

May 26, 2014

The Veterans Dept. failures have more of the liberal press turning on president bystander. Ron Fournier of the National Journal writes on how he became the "superhero of excuses." Ezra Klein mounts a defense and Fournier says;  
*... The inconvenient truth is that Klein's kind of thinking lets the president off the hook, unaccountable for promises broken and opportunities lost. Rather than change Washington's culture of polarization, zero-sum game politics, and spin, Obama surrendered to it almost immediately. On health insurance reform, government debt, and loosening immigration laws, Obama shares blame with obstinate House Republicans for fumbling potential compromise. On climate change and gun control, Obama knew (or should have known) his rhetoric was setting up voters for disappointment. Rather than roll back Bush-era terrorism programs that curb civil liberties, Obama deepened them.*

*The launch of the Affordable Care Act and the worsening of conditions at the Veterans Affairs Department are emblematic of Obama's inattention to the hard work of governing. He is slow to fire poor-serving Cabinet members and quick to dismiss controversies as "phony scandals." To the Obama administration, transparency is a mere talking point. The great irony of his progressive presidency: Democrats privately admit that Obama has done as much to undermine the public's faith in government as his GOP predecessor. The Green Lantern Theory is an excuse for failure.*

Dana Milbank of WaPo calls him president passive.

*... Obama said Wednesday that he doesn't want the matter to become "another political football," and that's understandable. But his response to the scandal has created an inherent contradiction: He can't be "madder than hell" about something if he won't acknowledge that the thing actually occurred. This would be a good time for Obama to knock heads and to get in front of the story. But, frustratingly, he's playing President Passive, insisting on waiting for the VA's inspector general to complete yet another investigation, this one looking into the Phoenix deaths.*

*While declaring that "we have to let the investigators do their job," Obama wasn't waiting. "The IG indicated that he did not see a link between the wait and them actually dying," the president told reporters, referring to the 40 veterans in Phoenix.*

*Few had thought Obama would take a bolder stand on Wednesday, as indicated by the network reporters doing their stand-ups in the briefing room before he walked in.*

*"The first thing we expect to hear from the president is no announcement about Eric Shinseki having to resign," said CBS News's Major Garrett.*

*"There will be no personnel announcements," said ABC's Jonathan Karl.*

*Said NBC's Peter Alexander, "We don't expect any dramatic new information coming out of the president's mouth."*

*Obama met these expectations. ...*

Back to some of our favorites as [Peter Wehner](#) posts on the narrative of epic incompetence.

*The last eight months have battered the Obama administration. From the botched rollout of the health-care website to the VA scandal, events are now cementing certain impressions about Mr. Obama. Among the most damaging is this: He is unusually, even epically, incompetent. That is not news to some of us, but it seems to be a conclusion more and more people are drawing.*

*The emerging narrative of Barack Obama, the one that actually comports to reality, is that he is a rare political talent but a disaster when it comes to actually governing. The list of his failures is nothing short of staggering, from shovel-ready jobs that weren't so shovel ready to the failures of healthcare.gov to the VA debacle. But it also includes the president's failure to tame the debt, lower poverty, decrease income inequality, and increase job creation. He promised to close Guantanamo Bay and didn't. His administration promised to try Khalid Sheikh Mohammed before a civilian jury in New York but they were forced to retreat because of outrage in his own party. Early on in his administration Mr. Obama put his prestige on the line to secure the Olympics for Chicago in 2016 and he failed.*

*Overseas the range of Obama's failures include the Russian "reset" and Syrian "red lines" to Iran's Green Revolution, the Egyptian overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, and Libya post-Gaddafi. The first American ambassador since the 1970s was murdered after requests for greater security for the diplomatic outpost in Benghazi were denied. ...*

More from [Wehner](#).

*... There is something oddly impressive when it comes to the sheer scope of this administration's failures. To have gone more than five years as president and to have almost no governing successes to point to is a standard most people, and most politicians, could not hope to attain. Yet Mr. Obama, being the historic figure that he is, decided to enter previously uncharted territory.*

*At some point I suppose it was inevitable that Jimmy Carter would be pushed aside when it came to incompetence. Now he has.*

Another answer to Ezra Klein from [Jonathan Tobin](#).

