passion, Courage, and Creativity

Temperance and wisdom do not preclude passion, just *uncontrolled* passion. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel once wrote that “a *wisdom* which does not include passion . . . is not worthy of being called wisdom.”³⁸ Almost a century ago the German thinker Max Weber, in an essay Obama knew well, referred to passion as one of the “three pre-eminent qualities . . . decisive for the politician.” He wrote that “devotion to politics, if it is not to be frivolous intellectual play but rather genuinely human conduct, can be born and nourished from passion alone.” But he went on to say that the politician’s passion had to be in the interest of noble causes.³⁹

While insisting on the need for tolerance and compromise, Obama also recognized the need for passionate idealism. In *The Audacity of Hope* he wrote “that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty,” but that passionate, and sometimes uncompromising, idealists like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman also advanced freedom. But Obama remained wary of the dangers of passion if not checked by reason and mentioned the Iraq war “as a war based not on reason but passion.”⁴⁰ In his University of Michigan [commencement speech](#) he declared that debates “over government and health care and war and taxes . . . are serious arguments. They should arouse people’s passions, and it’s important for everybody to join in the debate, with all the vigor that the maintenance of a free people requires.” But the president

³⁷ Kloppenber, 22; <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95054388>; Sasha Abramsky, “Inside Obama’s Brain,” at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-abramsky/inside-obamas-brain_b_386673.html.

³⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond; Including, Conversations Between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 198.

³⁹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Galaxy Book ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 115 (also at <http://www2.selu.edu/Academics/Faculty/jbell/weber.pdf>). On Obama’s familiarity with the essay, see Kloppenber, 145.

⁴⁰ Obama, 97, 294.

immediately warned that these passions should remain civil and respectful of other views. A few writers have referred to Obama's own passion. Journalist Abramsky, for example, has written that "he is passionate about bringing the voices of the voiceless into the halls of power."⁴¹

More often, however, it is his passionlessness that is mentioned. In his book on *Obama's Wars*, Woodward stated that John Podesta, who had served President Clinton as his chief of staff and helped Obama in transitioning to the presidency, wondered if "Obama felt anything, especially in his gut. He intellectualized and then charged the path forward, essentially picking up the emotions of others and translating them into ideas. He had thus created a different kind of politics . . . But, Podesta thought, sometimes a person's great strength, in this case Obama's capacity to intellectualize, was also an Achilles' heel."⁴²

Since assuming office, the president has frequently been accused of not being passionate enough in pursuing the causes he advocates such as universal health care and environmental protection. In late August 2009, Bill Moyers, who served in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, expressed in a TV interview the disappoint liberals often felt. He regretted that in dealing with health care, Obama was not displaying the passion of someone like Theodore Roosevelt, who "loved to fight."

He [TR] came into office and railed against the malefactors of great wealth, he was glad to take them on, take on the barons and the tycoons and people responded to it. I think if Obama fought instead of finessed so much, if he stood up and declared for what is really the right thing to do and what is really needed instead of negotiating the corners away, instead of talking about bending the curve and talking about actuarial rates, if he would stand up and say: "We need this because we're a decent country" I think it would change the atmosphere. . . . He [Obama] didn't speak in simple, powerful, moral, language. He was speaking like a policy wonk. ⁴³

Just days before the Moyers' interview, a more passionate politician died—Senator Ted Kennedy. Upon his death Obama issued a statement that called him "the greatest United States Senator of our time." He also said, "I've profited as president from his encouragement and wisdom." Later in the day, the president [added](#) that the senator "could passionately battle others and do so peerlessly on the Senate floor for the causes that he held dear, and yet still maintain warm friendships across party lines." Conservatives, like Kennedy's good friend Senator Orrin Hatch (R. Utah), also [praised](#) the mixture of his passion and willingness to compromise. "Ted was a lion among liberals, but he was also a constructive and shrewd lawmaker. He never lost sight of the big picture and was willing to compromise on certain provisions in order to move forward on issues he believed important."

Hatch expressed a hope that Obama shared, that "America's ideological opposites in Congress, on the airwaves, in cyberspace, and in the public square will learn [from Kennedy's example] that being faithful to a political party or a philosophical view does not preclude civility, or even friendships, with those on the other side." But two years after Ted Kennedy's death such civility seemed rarer than ever. So too were any demonstrations of Obama passion. In August

⁴¹ Abramsky at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-abramsky/inside-obamas-brain_b_386673.html.

⁴² Woodward, 38-39.

⁴³ Quoted in my "Is Obama Too Cerebral?" on the History News Network, at <http://hnn.us/articles/116297.html>, where I also mention others who commented on the president's passion paucity.

2011 *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd [opined](#), “His withholding and reactive nature has made him seem strangely irrelevant in Washington, trapped by his own temperament. He doesn’t lead, and he doesn’t understand why we don’t feel led.” Four months later she [wrote](#) about him being “too tightly controlled” and that he “struggles to get fiery.”

Just as President Obama admires the example of Ted Kennedy, so too does he of his two brothers, John and Robert. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he refers admiringly to both of them and mentions specifically John Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage*.

