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Op-Ed Columnist

Is Obama Punking Us?

By **FRANK RICH**

“AUGUST is a challenging time to be president,” said Andrew Card, the former Bush White House chief of staff, as he offered [unsolicited advice to his successors in a television interview](#) last week. “I think you have to expect the unexpected.”

He should know. Thursday was the eighth anniversary of “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U. S.,” the President’s Daily Brief that his boss ignored while on vacation in Crawford. Aug. 29 marks the fourth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina’s strike on the Louisiana coast, which his boss also ignored while on vacation in Crawford.

So do have a blast in Martha’s Vineyard, President Obama.

Even as we wait for some unexpected disaster to strike, Beltway omens for the current White House are grim. Obama’s [poll numbers are approaching free fall](#), we are told. If he fails on health care, he’s toast. Indeed, many of the bloviators who spot a fatal swoon in the Obama presidency are the same doomsayers who in August 2008 were predicting his Election Day defeat because he couldn’t “close the deal” and clear the 50 percent mark in matchups with John McCain.

Here are two not very daring predictions: Obama will get some kind of health care reform done

come fall. His poll numbers will not crater any time soon.

Yet there is real reason for longer-term worry in the form of a persistent, anecdotal drift toward disillusionment among some of the president's supporters. And not merely those on the left. This concern was perhaps best articulated by an Obama voter, a real estate agent in Virginia, featured on [the front page of The Washington Post last week](#). "Nothing's changed for the common guy," she said. "I feel like I've been punked." She cited in particular the billions of dollars in bailouts given to banks that still "act like they're broke."

But this mood isn't just about the banks, Public Enemy No. 1. What the Great Recession has crystallized is a larger syndrome that Obama tapped into during the campaign. It's the sinking sensation that the American game is rigged — that, as [the president typically put it](#) a month after his inauguration, the system is in hock to "the interests of powerful lobbyists or the wealthiest few" who have "run Washington far too long." He promised to smite them.

No president can do that alone, let alone in six months. To make Obama's goal more quixotic, the ailment that he diagnosed is far bigger than Washington and often beyond politics' domain. What disturbs Americans of all ideological persuasions is the fear that almost everything, not just government, is fixed or manipulated by some powerful hidden hand, from commercial transactions as trivial as the sales of prime concert tickets to cultural forces as pervasive as the news media.

It's a cynicism confirmed almost daily by events. Last week [Brian Stelter of The Times reported](#) that the corporate bosses of MSNBC and Fox News, Jeffrey Immelt of General Electric and Rupert Murdoch of News Corporation, had sanctioned their lieutenants to broker what a G.E. spokesman called a new "level of civility" between their brawling cable stars, Keith Olbermann and Bill O'Reilly. A Fox spokesman later [confirmed to Howard Kurtz of The Post](#) that "there

was an agreement” at least at the corporate level. Olbermann said he was a “party to no deal,” and in any event what looked like a temporary truce ended after The Times article was published. But the whole scrape only fed legitimate suspicions on the right and left alike that even their loudest public voices can be silenced if the business interests of the real American elite decree it.

You might wonder whether networks could some day cut out the middlemen — anchors — and just put covert lobbyists and publicists on the air to deliver the news. Actually, that has already happened. The most notorious example was [the flock of retired military officers](#) who served as television “news analysts” during the Iraq war while clandestinely lobbying for defense contractors eager to sell their costly wares to the Pentagon.

The revelation of that scandal did not end the practice. Last week [MSNBC had to apologize](#) for deploying the former Newsweek writer Richard Wolffe as a substitute host for Olbermann without mentioning his new career as a corporate flack. Wolffe might still be anchoring on MSNBC if the blogger Glenn Greenwald hadn’t [called attention to his day job](#). MSNBC assured its viewers that there were no conflicts of interest, but we must take that on faith, since we still don’t know which clients Wolffe represents as a senior strategist for his firm, Public Strategies, whose chief executive is the former Bush White House spin artist, Dan Bartlett.