*... according to liberal blogger Ezra Klein, the fault lies not with Obama but with his office. In a piece published on his Vox site, Klein makes the argument that it is unfair to expect Obama to succeed when the presidency is designed to be ineffective. In Klein's view, instead of blaming Obama for being an absentee president, we should be scolding James Madison and Alexander Hamilton for crafting a Constitution that didn't provide a president with the ability to govern because of the checks and balances incorporated into the system. Those who differ with this view are, he wrote, subscribing to a "Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency" in which the commander-in-chief is invested with magical powers.*

*This is, to put it mildly, bunk. No American president who respects the Constitution (a dubious proposition when applied to Obama) can be a dictator. But the presidency has evolved from its bare-bones origins at the Federal Convention of 1787 into one that both liberals and*

conservatives have often dubbed an “imperial” institution. To say that Obama hasn’t the power to succeed is to engage in denial of both history and logic.

*Were we having this discussion in the 19th century rather than the 21st century, Klein might have a point. Up until the Civil War, American presidents had only a tiny federal bureaucracy to rule and lacked the ability to influence many domestic issues, though even then some larger-than-life characters like Andrew Jackson were able to wield enormous power by both constitutional and unconstitutional means. The vast expansion of the national budget and its consequent expansion of federal power that the Civil War helped create changed that. But even in the late 19th century, presidents had but a fraction of the ability to influence events that they do today.*

*However, in the 20th century, the quaint notions of the early republic with its part-time Congress (meeting only a few months out of each year) and tiny federal payrolls were forgotten as the presidency grew along with the country and the government. ...*

**Abe Greenwald** penned an extensive review of five years of disasters in Middle East policy. We have here only the introduction and closing paragraphs. (The whole piece is 10,000 words.) **Follow this link** if you want to read about the obama foolishness and mistakes blow by blow and country by country.

*... The most tangible change brought on by Bush’s foreign policy was its domestic impact. By 2008, Americans were sick of war and tired of the Middle East altogether. Thus, one of Barack Obama’s biggest selling points was his promise to end the war in Iraq, extricate the country from the region, and pursue a more contrite foreign policy. Once elected, President Obama set out to honor his campaign pledge. The question of his ideological disposition can be debated endlessly, but whatever its precise contours, it translated into policies that largely reversed Bush positions in the Middle East. Where Bush was particularly supportive of our closest regional ally, Obama pressured Israel for concessions. Where Bush reached out to the Iranian people in solidarity against the regime that was our chief antagonist, Obama rebuffed ordinary Iranians and offered an “open hand” to the regime itself.*

*Between the two poles of Israel and Iran, Obama made clear to other Middle East leaders that his main concern was staying out of their affairs. As he told the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news station soon after taking office: “Too often the United States starts by dictating.” Unlike Bush, Obama implied, he would stand back and “listen.” And he has made good on his word to shrink American influence and undo the disruptive excesses of the Bush years.*

*What have we gotten in return for our more humble posture in the Middle East? The answer, as a case-by-case examination of the most important examples reveals, is this: a new age of great peril. Under Barack Obama’s leadership, in almost every square inch of the Middle East, the strategic position of the United States has decayed. And the region itself is far worse off than it was when he took office. ...*

*... It would be the height of unfairness to blame the Obama administration outright for everything that’s happened in the Middle East in the past five years. The region’s bad actors and cultural disorders are often well beyond the reach of the United States, regardless of who’s in office. But*

*limitations are one thing—ineptitude another. It's simply hard to find a single instance of President Obama responding to recent regional events in a way that has paid off either for the United States or its allies. At the same time, America's antagonists—chiefly Iran and its enablers—have been emboldened and are now ascendant.*