Courage is often thought of together with passion. Aristotle, for example, perceived such a connection. He thought that often “brave men also are passionate” and “act for honour's sake, but passion aids them.” However, the philosopher distinguished between a courageous person and a recklessness one, and thought that passion had to be controlled by reason. The type of political courage John Kennedy mainly admired was “the courage required of the Senator defying the angry power of the very constituents who control his future.” But “some demonstrated courage through their unyielding devotion to absolute principle,” while “others demonstrated courage through their acceptance of compromise, through their advocacy of conciliation, through their willingness to replace conflict with co-operation.”⁴⁴

President Obama’s political courage has been more of the second type—advocating conciliation at the risk of alienating his Leftist base. But many commentators think that in general he has not displayed much political courage, though some pundits praised him for displaying it in dealing with the military, especially giving the orders that led to the killing of bin Laden.

An [article](#) in *The Economist* (Mar 17, 2011), before the bin Laden killing, asked, “Has Barack Obama ever been brave? Perhaps more pertinently, will he ever be?” The occasion for the article was the president’s cautious approach toward Libyan demonstrations. It stated, “Obama, as is his wont, is erring on the side of caution; carefully considering, as he has for weeks, what, if anything, he ought to do. But this prompts a question about the president. Has he, at any point in his presidency so far, demonstrated real political courage? It is surprisingly hard, more than two years in, to think of an unambiguous example. . . . If political courage is taking a clear stand against the majority on some gut instinct or principle, it is much easier to list the cases where Mr Obama has chosen discretion over valour.” The essay went on to examine some of his political stances, stating, for example, that “his support for gay rights has been a study in caution, like his position on gun control,” and that with the exception of health reform the big fights—on global warming, immigration and the deficit—have been put on hold and many of the smaller ones ducked. “

While recognizing that many people had unrealistic expectations for him, the essay blames such hopes partly on him, for he wrote about “the audacity of hope,” sloganeered “yes, we can,” and held out the hope he could be a “transformational” president. It concludes that “maybe Mr Obama will find . . . raw courage when at last he thinks it warranted. All one can say is that it has not happened yet.”

⁴⁴ Kennedy, 206, 207. For more on Kennedy’s ideas on political courage, see my section on “Courage” in “[Political Wisdom](#).”

Occasionally, however, there are more positive assessments of his courage. After he delivered one of the best speeches of his life in March 2008, gambling that he could defuse the firestorm created by his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, [a *New York Times* editorial](#) labeled it a Profile in Courage. At the end of 2011, *Time* columnist Joe Klein [announced](#) that President Obama was first on his list of Teddy Awards, an annual list for political courage named after President Theodore Roosevelt. Obama led the list, “not so much for his domestic policy, which was sane but unsuccessful, as for his performance as Commander in Chief. This was not expected to be a strength when he came to office, but it is a role that he inhabits with skill, prudence and confidence. Obama went against the military brass on three important matters this year—Libya, Afghanistan and the raid that killed Osama bin Laden—and was right each time.” While some commentators thought the president had been too influenced by his generals in making decisions about Afghanistan, Klein thought the president had been courageous in going “against the wishes of his superstar general David Petraeus” and deciding “not to launch counterinsurgency operations in the country's difficult eastern region” and instead announcing “the beginnings of the drawdown of U.S. troops.”

Sometimes linked to charges that the president lacks passion and daring is the accusation that he lacks creativity. One critic, reviewing Bernstein's *Obama's Wars*, [wrote](#) that Obama “lacks the imagination and forcefulness to fashion his own conception of what a situation is, what it means and what the public need dictates in the way of policy action.” Others, however, believe that his leadership style encourages creative decision making.

Kloppenber, for example, believes that Obama learned before becoming president that “the values people cherish do not descend from the sky but emerge from their past and their present, and they must adapt those values creatively to solve the problems they encounter in the future.” As president, “Obama makes use of the American tradition of philosophical pragmatism: we should debate our differences, and test provisional interpretations of principle, not by measuring proposals against unchanging dogmas but through trial and error, by trying to solve problems creatively and then democratically deliberating, yet again, on the consequences of our experiments.” The Harvard historian also refers to the president's “repeated appeals to negotiation, bipartisanship, and creative compromise.”⁴⁵

In an [essay](#) contrasting the political leadership of Obama with George W. Bush, three scholars wrote, in late 2009, that “based on his behavior, his statements and his autobiography, we believe that US President Barack Obama has developed an inclination to see and act as if the political process were a creative process and that this inclination permeates his leadership style.” The scholars also commented on his Cabinet selections: “Obama lets the strong personalities around him challenge each other and him.”

