



# The Age of Obama

Conservatives rise up as the president attempts to follow through on the most liberal agenda in modern American history.

by Peter Wehner

**D**uring his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama eschewed the label “liberal” as if it were a plague, insisting that despite his voting record in the Illinois state Senate and in the U.S. Senate, he was non-ideological and trans-political, pragmatic and centrist, a unique figure who could bridge the partisan divide in Washington and unify the nation.

A lot of Americans believed Mr. Obama. And based on his first year in office, a lot of Americans were fooled.

The Obama presidency has been the most liberal, and in some respects the most radical, in modern American history. From national security to economic policies to social and cultural issues, President Obama has attempted to advance the cause of contemporary liberalism. And he and his party are paying a high political price for it.

## National security

On national security, President Obama has — with two important exceptions — taken steps that have damaged our nation. The first exception is Afghanistan, where early last year the president agreed to send 20,000 additional troops and then, in December, agreed to send an additional 30,000 troops. He is also pursuing a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that is modeled after the successful surge strategy in

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Iraq. And on Iraq, the president has not accelerated withdrawal beyond the timeline negotiated by his predecessor.

Apart from the Afghanistan and Iraq decisions, however, the Obama record is both dreary and dangerous. He is quite willing to undercut our allies (in Poland, the Czech Republic, Israel, Honduras, and Colombia, to name just a few) in order to please our adversar-

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ies (Russia, hard-line Palestinians, Cuba, Venezuela, et cetera). His trip to China was widely criticized for its lack of achievements and for President Obama’s willingness to bend to the will of the Chinese.

And the president’s efforts to engage Iran have proved to be disastrous, as the mullahs brutally crack down on dissent at home and move closer to obtaining a nuclear weapon, which would pose an existential threat to Israel and destabilize the Middle East far beyond its current state. Yet every demand made by the United States is not only ig-

nored by the Iranian regime; it is mocked. The same is true for North Korea. President Obama’s much ballyhooed outreach to the Muslim world has produced nothing tangible. And in Europe, the president has earned the reputation of being “Obama the Impotent.”

President Obama’s fecklessness abroad has been matched by his administration’s recklessness toward our intelligence agencies. This has manifest itself in two decisions: the release of previously classified Bush-era memos on interrogation tactics and Attorney General Eric Holder asking a special prosecutor to determine if criminal prosecutions of CIA operatives who interrogated terrorists in overseas locations should go forward — despite the fact that respected professional prosecutors had already examined the allegations of CIA misconduct and made a determination not to prosecute.

The effects of these have been to decimate morale at our intelligence agencies — and undoubtedly to make them far more passive when it comes to breaking up attacks on our country. Add to this an effective freeze of defense spending over the next five years, which is clearly insufficient to meet America’s global commitments, and we have the ingredients for a very dangerous situation.

Human rights also have been downplayed during the Obama era, from the president’s refusal to meet with the dalai lama to his tepid support for the forces of freedom in Iran, from his administration’s unwillingness to act in the face of mass killing on the African conti-

ment to his mute response to systematic human rights violations by China. There is a deliberate effort to pry apart moral considerations from the conduct of American foreign policy.

All of this is combined with President Obama's striking propensity to criticize the country he represents, to downplay American achievements and highlight American sins, both real and imagined. Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer summarized things this way:

As he made his *hajj* from Strasbourg to Prague to Ankara to Istanbul to Cairo and finally to the U.N. General Assembly, Obama drew the picture of an America quite exceptional — exceptional in moral culpability and heavy-handedness, exceptional in guilt for its treatment of other nations and peoples. With varying degrees of directness or obliqueness, Obama indicted his own country for arrogance, for dismissiveness and derisiveness (toward Europe), for maltreatment of natives, for torture, for Hiroshima, for Guantánamo, for unilateralism, and for insufficient respect for the Muslim world.

The effort to undermine the moral confidence of America is part of a broader effort to diminish the influence of the United States in global affairs, to reduce both our stature and dominance, to make the United States one (unexceptional) nation among many. “No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation,” President Obama said at the United Nations. “No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed.” This view of America is what won the president the Nobel Peace Prize. It will not

earn him the affection or esteem of his fellow citizens, most of whom seem to hold our country in higher regard than the president does.

## Economy

If President Obama's foreign policy is characterized by weakness, then for his economic policy the operative word is “profligacy.”

President Obama inherited a large deficit and debt upon taking office, triggered by the financial and credit crisis of 2008. But in the face of that, the president put his foot on the fiscal accelerator. He passed

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a hugely expensive (\$787 billion) stimulus package. Then he signed into law a \$410 billion omnibus spending bill, complete with more than 8,500 earmarks. He followed that up with a record-setting \$3.6 trillion budget — all of this *before* turning his attention to health care, which, if his reforms are enacted, would translate into the most expensive social program in history.