*If this is what the Obama administration has gotten in return for a more humble American posture, then it's time to drop that posture. Dangers like rolling civil wars, a near-nuclear Iran, a re-Talibanized Afghanistan, and a resurgent al-Qaeda will not vanish on their own. This administration has three years to reduce the damage that's been done. The challenge is enormous, but, despite all these setbacks, the United States remains the strongest power in world history. And, as we've seen, a lot can happen in a short amount of time.*

---

---

---

## National Journal

### How Obama Became the Superhero of Excuses

***Meant to mock president's critics, the 'Green Lantern' theory underscores the gap between his promise and his performance.***

by Ron Fournier

You helped elect an untested presidential candidate, a man almost as liberal as you. He promised to heal the oceans, make health care an inalienable right, and transform Washington's toxic culture. You mocked Republicans, independents, and squishy Democrats who had the audacity to criticize your guy, much less doubt the inevitability of his victory. President Obama won—twice—and then didn't live up to anybody's expectations, including his own.

What do you do? Well, if you're [Ezra Klein](#) and a coterie of inflexibly progressive pundits, you repurpose [an attack](#) used against President George W. Bush's bombastic approach to geopolitics. You call anybody who questions Obama's leadership style a [Green Lanternist](#). In a [post for Vox](#) stretching beyond 2,500 words, Klein makes his case against Obama critics.

"Presidents consistently overpromise and underdeliver," he begins, a fair start. Surely, the editor-in-chief of Vox is going to make the obvious point that presidents and presidential candidates should know enough about the political process (including the limits on the executive branch) to avoid such a breach of trust.

Klein is a data guy. He must know that the public's faith in government and politics is on a decades-long slide, a dangerous trend due in no small part to the fact that candidates make promises they know they can't keep. In Washington, we call it pandering. In the rest of the country, it's called a lie. Klein yawns.

What they need to say to get elected far outpaces what they can actually do in office. President Obama is a perfect example. His 2008 campaign didn't just promise health care reform, a stimulus bill, and financial regulation. It also promised a cap-and-trade bill to limit carbon emissions, comprehensive immigration reform, gun control, and much more. His presidency, he said, would be change American could believe in. But it's clear now that much of the change he

promised isn't going to happen—in large part because he doesn't have the power to make it happen.

Now, wait. A Harvard-trained lawyer and constitutional scholar like Obama didn't stumble into the 2008 presidential campaign unaware of the balance of powers, the polarization of politics, the rightward march of the GOP, and other structural limits on the presidency. He made those promises because he thought those goals were neither unreasonable nor unattainable. Either that, or he was lying.

Notice that the broken promises are pawned off to nonhuman forms ("his 2008 **campaign**" pledged ... "**It** also promised ... ") rather than Obama himself. The verbal gymnastics are an early hint that the main purpose of the essay is to shelter Obama from blame. There's so much more.

You would think voters in general and professional media pundits in particular would, by now, be wise to this pattern. But they're not.

Actually, we may not be as smart as Klein but we're wise to this pattern of broken promises. We get it. We just don't accept it. Why does Klein? Why do so many other progressives and Obama apologists settle for so little?

Each disappointment wounds anew. Each unchecked item on the To Do list is a surprise. Belief in the presidency seems to be entirely robust to the inability of any particular president to make good on their promises. And so the criticism is always the same: Why can't the president be more like the Green Lantern?

There it is, the straw man. Rather than conduct the important debate about the balance of powers and the structure of government in the 21st century, some liberals prefer to distort views that don't affirm their own. Nobody expects the president to be a superhero. Most of us would settle for one who is effective, engaged, empathetic, and transparent about how he or she conducts the people's business. Simple, not super.

According to Brendan Nyhan, the Dartmouth political scientist who coined the term, the Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency is "the belief that the president can achieve any political or policy objective if only he tries hard enough or uses the right tactics." In other words, the American president is functionally all-powerful, and whenever he can't get something done, it's because he's not trying hard enough, or not trying smart enough.