Although Obama seems more of a consensus seeker than one of his favorite presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, the comments of one of Roosevelt's leading biographers reminds us of some of those about Obama. Arthur Schlesinger wrote: “Under the pressure of national crisis, *FDR* came into his own, combining eloquent idealism with astute realism. . . . He was more interested in creativity than consensus. He did not mind competition and rivalry within his administration;

⁴⁵ Kloppenber, 163, 165, 262.

he rather encouraged it. . . . He had not in his Harvard years taken a course with William James, but he was an innate and visceral pluralist and pragmatist.”⁴⁶

Freedom and Justice

President Obama often speaks of freedom and justice as he did when he [declared](#) November 9, 2011 as World Freedom Day—“we continue to stand with all who seek their universal rights and reach for a future that offers dignity, justice, equality, personal freedom, and greater economic opportunity.” He is fond of quoting the words from our Pledge of Allegiance about “liberty and justice for all.” For example, [he did so](#) on May 31, 2011 in announcing that June was Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month—“While progress has taken time, our achievements in advancing the rights of LGBT Americans remind us that history is on our side, and that the American people will never stop striving toward liberty and justice for all.” The president, like many others (and as we shall do here), often uses the words liberty and freedom interchangeably as he did in September 2010 when he [declared](#) that “in the United States, our Constitution is not simply words written on aging parchment, but a foundation of government, a protector of liberties, and a guarantee that we are all free to shape our own destiny. As we celebrate this document's profound impact on our everyday lives, may all Americans strive to uphold its vision of freedom and justice for all.”

Having taught law, especially constitutional law, at the University of Chicago Law School for a dozen years, the president also sometimes refers to all or part of the Preamble to the [Constitution](#): “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

But his knowledge of American history has impressed upon him that obtaining “liberty and justice” was not accomplished simply by proclaiming them as ideals in the Constitution, but by struggles to broaden them so as to bring them about “for all,” including slaves and their descendents, women, and the LGBT community. As Obama said in 2008, “Dr. King once said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. It bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc.”⁴⁷

President Obama believes, that “sometimes the original understanding [of the Constitution] can take you only so far—that on the truly hard cases, the truly big arguments, we have to take context, history, and the practical outcomes of a decision into account. . . . The Founding Fathers and original ratifiers have told us *how* to think but are no longer around to tell us *what* to think. We are on our own, and have only our own reason and our judgment to rely

⁴⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933-1935*. Mariner Books ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), vii.

⁴⁷ Quoted in the *Congressional Record*, 157 (May 25, 2011), at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2011-05-25/html/CREC-2011-05-25-pt1-PgE953-3.htm>.

on. . . . The constitutional text tells us that freedom of speech must be protected, but it doesn't tell us what such freedom means in the context of the Internet.”

The president's view of the Constitution is connected with his valuing of humility, tolerance, and compromise.

What the . . . Constitution can do is organize the way by which we argue about our future. All of its elaborate machinery—its separation of powers and checks and balances and federalist principles and Bill of Rights—are designed to force us into a conversation, a 'deliberative democracy' in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent. Because power in our government is so diffuse, the process of making law in America compels us to entertain the possibility that we are not always right and to sometimes change our minds; it challenges us to examine our motives and our interests constantly, and suggests that both our individual and collective judgments are at once legitimate and highly fallible. . . .

I confess that there is a fundamental humility to this reading of the Constitution and our democratic process. It seems to champion compromise, modesty, and muddling through. . . . And yet I think we make a mistake in assuming that democratic deliberation requires abandonment of our highest ideals, or of a commitment to the common good. After all, the Constitution ensures our free speech not just so that we can shout at one another as loud as we please, deaf to what others might have to say (although we have that right). It also offers us the possibility of a genuine marketplace of ideas, one in which the “jarring of parties” works on behalf of “deliberation and circumspection”; a marketplace in which, through debate and competition, we can expand our perspective, change our minds, and eventually arrive not merely at agreements but at sound and fair agreements.⁴⁸

In his chapter on “The Constitution” in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama stated that Republicans and Democrats generally agreed about basic liberties identified in the “Constitution and our common law: the right to speak our minds; the right to worship how and if we wish; the right to peaceably assemble to petition our government; the right to own, buy, and sell property and not have it taken without fair compensation; the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures; the right not to be detained by the state without due process; the right to a fair and speedy trial; and the right to make our own determinations, with minimal restrictions, regarding family life and the way we raise our children.”⁴⁹

The problem comes, he suggests, when we try to apply these rights to specific cases, such as prayer in public schools. Or when freedom conflicts with other values. “When liberty is cited in the defense of a company's decision to dump toxins in our rivers, or when our collective interest in building an upscale new mall is used to justify the destruction of somebody's home—we depend on the strength of countervailing values to temper our judgment and hold such excesses in check.”⁵⁰

Although Obama did not wade into the long-standing debate about the definition of freedom, historian James MacGregor Burns once wrote: “For over two centuries Americans had debated and squabbled and even warred over the definition of freedom. During the 1950s the quarrel turned into a cacophony.”⁵¹ And the cacophony has continued ever since. A fundamental

⁴⁸ Obama, 53, 89-90, 92-94.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵¹ *The Crosswinds of Freedom: From Roosevelt to Reagan—America in the Last Half Century*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 276.

difference between conservatives and liberals is that the former emphasize freedom *from* big government, and the latter, following the example of Franklin Roosevelt, emphasize that true freedom should include “freedom from want” and that governments need to help create this condition. Where President Obama stands in regard to that debate is very clear in the pages of *The Audacity of Hope*:

In 1941, FDR said he looked forward to a world founded upon four essential freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Our own experience tells us that those last two freedoms - freedom from want and freedom from fear - are prerequisites for all others. For half of the world's population, roughly three billion people around the world living on less than two dollars a day, an election is at best a means, not an end; a starting point, not deliverance. These people are looking less for an “electocracy” than for the basic elements that for most of us define a decent life – food, shelter, electricity, basic health care, education for their children, and the ability to make their way through life without having to endure corruption, violence, or arbitrary power. If we want to win the hearts and minds of people in Caracas, Jakarta, Nairobi, or Tehran, dispersing ballot boxes will not be enough. We'll have to make sure that the international rules we're promoting enhance, rather than impede, people's sense of material and personal security.⁵²

In his State of the Union address in January 1944, Roosevelt declared that true “freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free men.’” He called for a “second Bill of Rights” that would include various freedoms, among them the right to adequate medical care and for every family a decent home. A good friend of Obama from his days teaching law at the University of Chicago, law professor Cass R. Sunstein, wrote about this FDR idea in *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR'S Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More than Ever* (2004), and in late 2009 he became the President Obama's “regulation czar” at the Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs

More than a half century after Roosevelt's words,” many on the Right continued to insist that governments that paid too much attention to insuring “freedom from want” impeded true freedom, while many on the Left continued to emphasize that attending to such “wants” was necessary to maximize freedom. Historian Richard Pipes, who served on President Reagan's National Security Council, declared that “the entire concept of the welfare state . . . is incompatible with individual liberty.”⁵³ Conversely, Nobel-Prize-winning-economist Amartya Sen wrote in *Development as Freedom* (1999) that true freedom required not just political and civil rights, but also “substantive freedom,” which means economic and social opportunities that might include such things as jobs and subsidies, unemployment benefits, and inexpensive health care. Poor, uneducated people without land, jobs, or access to health care, might be free to associate with whomever they please and to vote and exercise other personal and civic rights, but Sen argued that they were not as free as those who possessed many more opportunities due to their greater resources.⁵⁴

⁵² Obama, 317.

⁵³ Richard Pipes, *Property and Freedom*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 284.

⁵⁴ I deal at much greater length with the Right-Left debate about freedom, including the “Second Bill of Rights,” in Ch. 5, “Freedom and Human Rights,” of my *An Age of Progress? : Clashing Twentieth-century Global Forces* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2008).

Obama's thinking on justice seems to have greatly influenced by John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and other writings, where Rawls attempted to outline what he believed was the proper balance between liberty and justice. Kloppenberg, in his *Reading Obama* (2011), depicts Rawls as the major intellectual influence on legal thinking while Obama was earning a degree at Harvard Law School. Rawls developed two main principles in working out a theory of "justice as fairness." The first "requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, while the second holds that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of the society." After Obama imbibed these principles at Harvard, he saw them reinforced in a job he took after graduation. "To a remarkable degree, Rawls's two principles align with the principles that Obama learned in Chicago as a community organizer. . . . It is the people at the bottom of the heap, the people who lack the resources to realize their life plans, who should be the focus of social policy. Democratic government should concentrate its resources not on rewarding the powerful but on improving the situation of the least advantaged."⁵⁵

In several of the president's major initiatives, including his push for more comprehensive medical care coverage and advocating a reform of the tax code so that millionaires would pay a larger percentage of their income, we see him advocating "justice as fairness." Rawls' impact, whether direct or indirect, seems apparent.

Not only does a supporter of Obama like Kloppenberg see the influence of Rawls on the president's thinking, but so too does a conservative like Michael Gerson, who served President George W. Bush as a major speech writer and a policy adviser. In a September 2011 [opinion piece](#) in *The Washington Post* he noted that Obama in a Rose Garden [statement](#) "employed variants of the word 'fair' at least 10 times." The president's brief talk was about the American Jobs Act, which he had sent Congress the previous week. Among other things, he said "I will veto any bill that changes benefits for those who rely on Medicare but does not raise serious revenues by asking the wealthiest Americans or biggest corporations to pay their fair share. We are not going to have a one-sided deal that hurts the folks who are most vulnerable." Referring to the ongoing debate with Republicans about the economy, jobs, government spending and deficit reduction, he ended his remarks by saying that the debate was "also about fairness. It's about whether we are, in fact, in this together, and we're looking out for one another. We know what's right. It's time to do what's right." (The president's [State of the Union speech](#) in January 2012 again emphasized fairness.) Gerson attributed this emphasis on fairness to Rawls's type of thinking, and added that "Rawl's conception of fairness provided a moral justification for an expansive welfare state. It also reinforced an assumption among liberals that all reasonable people are egalitarians."

Gerson, of course, favors a different approach to justice: "There is, however, another tradition of American political thought: a belief in justice as opportunity. Instead of focusing on the fair distribution of wealth in a static economy, presidents such as Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan set out to increase the economic rewards for enterprise and ambition. . . . They talked not just of equality for those at the bottom of the social ladder but of a chance to rise upon

⁵⁵ Kloppenberg, 87-92; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 14-15.

it. . . . In a free society, the most important goal is not a fair outcome but a fair chance — not economic equality but social mobility in a dynamic economy.”

In a [speech](#) in Kansas on December 6, 2011, the president spoke of the progressive ideas of Teddy Roosevelt a century earlier and about growing economic inequality. And again he emphasized fairness, calling for “rebuilding this economy based on fair play, a fair shot, and a fair share.”