In 2009, the U.S. ran a deficit of \$1.4 trillion. President Obama is on course to double the national debt in six years and nearly triple it in 10. Our national debt is projected to stand at \$17.1 trillion 10 years from now, which translates into more than \$50,000 for every American. These numbers are staggering and unsustainable; the enor-

mous size of the deficit and debt is likely to fuel a sharp rise in both taxes and inflation. And all of this is taking place in an economy that is weak, with unemployment in 2009 having reached the highest level in more than a quarter-century (and far exceeding what the Obama administration predicted). Nor are we seeing the type of strong recovery that has characterized previous post-recession rebounds. The recession technically may be over, but the recovery so far is anemic, and job growth nonexistent.

President Obama is not only vastly enlarging the size of government, he is also pushing for increasing its power and reach, most especially in creating a government-run health care system. Health care is the president's beachhead, the means by which he hopes to transform government's relationship with the economy and the citizenry, to move America from a limited welfare state into a full-blown one. This would lead to even greater dependence on the state — habits that are hard to break once they are acquired.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once said:

What we need is a strong State determined to maintain in good repair the frame which surrounds society. But the frame should not be so heavy or so elaborate as to dominate the whole picture. Ordinary men and women who are neither poor nor suffering should not look to the State as a universal provider ... We should not expect the State to appear in the guise of an extravagant good fairy at every christening, a loquacious and tedious companion at every stage of life's journey, the unknown mourner at every funeral.

When the State becomes as pow-



Just several weeks into his term, President Barack Obama signs an executive order lifting some restrictions on federal funding of destructive embryonic stem-cell research.

erful as President Obama wants it to be, there are damaging civic and moral ramifications to it.

## Social issues

One of President Obama's most important acts in his first year was nominating Sonia Sotomayor to replace David Souter on the Supreme Court. The selection of Sotomayor did not alter the ideological balance of the court; Souter, after all, was a reliable liberal vote. But it did replace an aging liberal Supreme Court justice (70 years old) with a relatively young one (age 55).

One disturbing element of the Sotomayor pick is that, in her pre-Supreme Court speeches, she argued that a judge's "aspiration of impartiality" is just that, an aspiration, one that is impossible to meet. She argued there are no "objective stances," but only a "series of perspectives." And according to Sotomayor, her particular Latina perspective was superior to everyone

else's. This kind of identity politics, if practiced on the highest court in the land, could be quite destructive.

Two months before nominating Sotomayor, President Obama lifted some restrictions on federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research. In the words of my Ethics and Public Policy Center colleague Yuval Levin:

Even for those of us who expected the worst from the Obama stem cell policy, the actual text of his Executive Order is a bit of a shock. It describes no particular ethical restraints whatsoever — not against funding the use of embryos created for research, or cloned embryos, or anything else. And it offers not even a mention of an ethical debate. The only case for the policy it makes is that "advances over the past decade

in this promising scientific field have been encouraging, leading to broad agreement in the scientific community that the research should be supported by Federal funds." Agreement in the scientific community seems to be all that matters in making federal funding policy. And it then leaves it up to NIH (National Institutes of Health) to make all the rules. It's all science and no ethics, and doesn't even bother to pretend otherwise.

Then there is the matter of abortion. Within days of taking office, President Obama reversed the Mexico City Policy, which prohibited U.S. money from funding international groups that promote or perform abortions. The policy, put in place by Ronald Reagan, was based on the belief that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abor-



Gay activists march in front of the White House in October. The president has been criticized by homosexual-rights groups for not fighting aggressively enough for their agenda.

tions or promote abortion, either here or abroad. President Obama holds the opposite view.

Perhaps the most important issue when it comes to federal policy on abortion has to do with health care.

As this article was going to press, the final outcome of the abortion debate was unknown. But here's what we do know: The bill passed in late December by the Senate took unprecedented steps toward government funding of abortion. It also eviscerated the spirit of the Hyde Amendment, which for more than 30 years largely has prevented taxpayer dollars from funding abortions. The Senate "compromise" bill departs from that tradition and creates an elaborate accounting scheme to explicitly allow taxpayer subsidies for health insurance coverage that includes abortion. It allows states to opt out of offering health insurance plans that cover

abortion, but citizens in those states will still subsidize abortion coverage in other states.

On a cluster of gay-rights issues, the president's record is mixed. In November, he signed pro-gay legislation that widened federal hate-crimes laws to provide special protection based on sexual orientation and gender identity — a dozen years after it was introduced. A White House official called it "a very, very quiet but important victory."