Nyhan further separates it into two variants: "the Reagan version of the Green Lantern Theory and the LBJ version of the Green Lantern Theory." The Reagan version, he says, holds that "if you only communicate well enough the public will rally to your side." The LBJ version says that "if the president only tried harder to win over Congress they would vote through his legislative agenda." In both cases, Nyhan argues, "we've been sold a false bill of goods."

That is a good summary of a theory that, in fairness, raises important issues about the public's understanding of the presidency. Journalists should remind readers that Congress is the first branch of government, and the Supreme Court is another check on the executive branch. No

fair-minded person would absolve the Republican House of blame for Washington's dysfunction.

The American public is not stupid, at least not as dumb as Klein, Nyhan, and other Green Lantern accusers must think. Voters know the president isn't "all-powerful." They don't think he wears a cape beneath his suit. They certainly know, perhaps better than any of us in Washington, that good things don't always come to those who work hard.

The Green Lantern Corps is a fictional, intergalactic peacekeeping entity that exists in DC Comics. Members of the Corps get a power ring that's capable of creating green energy projections of almost unlimited power. The only constraint is the willpower and imagination of the ring's wearer ....

I can't tell whether this is a nerdy riff meant to entertain his like-minded readers or a sarcastic rant intended to insult the rest of us. Maybe it's both. Did I mention that Klein is a smart dude?

The Founding Fathers were rebelling against an out-of-control monarch. So they constructed a political system with a powerful legislature and a relatively weak executive. The result is that the U.S. president has little formal power to make Congress do anything. He can't force Congress to vote on a bill. He can't force Congress to pass a bill. And even if he vetoes a bill Congress can simply overturn his veto. So in direct confrontations with Congress—and that describes much of American politics these days—the president has few options.

If you paid attention in high school civics class, you can skip this part. Same, too, for the long stretches on Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and a no-duh study about how when a president takes a position on an issue the opposing party becomes far more likely to take the opposite position. No college term paper is complete without historical filler and a study documenting the obvious

But please don't miss the part where Klein quotes *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd and me criticizing Obama's leadership style and skills.

This kind of thing both lets Congress off the hook and confuses Americans about where the power actually lies in American politics—and thus about who to hold accountable.

Again, it's only in Klein's imagination that anybody believes in "this kind of thing"—that a president has superpowers or deserves singular blame. Oddly, while our ignorance is central to his attack, Klein concedes that we understand that a constitutional balance of powers limits the presidency: "Green Lantern theorists don't deny any of this."

The inconvenient truth is that Klein's *kind of thinking* lets the president off the hook, unaccountable for promises broken and opportunities lost. Rather than change Washington's culture of polarization, zero-sum game politics, and spin, Obama surrendered to it almost immediately. On [health insurance reform](#), government [debt](#), and loosening immigration laws, Obama shares blame with obstinate House Republicans for fumbling potential compromise. On climate change and gun control, Obama knew (or should have known) his rhetoric was setting up voters for disappointment. Rather than roll back Bush-era terrorism programs that curb civil liberties, Obama deepened them.

The launch of the Affordable Care Act and the worsening of conditions at the Veterans Affairs Department are emblematic of Obama's inattention to the hard work of governing. He is slow to fire poor-serving Cabinet members and quick to dismiss controversies as "phony scandals." To the Obama administration, transparency is a mere talking point. The great irony of his progressive presidency: Democrats privately admit that Obama has done as much to undermine the public's faith in government as his GOP predecessor. The Green Lantern Theory is an excuse for failure.

## Washington Post

### Obama is President Passive over the Veterans Affairs scandal

by Dana Milbank

It doesn't inspire great confidence that President Obama, on the day [he finally decided to comment about excessive wait times for veterans' medical appointments](#), showed up late to read his statement.

The White House briefing room is only about 100 feet from the Oval Office, but Obama arrived 13 minutes after the scheduled time for [his remarks](#), the first since the day [the scandal](#) broke late last month with a report that [40 veterans had died in Phoenix while waiting to see doctors](#).