Obama’s Exercise of Political Wisdom

Robert Sternberg’s claim that wisdom is “the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good” (see above, n. 3) applies especially to political wisdom, which aims to achieve just such a good. And political wisdom involves not only thought and feeling but action. Although President Obama correctly perceives the proper aim of politics and possesses many of the virtues and values of a politically wise leader, how wise his political actions have been is more debatable. In his *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes that there are some things he is “absolutely sure about—the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace.” But he admits that how to apply these values to concrete political or legal issues is much more problematic.⁵⁶

We have already seen that political wisdom is a type of practical wisdom. About this latter wisdom two scholars have written that it means “figuring out the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance. . . . It is a moral skill—a skill that enables us to discern how to treat people in our everyday social activities. . . . [It] combines will with skill. Skill without will—without the desire to achieve the proper aims of an activity—can lead to ruthless manipulation of others, to serve one’s own interests, not theirs. And will without skill can lead to ineffectual fumbling around—the sort of thing we see in people who ‘mean well’ but leave situations in worse shape than they found them. How, then, are we to learn to be practically wise? There is no recipe, formula, or set of techniques. Skills are learned through experience, and so is the commitment to the aims of a practice. That’s why we associate wisdom with experience. But not just any experience will do. Some experiences nurture and teach practical wisdom; others corrode it.” These same two scholars emphasize that practical wisdom is often about making choices and balancing values such as empathy and justice.⁵⁷

Obama recognizes that “finding the right balance between our competing values is difficult.” As an example, he notes “that even the wisest president and most prudent Congress would struggle to balance the critical demands of our collective security against the equally compelling need to uphold civil liberties.” He has also written of the need to balance freedom and individualism with “a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society

⁵⁶ Obama, 224; Kloppenberg, 249-50.

⁵⁷ Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010), 5-8.

depends. . . . the constellation of behaviors that express our mutual regard for one another: honesty, fairness, humility, kindness, courtesy, and compassion.” Commenting on these sentiments, Kloppenberg writes that “a similar litany punctuated Obama’s acceptance speech the night of the election and his inaugural address, and it seems safe to predict that he will continue to repeat this message as he attempts to reorient the Democratic Party toward the values of empathy and reciprocity, two of the central animating norms of American democratic culture.”⁵⁸

Almost a year after being elected, in an [NBC interview](#) in September 2009, President Obama alluded to the perennial debate of how we “balance freedom with our need to look out for one another,” and what role the government should play in striking this balance.

Few would argue, however, that he has always struck the right balance. Many conservatives, wishing to see more emphasis on impartial justice in the selection of Supreme Court justices, believe that the president stressed empathy too much in his appointments of Justices Sotomayor and Kagan and that a judge who is too empathetic will not be impartial. Many liberals and progressives, hoping for the display of more passionate idealism from the president, believe he has too often sacrificed it on the altar of compromise. True, he has recognized the importance of passionate idealists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman in advancing freedom, but his own temperament and role as a politician have tipped him more toward compromise than any passionate crusading. Some of his speeches revealed the idealist within, but most of his political actions displayed little passion.

Besides implicitly questioning the wisdom of how well he balanced his values, many critics faulted him for not demonstrating greater political skills. In early 2011, historian Alan Brinkley [wrote](#) in a review of James Kloppenberg’s *Reading Obama* that “much of Obama’s base—liberals, leftists, and many others—feel deeply disappointed, if not betrayed. . . . Obama’s ideas and convictions do not themselves explain his performance as president. It is Obama’s political skills, not his ideas, that seem to be his problem.” Brinkley also noted that he did not share Franklin Roosevelt’s “love of politics.” He was not a natural schmoozer, and [a New York Times article](#) observed that “his relationship with Washington insiders is described by members of both parties as ‘remote,’ ‘distant’ and ‘perfunctory.’” As I have mentioned [elsewhere](#), the contrast between the more natural politician Bill Clinton and him reminded one of the more cerebral Mikhail Gorbachev and the folksy Boris Yeltsin. And also like Gorbachev, Obama has not communicated as well as he might with average voters.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof [wrote](#) in November 2011: “Like many, I have disappointments with Obama. He badly underestimated the length of this economic crisis, and for a man with a spectacular gift at public speaking, he has been surprisingly inept at communicating.” Brinkley earlier said something similar when he wrote: “But there is a fuzziness about his [Kloppenbergs] connection between the ideas he presents . . . and the degree to which Obama has embraced them. Perhaps that fuzziness can be traced to his subject, who, two years into his presidency, still has not quite snapped into focus.”