The president has said that he wants to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which protects states from being forced to recognize same-sex marriages from other states. He also continues to believe that employment laws should be expanded to provide special protection based on employees' sexual orientation and gender identity, and that openly gay individuals should be able to

serve in the military.

But President Obama has actually done relatively little to push for these changes. The president has, in fact, been criticized by homosexual-rights groups for not fighting aggressively enough for their agenda.

It seems clear that the president, while undeniably liberal on social issues, is approaching them gingerly. He realizes they are explosive, and have the capacity to derail his agenda and possibly even his presidency.

What is notable is the degree to which the Obama presidency has revived and strengthened the pro-life community. That was demonstrated with the Stupak amendment to health care reform, which passed the Democratically-controlled House with the support of every Republican and 64 Democrats (see accompanying story). It's little wonder

why: A Rasmussen poll in September showed that just 13 percent of Americans want health care reform to use tax dollars to fund abortions.

### Conservative surge

The Obama presidency has had an enormous impact on American politics — but not in the ways his supporters envisioned.

The country is becoming more conservative during the Age of Obama. For example, self-identified conservatives now outnumber self-identified liberals by a ratio of about 2-to-1. Trust in government is at the lowest point we have seen in a dozen years. And support for health care reform, the president's signature domestic issue, has been dropping steadily since last summer. "The mood of America is glum," according to a recent Pew poll.

President Obama himself has suffered from a historic drop in support during his first year in office. "All presidents fall from their

honeymoon highs," *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reports, "but in the history of polling, no newly elected American president has fallen this far this fast." The president also has become the most polarizing first-year president in the history of polling.

Near the end of last year, the overall job approval rating for Congress was less than 25 percent.

There are lessons to be drawn from all this. America remains a conservative country — not on everything and not all the time, of course, but on most issues, most of the time. President Obama is attempting to push through an agenda that is very much at odds with the views and wishes of much of the polity. There

is a kind of progressive paternalism at work, a sense that liberal, Ivy

League-educated officials are the repository of extraordinary wisdom and competence and the rest of the country should therefore defer to them, their betters.

Thankfully, this isn't happening. Like a virus attacking the human body, the Obama agenda

is creating its own political antibodies. That shouldn't surprise anyone. The United States is a nation of remarkable strength and resilience, with its people having shown the capacity for regeneration and self-renewal. There is a basic moral self-confidence that is part of the American character.

President Obama, in championing the agenda he is, has awakened much of the citizenry. They see what is unfolding before their eyes and they are showing, in any number of ways, that they are not pleased. If this continues, as it almost surely will, the American people will do to the president and his party what they have done so often in the past: hold their political leaders accountable for their actions.

This is likely to be a year of fairly harsh judgment on contemporary liberalism and a year of success for modern conservatism. Thanks to President Obama, the debate has been fully joined, and a huge amount rests on its outcome. ●

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# Democrats stand for life

Michigan Rep. Bart Stupak took on his own party as he championed a pro-life amendment to the health care reform bill.

by Ben Domenech

As the debate over national health care reform raged recently in Washington, D.C., the issue of federally funded abortion became a lightning rod for Democrats on Capitol Hill.

In the limelight was Rep. Bart Stupak, a pro-life Democrat from Michigan.

Stupak has been through many battles with the pro-abortion leadership of his own party, but none as prominent or as publicly divisive as the recent conflict.

"I don't think the party leadership expected this," Democratic Congressman Bart Stupak tells *Citizen*. "They really did not think we would make such a big issue out of it. And they were wrong."

While Democratic Party leadership remains solidly in favor of taxpayer funding for abortions, part of its strategy for regaining majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate in 2006 was built around electing more moderate members — Democrats who could compete in Republican districts, thanks to their views on social policy, particularly abortion. There is now a coalition of Republicans and Democrats in the House opposed to abortion-on-demand.

Stupak has risen to leadership on the Democratic side of this coalition, a role that placed him at the center of the political whirlwind late last year. A 16-year representative from the 1st district of Michigan, Stupak led a group of roughly 40 Democratic House members who pledged to stand against the health care reform package backed by Speaker Nan-



"I'm getting a lot of heat from my party," says Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich. "They're probably going to primary me; they're going to make life pretty miserable; they're going to try to shut me down."

cy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and President Barack Obama unless it contained assurances that no federal money would go toward abortion.

Under the version of the health care bill originally presented in the House, there was nothing to prevent the subsidization of abortion coverage with federal funds. The bottom line, according to health policy experts and pro-life advocates, is that Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers stood to gain millions in federal funding, effectively performing a legal end run around the late Rep. Henry Hyde's legislation prohibiting the use of federal funds to pay for abortions.