Over the weekend, the president's chief of staff assured the public that [Obama was "madder than hell"](#) about what happened at the Department of Veterans Affairs, but in person Obama didn't seem very angry. Like [VA Secretary Eric Shinseki](#), Obama wasn't entirely convinced something bad had happened.

"If these allegations prove to be true, it is dishonorable," he said. "If there is misconduct, it will be punished."

Obama spoke of only "the possibility that somebody was trying to manipulate the data" on appointment wait lists, and he suggested that "whatever is wrong" may be "just an episodic problem."

But there are no "ifs" about it: Numerous inquiries and leaked memos over several years point to ["gaming strategies"](#) employed at VA facilities to make wait times for medical appointments seem shorter — and these clearly aren't limited to those reported in Phoenix; [Albuquerque](#); [Fort Collins, Colo.](#); and elsewhere. [Lawmakers](#) in [both parties](#) have spoken of a systemic problem at the agency, and [the American Legion, citing "poor oversight," has called for Shinseki's resignation](#) — the first time it has made such a gesture in more than 70 years.

Obama said Wednesday that he doesn't want the matter to become "another political football," and that's understandable. But his response to the scandal has created an inherent contradiction: He can't be "madder than hell" about something if he won't acknowledge that the thing actually occurred. This would be a good time for Obama to knock heads and to get in front of the story. But, frustratingly, he's playing President Passive, insisting on waiting for the VA's inspector general to complete yet another investigation, this one looking into the Phoenix deaths.

While declaring that “we have to let the investigators do their job,” Obama wasn’t waiting. “The IG indicated that he did not see a link between the wait and them actually dying,” the president told reporters, referring to the 40 veterans in Phoenix.

Few had thought Obama would take a bolder stand on Wednesday, as indicated by the network reporters doing their stand-ups in the briefing room before he walked in.

“The first thing we expect to hear from the president is no announcement about Eric Shinseki having to resign,” said CBS News’s Major Garrett.

“There will be no personnel announcements,” said ABC’s Jonathan Karl.

Said NBC’s Peter Alexander, “We don’t expect any dramatic new information coming out of the president’s mouth.”

Obama met these expectations. Referring frequently to his notes, he offered the platitude that veterans “are the best that our country has to offer,” and he said that long waits for veterans’ medical care have “been a problem for decades, and it’s been compounded by more than a decade of war.” He assured his television audience that “we have been working really hard” to lessen the delays, and that “we don’t have to wait to find out if there was misconduct to dig in and make sure that we’re upping our game.”

He assured Americans that the disability-claim backlog has been cut in half in the past year, and that “there are millions of veterans who are getting really good service from the VA.” This may all be true, but it’s a bit like pointing out after a plane crash that many other flights landed safely.

The Associated Press’s Jim Kuhnhenn asked whether Shinseki is responsible for what happened.

Obama replied that “I am going to make sure there is accountability throughout the system after I get the full report.”

Steve Holland of Reuters followed up: “If he’s not to blame, then who is?”

Obama repeated that he’s “waiting to see what the results of all this review process yields.”

Garrett asked about bonuses paid to people implicated in mismanagement.

“If somebody’s mismanaged or engaged in misconduct,” Obama said, “I want them punished. So that’s what we’re going to hopefully find out from the — from the IG report as well as the audits that are taking place.”

But Obama doesn’t need an IG to tell him “if” there has been mismanagement and misconduct. He needs only his eyes and ears.



## Contentions

### [The New Obama Narrative: Epic Incompetence](#)

by Peter Wehner

The last eight months have battered the Obama administration. From the botched rollout of the health-care website to the VA scandal, events are now cementing certain impressions about Mr. Obama. Among the most damaging is this: He is unusually, even epically, incompetent. That is not news to some of us, but it seems to be a conclusion more and more people are drawing.