One of strongest criticisms of Obama for his lack of political skills, and thus implicitly his political wisdom, has come in another review, this time of Bernstein’s *Obama’s Wars*. At the liberal Huffington Post website, which the president once [advised](#) conservatives to read to obtain

⁵⁸ Obama, 55-57; Kloppenberg, 220.

some balance, Michael Brenner (in October 2010) [criticized](#) the president for many failings. “Obama has no one to blame for this sorry state [in Afghanistan] other than himself. He hand picked a foreign policy team composed of Republican stay behinds, celebrities like Hillary [Clinton] who is neither loyal to him nor provides substantial experience in foreign affairs . . . and pale technocrats.” Brenner also faults the president for his poor administrative abilities, partly explained by his “total absence of executive experience.” Summing up his criticism, Brenner adds: “Finally, one comes away from this dispiriting story with a keener appreciation of Obama's limitations. He is a remarkably conventional thinker who defers to established opinion and persons. He instinctively gives the benefit of all doubts to those who embody a conservative perspective. He lacks the imagination and forcefulness to fashion his own conception of what a situation is, what it means and what the public need dictates in the way of policy action. He habitually sees the greatest risks as residing in any marked departure from the status quo; hence, he permits himself only slight deviations from it. When he does venture to so he needs the reassurance of having at least some of the most powerful powers that be by his side [like Secretary of Defense Robert Gates].”

Like Brenner, Cornel West, once called the “pre-eminent African American intellectual of his generation,” has criticized President Obama for relying on the wrong people: He’s listening to technocratic elites in his economic team who have never had any serious concern with poor people and working people.”⁵⁹

Thus, the president has many critics, on both the Right and the Left, who question some of his political judgments and thus his political wisdom. And those who argue that political skills are important in demonstrating political wisdom are correct. Effectively communicating with average voters, administering well, selecting good subordinates, and displaying imagination and creativity are important traits for any leader hoping to lead wisely. But the extent to which the president lacks these skills still needs to be weighed and summarized.

Conclusion

In summary, what are the president’s strong and weak points regarding political wisdom? On the positive side, he seems genuinely devoted to the proper final aim of politics—furthering the common good. This is not to say that being reelected is not a goal of his, only that he sees it as a means toward a higher purpose. Secondly, he desires to be a wise president, while other presidents and aspirants for the job have often given little thought to the subject of political wisdom. Thirdly, he possesses many values and virtues that thinkers from the time of Aristotle to the present day have associated, either explicitly or implicitly, with political wisdom; and he recognizes the need to strike a judicious balance between values in general. Fourthly, despite accusations of inconsistency, he has hewed steadily to a pragmatic political approach that is in keeping with the wisest American traditions.

Of the above, only the last two points taken together require elaboration. In Obama’s writings, speeches, and actions we have seen ample evidence that he values and often demonstrates realism, compassion, empathy, humility, tolerance, a willingness to compromise,

⁵⁹ Cornel West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Judith Butler et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 100.

prudence, and self-discipline. Moreover, he possesses a keen appreciation of the importance of freedom and justice. In addition, he is intelligent and knowledgeable about history and the complexities of the modern world.⁶⁰ While intelligence by itself does not make for political wisdom, it certainly helps.

Although critical in many ways of Obama's presidential actions, historian Brinkley [has written](#): "Obama is one of the most articulate and intelligent men ever to have been president. And his understanding of ideas and faiths is consistently impressive. . . . Obama grasps a wide range of political and social theories. He is remarkably open-minded in his judgment of values with which he disagrees. He embraces pragmatism at the same time that he embraces communitarianism and idealism. He understands many social worlds, both black and white."

In Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* and on blogs where he defends his viewpoint, he perceives great consistency between Obama's books, speeches, and presidential actions. In his book, Kloppenberg devotes a chapter to "Obama's American History," and writes of his treatment in *The Audacity of Hope* "of the Constitution, antebellum American democracy, Lincoln and the Civil War, and the reform movements of the Progressive, New Deal, and civil rights eras": "From his well-informed and sophisticated analysis of those issues emerges a particular conception of democracy." "His invocations of the public good have roots that stretch much more deeply into American history than do the strident appeals to individual self-interest that have become almost reflexive across the political spectrum in the last three decades." Kloppenberg also believes that "Obama is a shrewd and an unusually well-informed observer of American political life and the so-called culture wars of recent decades."⁶¹

On the Daily Beast blog in late 2010, he [wrote](#) that "the Obama who wrote *Dreams [From My Father]* 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."

Kloppenbergs' book is one of the most positive on Obama, and without directly addressing the president's political wisdom, the author suggests that his political philosophy, decision-making process, and general approach to politics is wise. "That willingness to compromise, that commitment to fallibilism and experimentation, does not reveal a lack of conviction. Instead it evinces a particular kind of conviction, the conviction of a democrat committed to forging agreement rather than deepening disagreements. Whereas many radicals as

⁶⁰ Columnist David Brooks, however, [has written](#) that "members of the Obama administration have many fine talents, but making adept historical analogies may not be among them." Brooks argues that analogies with the Progressive and New Deal eras are inappropriate because the world is much different now than it was in those earlier times. But in the article itself, Brooks recognizes that Obama realizes today's world is quite different than in the early twentieth century. The central question remains how realistic is his view of today's complex world; and, except for a few caveats yet to be mentioned about what is required in the present toxic political atmosphere, my view is: pretty realistic.

⁶¹ Kloppenberg, 153, 219, 223.

well as many conservatives believe that they possess the truth and that their opponents are evil as well as misguided, Obama accepts different political perspectives as a normal and healthy sign of a vibrant culture.”⁶² Other commentators have noted the president’s encouraging of differing viewpoints during White House policy debates.