"The Hyde Amendment has prohibited exactly this kind of taxpayer funding for abortions since 1976," says Charmaine Yost, president of Americans United for Life. "But before these brave con-

gressmen put their amendment forward, there was nothing in this bill to prevent this direct taxpayer funding. The truth is that within this health care legislation, we are confronting the greatest expansion of abortion since *Roe v. Wade*."

Seeking to correct this problem and hold the line on taxpayer funding, Stupak, a Roman Catholic, joined with Republican Joe Pitts of Pennsylvania, an evangelical, to co-sponsor a pro-life amendment to the health care legislation. They were joined by Democrats Brad Ellsworth of Indiana, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, Dan Lipinski of Illinois and Kathy Dahlkemper of Pennsylvania, among others, and spent days arguing for the amendment in the press and on the House floor. These Democrats stood strong in spite of massive pressure from the abortion lobby and President Obama, who said they were seeking to solve a "fab-

ricated” problem being propagated by “people who are bearing false witness.”

“You’ve heard that this is all going to mean government funding of abortion. Not true,” President Obama said during an Aug. 19 conference call with faith-based groups. “This is all, these are all fabrications that have been put out there in order to discourage people from meeting what I consider to be a core ethical and moral obligation, and that is that we look out for one another, that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper.”

Yet, according to Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee, “The bill backed by the White House explicitly authorizes the government plan to cover all elective abortions.”

FactCheck.org, a project of the nonpartisan Annenberg Public Policy Center, confirmed Johnson’s assessment: “Though we of course take no position on whether the legislation should allow or not allow coverage for abortions, the House bill does just that.”

## Coming together

Taking a stand against the speaker, majority leader and president of your own party is never an easy thing, and for some time, it appeared as if the bipartisan pro-life coalition would not even get a chance to add its amendment to the legislation.

“Speaker Pelosi had no intention of allowing a vote on the floor on the amendment,” Yoest says. “But pro-lifers from across the country, Republicans and Democrats, came together to make it happen. Pro-lifers shut down the switchboards with phone calls; they engaged, and they were heard.”

The roadblock held, and Pelosi realized she would not have sup-

port for the health care legislation if she did not allow a vote on the pro-life amendment. After a lengthy debate during a rare Saturday session, the House supported the Stupak-Pitts amendment in overwhelming fashion, 240-194. The health care package then passed by a vote of 220-215.

Polls indicate that Stupak’s position, and those of the 40 Democrats, is supported by wide margins among the American people. A Washington Post/ABC News poll conducted after the vote found that 61 percent support “barring coverage for abortions for those receiving public subsidies.” A CNN/Opinion Research Corp. poll conducted around the same time found that 60 percent oppose public funding of abortion.

Meanwhile, in the Senate, seven Democrats took a stand for life by supporting a pro-life amendment to health care reform similar to Stupak’s. They are: Sens. Evan Bayh of Indiana; Bob Casey of Pennsylvania; Kent Conrad of North Dakota; Byron Dorgan of North Dakota; Edward Kaufman of Delaware; Ben Nelson of Nebraska; and Mark Pryor of Arkansas. That amendment failed.

Yoest says it is vital that pro-lifers let pro-life Democrats know they have support as they confront pushback within their own party.

“It’s so critically important that we let these courageous pro-life legislators know that we will have their back,” she says.

## Intense pressure

For all intents and purposes, Stupak is now the national face of pro-life Democrats, even though it is a role he did not initially seek. He admits the pressure has been intense.

“I’m getting a lot of heat from my party,” Stupak says. “They’re probably going to primary me;

they’re going to make life pretty miserable; they’re going to try to shut me down.”

Indeed, Stupak and his fellow pro-life Democrats have seen significant blowback from pro-abortion activists. Planned Parenthood and others came back firing after the amendment passed, cranking up the disinformation machine and targeting districts of those Democratic members who voted for life.

The activist group Health Care for America NOW! promised to oppose vulnerable Democrats who voted with Stupak. NARAL Pro-Choice America said it would consider supporting primary challenges against Democrats who voted pro-life, and launched a television ad in Michigan targeting Stupak for his position. The narrator of the ad intones: “Why would politicians like Bart Stupak introduce abortion into America’s health care debate? Why?”

Liberal group CREDO Action even encouraged its activists to send wire coat hangers to about 20 Democrats who voted for Stupak’s amendment, as a symbol of “back-alley abortions.”

Yet when asked if this fight is worth the political cost, Stupak answers without hesitation.

“Is it worth it? Absolutely,” he says. “If you believe in something, you have to stand up for it, no matter what anyone throws at you. You can’t back down on issues as important as this. It’s just that simple.” ●

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