The emerging narrative of Barack Obama, the one that actually comports to reality, is that he is a rare political talent but a disaster when it comes to actually governing. The list of his failures is nothing short of staggering, from shovel-ready jobs that weren't so shovel ready to the failures of healthcare.gov to the VA debacle. But it also includes the president's failure to tame the debt, lower poverty, decrease income inequality, and increase job creation. He promised to close Guantanamo Bay and didn't. His administration promised to try Khalid Sheikh Mohammed before a civilian jury in New York but they were forced to retreat because of outrage in his own party. Early on in his administration Mr. Obama put his prestige on the line to secure the Olympics for Chicago in 2016 and he failed.

Overseas the range of Obama's failures include the Russian "reset" and Syrian "red lines" to Iran's Green Revolution, the Egyptian overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, and Libya post-Gaddafi. The first American ambassador since the 1970s was murdered after requests for greater security for the diplomatic outpost in Benghazi were denied. (For a comprehensive overview of President Obama's failures in the Middle East, see [this outstanding essay](#) by Abe Greenwald.) The president has strained relations with nations extending from Canada to Germany, from Israel to Afghanistan to Poland and the Czech Republic to many others. All from a man who promised to heal the planet and slow the rise of the oceans.

But that's not all. The White House response to everything from the VA and IRS scandals to the seizure of AP phone records by the Department of Justice is that it learned about them from press reports. More and more Mr. Obama speaks as if he's a passive actor, a bystander in his own administration, an MSNBC commentator speaking about events he has no real control over. We saw that earlier today, when the president, in trying to address the public's growing outrage at what's happening at the VA, insisted he "will not stand for it" and "will not tolerate" what he has stood for and tolerated for almost six years. His anger at what's happening to our veterans seems to have coincided with the political damage it is now causing him.

We've learned the hard way that Mr. Obama's skill sets are far more oriented toward community organizing than they are to governing. On every front, he is overmatched by events. It's painful to watch a man who is so obviously in over his head. And more and more Americans are suffering because of it.

## Contentions

### [Obama's Epic Incompetence \(continued\)](#)

by Peter Wehner

Yesterday I wrote a [post](#) about Barack Obama's epic incompetence. Now, as if to prove my assertion, Karen DeYoung wrote a [Washington Post story](#) that begins this way:

A year after President Obama announced a major new counterterrorism strategy to take the country beyond the threats that flowed directly from the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, much of the agenda he outlined remains unfinished or not even begun.

In [an ambitious address delivered a year ago](#) Friday at the National Defense University, Obama said that the core of al-Qaeda was “on the path to defeat” and that the upcoming end of the war in Afghanistan had [brought America to a “crossroads.”](#)

But many of the changes Obama outlined have proved easier said than done, including new rules governing the use of force abroad, increased public information on and congressional oversight of [lethal attacks with drones](#), and efforts to move the CIA out of the killing business.

Some initiatives have become mired in internal debates, while others have taken a back seat to other pressing issues and perceived new terrorism dangers. Congress, while demanding faster change in some areas, has resisted movement in others.

So you can add this to the list of Mr. Obama’s ineptness.

There is something oddly impressive when it comes to the sheer scope of this administration’s failures. To have gone more than five years as president and to have almost no governing successes to point to is a standard most people, and most politicians, could not hope to attain. Yet Mr. Obama, being the historic figure that he is, decided to enter previously uncharted territory.

At some point I suppose it was inevitable that Jimmy Carter would be pushed aside when it came to incompetence. Now he has.

## **Contentions**

### **Powerless President? Obama’s Lamé Excuse**

by Jonathan S. Tobin

In the wake of the VA scandal, President Obama’s cheering section in the press has been scrambling to come up with an excuse for his latest lackluster response to a governmental problem. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney told the country that Obama first heard about the disaster at the VA while watching television, the same story we were told about his discovery of the IRS scandal as well as other instances of potential misconduct. But the fact that this absentee president is incapable of coming up with original excuses about his slow response time to the fiascos that occur on his watch is just the tip of the iceberg.