Let’s presume that Wolffe’s clients do not include the corporate interests with billions at stake in MSNBC and Washington’s Topic A, the health care debate. If so, he’s about the only player in the political-corporate culture who’s not riding that gravy train.

As Democrats have pointed out, the angry hecklers disrupting town-hall meetings convened by members of Congress are not always ordinary citizens engaging in spontaneous grass-roots

protests or even G.O.P. operatives, but [proxies for corporate lobbyists](#). One group [facilitating the screamers is FreedomWorks](#), which is run by the former Congressman Dick Armey, [now a lobbyist](#) at the DLA Piper law firm. Medicines Company, a global pharmaceutical business, has paid DLA Piper [more than \\$6 million in lobbying fees in the five years Armey has worked there](#).

But the Democratic members of Congress those hecklers assailed can hardly claim the moral high ground. Their ties to health care interests are merely more discreet and insidious. As Congressional Quarterly [reported last week](#), industry groups contributed almost \$1.8 million in the first six months of 2009 alone to the 18 House members of both parties supervising health care reform, Nancy Pelosi and Steny Hoyer among them.

Then there are the 52 conservative Blue Dog Democrats, who have balked at the public option for health insurance. Their cash intake from insurers and drug companies outpaces their Democratic peers by an average of 25 percent, [according to The Post](#). And let's not forget the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, which has [raked in nearly \\$500,000 from a single doctor-owned hospital](#) in McAllen, Tex. — the very one that Obama has cited as a symbol of runaway medical costs ever since it was [profiled in The New Yorker this spring](#).

In this maze of powerful moneyed interests, it's not clear who any American in either party should or could root for. The bipartisan nature of the beast can be encapsulated by the remarkable progress of Billy Tauzin, the former Louisiana congressman. [Tauzin was a founding member](#) of the Blue Dog Democrats in 1994. A year later, he bolted to the Republicans. Now he is chief of PhRMA, the biggest pharmaceutical trade group. In the 2008 campaign, Obama ran a television ad pillorying Tauzin for his role in preventing Medicare from negotiating for lower drug prices. Last week [The Los Angeles Times reported](#) — and [The New York Times confirmed](#) — that Tauzin, an active player in White House health care negotiations, had secured a behind-

closed-doors flip-flop, enlisting the administration to push for continued protection of drug prices. Now we know why the president has ducked his campaign pledge to broadcast such negotiations on C-Span.

The making of legislative sausage is never pretty. The White House has to give to get. But the cynicism being whipped up among voters is justified. Unlike Hillary Clinton, whose chief presidential campaign strategist unapologetically did double duty as a high-powered corporate flack, Obama promised change we could actually believe in.

His first questionable post-victory step was to assemble an old boys' club of Robert Rubin protégés and Goldman-Citi alumni as the White House economic team, including a Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, who failed in his watchdog role at the New York Fed as Wall Street's latest bubble first inflated and then burst. [The questions about Geithner's role in adjudicating the subsequent bailouts aren't going away](#), and neither is the angry public sense that the fix is still in. We just learned that nine of those bailed-out banks — which in total received \$175 billion of taxpayers' money, but as yet have repaid only \$50 billion — are [awarding a total of \\$32.6 billion in bonuses for 2009](#).

It's in this context that Obama can't afford a defeat on health care. A bill will pass in a Democrat-controlled Congress. What matters is what's in it. The final result will be a CAT scan of those powerful Washington interests he campaigned against, revealing which have been removed from the body politic (or at least reduced) and which continue to metastasize. The Wall Street regulatory reform package Obama pushes through, or doesn't, may render even more of a verdict on his success in changing the system he sought the White House to reform.

The best political news for the president remains the Republicans. It's a measure of how out of touch G.O.P. leaders like Mitch McConnell and John Boehner are that they keep trying to scare

voters by calling Obama a socialist. They have it backward. The larger fear is that Obama might be just another corporatist, punking voters much as the Republicans do when they claim to be all for the common guy. If anything, the most unexpected — and challenging — event that could rock the White House this August would be if the opposition actually woke up.

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