Kloppenbergr emphasizes Obama’s pragmatism and connects it with his tolerance and humility. “Obama’s Christian humility, his pragmatist antifoundationalism, and his nuanced appreciation for the complexities of the American past all point toward the disconcerting but inescapable truth of human fallibility. . . . [he] understands the limits of certainty and the limits of compromise. He knows that democratic politics is the art of the possible, in which results are achieved persuasion and conciliation rather than force.”⁶³

One of the most quoted writers on political wisdom is Britain’s Isaiah Berlin, and he was also an advocate of a pragmatic, tolerant approach. In an essay on “Political Judgment,” he stated that political wisdom was “a gift akin to that of some novelists, that which makes such writers as, for example, Tolstoy or Proust convey a sense of direct acquaintance with the texture of life; not just the sense of a chaotic flow of experience, but a highly developed discrimination of what matters from the rest, whether from the point of view of the writer or that of the characters he describes. Above all this is an acute sense of what fits with what, what springs from what, what leads to what; how things seem to vary to different observers, what the effect of such experience upon them may be; what the result is likely to be in a concrete situation of the interplay of human beings and impersonal forces.” To Berlin it was the “concrete situation” that mattered, and his enemy was any Utopianism or absolutist, dogmatic approach that failed to acknowledge the plurality and variety of human existence. “Obviously what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness, the particular men and events and dangers, the particular hopes and fears which are actively at work in a particular place at a particular time.”⁶⁴

In a 2005 book, *Expert Political Judgment*, psychologist Philip Tetlock reported on the results of tracking more than 82,000 predictions by 284 “experts” in various fields, most of them possessing Ph.D.s. Although he discovered that the experts were often wrong, he found that the more dogmatic, less pragmatic experts were wrong far more often than those who were more open-minded. Using the debates over “intelligence failures” prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq as an example, he writes:

If we want to stop running into ideological impasses rooted in each side’s insistence on scoring its own performance, we need to start thinking more deeply about how we think. . . .
. . . *What* experts think matters far less than *how* they think. If we want realistic odds on what will happen next, coupled to a willingness to admit mistakes, we are better off turning to experts who embody the intellectual traits of Isaiah Berlin’s prototypical fox—those who “know many little things,” draw from an eclectic array of traditions, and accept ambiguity and contradiction as inevitable features of life—than we are turning to Berlin’s hedgehogs—those who “know one big thing,” toil devotedly within one tradition, and reach for formulaic solutions to ill-defined problems. [In Berlin’s essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox” he examined two different approaches to knowledge symbolized by the two animals] . . .

⁶² Ibid. 222.

⁶³ Ibid., 247, 249.

⁶⁴ Berlin, “Political Judgment,” 45-46.

... We need to recognize that political belief systems are at continual risk of evolving into self-perpetuating worldviews, with their own self-serving criteria for judging judgment and keeping score, their own stocks of favorite historical analogies, and their own pantheons of heroes and villains.⁶⁵

Thus, pragmatists like Obama tend to make better political judgments, to exercise more political wisdom than do ideologues. Although some critics have claimed that Obama is too professorial and elitist, such charges often smack of the American anti-intellectualism that historian Richard Hofstadter decried decades ago. With politicians of both major political parties so often praising our Founding Fathers, including cosmopolitan men of the Enlightenment like Ben Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, it seems illogical indeed to fault President Obama for sharing a similar cosmopolitan intellectualism. If we think of the wide-learning and respect for rationality displayed by these three Founding Fathers as aiding their political wisdom, should we not also think likewise about President Obama?

Yet, we still need to examine more closely some of the criticisms made about him. While admitting that Obama has many of the positive traits mentioned above, historian Brinkley [concluded](#) in early 2011 that

the kind of slow, deliberate consensus-building that Obama seems to prefer is not consistent with the character and needs of national politics and is certainly not consistent with the political world he has inherited—as exhibited by the obdurate and virtually unanimous opposition of the Republican caucus to almost everything he proposes. It may be that no president could be more effective than Obama has been in this political climate. The climate of crisis that he inherited would make it difficult for any leader. But that is all the more reason for him to rebut energetically the powerful opposition that is attempting to derail him. His quasi-pragmatic coolness has not so far been helpful to him or to the nation. . . .

... Unfortunately, although the traits he does reveal are admirable, it is the ones he is missing that our politics demand [for example, the powers of persuasion of Lyndon Johnson]. . . .

... He is also prone at times to waffling and allowing public opinion to push him around, an unhappy aspect of the pragmatic side of his temperament. Unlike his Republican predecessors, Obama is sometimes quick to jettison colleagues and supporters when they come under attack He occasionally backtracks on his own statements when they attract criticism. . . .

... In the increasingly polarized political world that Obama faces, dreams of consensus and reconciliation are not what progressives seek, nor what the nation needs. The world the President inherited requires political skills, conviction, toughness, and the willingness to fight—the very things Obama’s many admirers are waiting to see.