Though Obama arrived at the Oval Office claiming that he would transform America in a blaze of hope and change, he has proven incapable of fixing the most mundane issues, let alone reboot the country’s political culture or turn back the oceans. Obama’s presidency is stuck in neutral as his second term drifts steadily into lame duck territory. Washington gridlock, the complexities of foreign problems that the president thought would be solved by the magic of his personality (Russian “reset,” Iran engagement, and Middle East peace), and the difficulty of rolling out his signature health-care law have left him looking not so much defeated as helpless. When he spoke to the country about the VA scandal that may have led to as many as 40 deaths of veterans kept waiting for medical service, he lacked passion. Even though VA Secretary Eric

Shinseki had clearly failed in his five and half years to address the agency's problems, Obama was prepared to give him more time. The administration's slow response was seen as a function of a government that simply didn't work. For those not still in thrall to Obama's historic status this state of affairs is a damning indictment of his leadership style and inability to hold his appointees accountable for incompetence and/or failure.

But according to liberal blogger Ezra Klein, the fault lies not with Obama but with his office. [In a piece published on his Vox site](#), Klein makes the argument that it is unfair to expect Obama to succeed when the presidency is designed to be ineffective. In Klein's view, instead of blaming Obama for being an absentee president, we should be scolding James Madison and Alexander Hamilton for crafting a Constitution that didn't provide a president with the ability to govern because of the checks and balances incorporated into the system. Those who differ with this view are, he wrote, subscribing to a "Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency" in which the commander-in-chief is invested with magical powers.

This is, to put it mildly, bunk. No American president who respects the Constitution (a dubious proposition when applied to Obama) can be a dictator. But the presidency has evolved from its bare-bones origins at the Federal Convention of 1787 into one that both liberals and conservatives have often dubbed an "imperial" institution. To say that Obama hasn't the power to succeed is to engage in denial of both history and logic.

Were we having this discussion in the 19th century rather than the 21st century, Klein might have a point. Up until the Civil War, American presidents had only a tiny federal bureaucracy to rule and lacked the ability to influence many domestic issues, though even then some larger-than-life characters like Andrew Jackson were able to wield enormous power by both constitutional and unconstitutional means. The vast expansion of the national budget and its consequent expansion of federal power that the Civil War helped create changed that. But even in the late 19th century, presidents had but a fraction of the ability to influence events that they do today.

However, in the 20th century, the quaint notions of the early republic with its part-time Congress (meeting only a few months out of each year) and tiny federal payrolls were forgotten as the presidency grew along with the country and the government. Contemporary presidents have at their disposal vast and numerous Cabinet departments and sundry agencies that have been gifted with virtually plenipotentiary powers over states and municipalities. They needn't resort to attempts to govern by executive orders as Obama has done to throw their weight around. As Obama proved in his first term, the bully pulpit of the presidency and the ability to pressure Congress to act can result not only in giving the man in the White House a trillion-dollar stimulus but also the ability to transform America's health-care system.

But Klein tells us not to believe our lying eyes and ears and instead believe that Obama's doldrums are the function of his office. He dissects criticisms of Obama's inability to work with Congress or to effectively communicate his agenda to the nation by claiming that those who have done so were flukes. Such "Green Lantern Presidents" as Lyndon Johnson, whose legendary ability to ram bills through Congress despite bitter opposition makes Obama's refusal to deal with the legislative branch look particularly bad, and Ronald Reagan, who used the bully pulpit of the White House to change both foreign and domestic policies, were operating in different times and under different circumstances. He also asserts that partisan divisions are exacerbated by stark ideological splits with the opposition party always believing that it is in their interests to oppose the president on every conceivable issue (as both George W. Bush and Obama could attest).

It is true that the 21st century president has problems that even Reagan and LBJ didn't face in eras where each party had its share of liberals and conservatives. But the power of the presidency has continued to expand as well. As Obama has perhaps belatedly realized the courts have given him wide latitude to enact policy on issues like carbon emissions. He can also use a Judiciary Department to selectively enforce laws in ways that overshadow the will of Congress.

But none of this gainsays the fact that Obama is simply incompetent in the business of political persuasion and in administration. That he lacks these basic skills that have always been considered essential to a successful presidency cannot be lain at the feet of Madison and Hamilton.

I write more about Klein's potshot at Alexander Hamilton [in a subsequent post](#).

## Commentary

### [He's Made It Worse: Obama's Middle East](#)

by Abe Greenwald

In the last days of George W. Bush's presidency, the *Economist* delivered a damning assessment: "Abroad, George Bush has presided over the most catastrophic collapse in America's reputation since the second world war." In the view of the magazine's editors, "a president who believed that America's global supremacy was guaranteed by America's unrivalled military power ended up demonstrating the limits of both."

Without question, the United States paid a large price for Bush's policies outside the United States. There were two unresolved wars, thousands of American dead, and the lingering castigations of assorted parties around the globe.

Of course all policy decisions are trade-offs, and Bush's demonstrated not only the limits of American power but also its possibilities. In return for our sacrifices we saw al-Qaeda decimated and the American homeland secured against attack. By the time the 43rd president left office, an American-led coalition had established a flawed but democratic ally in the heart of the Muslim world. Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, moreover, had given up his weapons of mass destruction, a development whose full benefit would be appreciated a decade later when Qaddafi's regime fell and his conventional arms were dispersed to jihadists in North Africa.

By the end of Bush's presidency, some saw the United States as fearless, others saw us as stumbling, and still others as dangerously belligerent. But for all the outrage about unilateralism and cowboy diplomacy, American relations in the larger Middle East functioned within long-standing diplomatic boundaries. Bush promoted freedom in the region but never jeopardized pragmatic relations with the most important autocracies and monarchies, for better or worse. Some European capitals were upset with Washington, but this caused no long-term rift in transatlantic relations.

The most tangible change brought on by Bush's foreign policy was its domestic impact. By 2008, Americans were sick of war and tired of the Middle East altogether. Thus, one of Barack Obama's biggest selling points was his promise to end the war in Iraq, extricate the country from the region, and pursue a more contrite foreign policy. Once elected, President Obama set out to

honor his campaign pledge. The question of his ideological disposition can be debated endlessly, but whatever its precise contours, it translated into policies that largely reversed Bush positions in the Middle East. Where Bush was particularly supportive of our closest regional ally, Obama pressured Israel for concessions. Where Bush reached out to the Iranian people in solidarity against the regime that was our chief antagonist, Obama rebuffed ordinary Iranians and offered an “open hand” to the regime itself.

Between the two poles of Israel and Iran, Obama made clear to other Middle East leaders that his main concern was staying out of their affairs. As he told the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news station soon after taking office: “Too often the United States starts by dictating.” Unlike Bush, Obama implied, he would stand back and “listen.” And he has made good on his word to shrink American influence and undo the disruptive excesses of the Bush years.

What have we gotten in return for our more humble posture in the Middle East? The answer, as a case-by-case examination of the most important examples reveals, is this: a new age of great peril. Under Barack Obama’s leadership, in almost every square inch of the Middle East, the strategic position of the United States has decayed. And the region itself is far worse off than it was when he took office.

## **II. The Egypt Reversals...**

... It would be the height of unfairness to blame the Obama administration outright for everything that’s happened in the Middle East in the past five years. The region’s bad actors and cultural disorders are often well beyond the reach of the United States, regardless of who’s in office. But limitations are one thing—ineptitude another. It’s simply hard to find a single instance of President Obama responding to recent regional events in a way that has paid off either for the United States or its allies. At the same time, America’s antagonists—chiefly Iran and its enablers—have been emboldened and are now ascendant.

If this is what the Obama administration has gotten in return for a more humble American posture, then it’s time to drop that posture. Dangers like rolling civil wars, a near-nuclear Iran, a re-Talibanized Afghanistan, and a resurgent al-Qaeda will not vanish on their own. This administration has three years to reduce the damage that’s been done. The challenge is enormous, but, despite all these setbacks, the United States remains the strongest power in world history. And, as we’ve seen, a lot can happen in a short amount of time.