A similar [criticism](#) comes from historian John Summers, another reviewer of Kloppenberg’s *Reading Obama*. One of his main charges, more implicit than explicit, is that neither Kloppenberg nor the president pay enough attention to the irrational and non-rational side of politics, to emotions and symbols. As Summers noted about this side of politics, which he believed modern conservatives have increasingly emphasized: “In this tradition, unconscious emotional drives were thought to belie the image of the rational citizen handed down by democratic theorists. Studies of propaganda in the Great War taught journalists, publicists, and social and political scientists . . . to distrust or deny the ethical force of public opinion and the educative value of politics. Successful politicians tapped into the collective unconscious of voters, controlling their perceptions. Power was a game played out in folk rituals, images, and slogans, in misinformation campaigns, and in the subliminal stimulation sneaked into

⁶⁵ Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-4, 44, 246.

advertisements for “The American Dream.”” Such criticism fits in with that which faults the president for seeming too professorial, for not communicating effectively any overall vision to the average voter, for effective communication implies more than just rational appeals. And Summers suggests another reason for the president’s failure to articulate a clear vision: “pragmatism’s anti-metaphysical stance does not provide by itself an ethical foundation.” It is primarily about obtaining results.

In general, Summers implicitly calls into question the president’s realism when it comes to understanding how best to appeal to the American electorate. If, as Berlin suggests, realism and good political judgment entail knowing “what fits with what,” Brinkley and Summers imply that the president does not possess a realistic sense of what is required in the present political atmosphere where his appeals to reason and willingness to compromise have been ineffective.

Thus, historians Brinkley and Summers, as well as Brenner in his Huffington Post piece, collectively criticize the president for being guided by a political philosophy that seems ineffective in the present political atmosphere and for failing to display adequately certain political skills. Brenner’s list includes poor administrative abilities and a lack of “imagination and forcefulness to fashion his own conception of what a situation is, what it means and what the public need dictates in the way of policy action.”

Thus, a consensus list of the president’s negatives when it comes to exercising political wisdom might include not displaying enough passion, decisiveness, and creativity, as well as not being a highly skilled administrator nor persuasive enough when it comes to other politicians and the American public. And the latter failing might be partly due to the lack of a compelling vision as to where he wishes to lead the country.

Historians Brinkley and Summers both suggest that while President Obama might possess many fine qualities, he is “a man out of joint with his times”—as historian Gordon Wood once wrote about the revolutionary Thomas Paine.⁶⁶ Is the present political climate simply too toxic, are the Republicans too uncompromising for a leader who emphasizes that political realism must be balanced with idealism and who values compassion, empathy, humility, tolerance, a willingness to compromise, prudence, and self-discipline?

Political theorist and president of the University of Pennsylvania Amy Gutmann and Harvard professor of government Dennis F. Thompson suggest an alternative to replacing the president with a less compromising individual. After noting that House Speaker John A. Boehner, “pressed to explain why he would not try to compromise, said, ‘I reject the word,’” they [write](#), “If its [Congress’s] members won’t relearn the value of compromise, then voters must use the next election to show that they want representatives who care enough about governing to try to compromise. This does not mean accepting those who abandon their principles or forgo partisanship. But it does mean choosing those who accept that compromises by their very nature will be impure from all partisan perspectives. So voters, too, may need to free, and speak, their minds.”

Throwing out of office those unwilling to compromise in order to better serve the public good does not mean being less passionate about our own individual values. As Obama has

⁶⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 222.

reminded us we need passionate advocates of freedom and justice, like many of the nineteenth century abolitionists and Martin Luther King. But we also need politicians skilled at compromising for the public good. Perhaps another man, John Kennedy, who like Obama wrote a best-selling book (*Profiles in Courage*) a few years before becoming president, expressed best our present need more than a half century ago: “We shall need compromises in the days ahead, to be sure. But these will be, or should be, compromises of issues, not of principles. We can compromise our political positions, but not ourselves. We can resolve the clash of interests without conceding our ideals. And even the necessity for the right kind of compromise does not eliminate the need for those idealists and reformers who keep our compromises moving ahead. . . . Compromise need not mean cowardice. Indeed it is frequently the compromisers and conciliators who are faced with the severest tests of political courage as they oppose the extremist views of their constituents.”⁶⁷

In closing, the [words](#) of columnist Nicholas Kristof seem appropriate: “Many Democrats and journalists alike, feeling grouchy, were dismissive of Al Gore and magnified his shortcomings. We forgot the context, prided ourselves on our disdainful superiority—and won eight years of George W. Bush. This time, let’s do a better job of retaining perspective. If we turn Obama out of office a year from now, let’s make sure it is because the Republican nominee is preferable, not just out of grumpiness toward the incumbent during a difficult time.” This present essay has been an attempt to provide some of the perspective that Kristof thinks we need. I would elaborate upon his “preferable,” by defining it as the candidate most likely to exercise political wisdom.

One final point. In a thorough and thoughtful essay on Obama in *The Atlantic* (March 2012), James Fallows considers the president’s shortcomings, including his lack of experience for the job in 2009. But he adds that “Obama has shown the main trait we can hope for in a president—an ability to grow and adapt” (p. 65). Aristotle and others have indicated how such learning from experience can contribute to wisdom. If elected for four more years, President Obama will have something he did not have when he came to office in 2009—and something none of his rivals have—presidential experience.

⁶⁷ Kennedy, 17.