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**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Obama!**

By **FRANK RICH**

NOT since Clark Kent changed in a phone booth has there been an instant image makeover to match Barack Obama's in the aftermath of his health care victory. "He went from Jimmy Carter to F.D.R. in just a fortnight," said [one of the "Game Change" authors, Mark Halperin, on MSNBC](#). "Look at the steam in the man's stride!" [exclaimed Chris Matthews](#). "Is it just me, or does Barack Obama seem different since health care passed?" [wrote](#) Peter Beinart in The Daily Beast, which, like The Financial Times, ran an illustration portraying the gangly president as a newly bulked-up Superman.

What a difference winning makes — especially in America. Whatever did (or didn't) get into Obama's Wheaties, this much is certain: No one is talking about the clout of Scott Brown or Rahm Emanuel any more.

But has the man really changed — or is it just us? Fifteen months after arriving at the White House, Obama remains by far the most popular national politician in the country, even with a sub-50 percent approval rating. And yet he's also the most enigmatic. While he is in our face more than any other figure in the world, we still aren't entirely sure what to make of him.

Depending on where you stand — or the given day — he is either an overintellectual, professorial wuss or a ruthless Chicago machine pol rivaling the original Boss Daley. He is

either a socialist redistributing wealth to the undeserving poor or a tool of Wall Street's Goldman Sachs elite. He is a terrorist-coddling, A.C.L.U.-tilting lawyer or a closet Cheneyite upholding the worst excesses of the Bush administration's end run on the Constitution. He is a lightweight celebrity who's clueless without a teleprompter or a Machiavellian mastermind who has ingeniously forged his Hawaiian birth certificate, covered up his ties to Islamic radicals and bamboozled the entire mainstream press. He is the reincarnation of J.F.K., L.B.J., F.D.R., Reagan, Hitler, Stalin, Adlai Stevenson or Nelson Mandela. (Funny how few people compared George W. Bush to anyone but Hitler and his parents.)

No wonder that eight major new Obama books are arriving in the coming months, as Howard Kurtz [reported in The Washington Post last week](#). And that's just counting those by real authors, like Bob Woodward and Jonathan Alter, not the countless anti-Obama diatribes. There's a bottomless market for these volumes not just because their protagonist remains popular but also because we keep hoping that the Obama puzzle might be cracked once and for all, like the Da Vinci Code.

The first of these books, out this week, is full of intriguing clues. Titled "[The Bridge](#)" and written by David Remnick, the editor of The New Yorker, it portrays Obama as fairly steady in his blend of liberal and centrist views, however much they (like everyone else's) may have evolved over decades. Even his cultural tastes combined the progressive with the cautious. In the apartment he shared with a roommate at Occidental College, the playlist at late-night parties ran the gamut from Bob Marley and the Talking Heads to "that not-so-great soft Grover Washington stuff," a friend recalls with some disdain.

If Obama's belief system was fairly consistent, his public persona was not. Remnick returns repeatedly to the notion that Obama is a "shape-shifter," with a remarkable ability to come

across differently to disparate constituencies. Some of that reflects his agility at shifting rhetorical gears when, say, speaking to a living-room gathering on Chicago's Near North Side or at a black church — a talent not unknown to some white politicians, starting with Bill Clinton. But much of this has less to do with Obama's performance style than with how various audiences respond to his complex, hard-to-pigeonhole poly-racial-cultural-geographical identity. As far back as 2004 — when Obama was still in the Illinois Senate — a writer at The Chicago Tribune, Don Terry, framed what remains the prevailing Obama takeaway to this day. “He's a Rorschach test,” Terry wrote. “What you see is what you want to see.”

Last week, [after I wrote about the role race plays](#) in some of the apocalyptic right-wing hysteria about the health care bill, a friend who is a prominent liberal Obama supporter sent me an e-mail flipping my point. He theorized that race also plays a role in “the often angry and intemperate talk” he has been hearing from “left-liberal friends for the past many months about what a failure and a disappointment” the president has been. In his view, “Obama never said anything, while running, to give anyone the idea” that he was other than a “deliberate, compromise-seeking bipartisan moderate.” My friend wondered if white liberals who voted for Obama expected a “sweeping Republicans-be-damned kind of agenda” in part — and he emphasized “in part!” — because “they expect a black guy to be intemperate, impetuous, impatient” rather than “measured, deliberate, patient.”

That was one provocative expansion of Obama-as-Rorschach test I hadn't encountered before, and I guess anything is possible, particularly when it involves race in America. But what is unquestionably true is my friend's underlying premise — that the Obama we see now is generally consistent with the one he presented in the 2008 campaign. Many, if not all, of the positions that have angered liberals since he entered the White House line up with his positions then, including his stubborn and futile faith in the prospect of bipartisanship in Washington.

When the 2008 Obama [called Afghanistan an essential war](#) and vowed to take out terrorist havens in Pakistan, he wasn't just posturing to prove he was as hawkish as Hillary Clinton — which is what some chose to hear. Though he nominally supported a public option as a plank of health care reform, it was not a high priority and he rarely mentioned it, [according to a review](#) of his campaign speeches, interviews and debates by Sam Stein of The Huffington Post. Obama never said anything to suggest that he was interested in economic interventionism as bold as, say, the potential nationalization of failing banks. He was unambiguous in his professed opposition to same-sex marriage and largely silent on gun control. And as Jake Tapper of ABC News [chronicled last week](#), Obama had even opened the door to offshore oil drilling in the weeks before Election Day.

It's not just the Tea Party right or some on the liberal left who see only the Obama they want to see. This phenomenon extends to moderate Republicans who refuse to believe that Obama agrees with them even when he does. Susan Collins, the senator from Maine, reacted to the news of the Christmas Day bomber with [an over-the-top outburst](#) accusing Obama of being soft on terrorism. Though Obama's education reforms have [increased Pell grants](#) and [nettled one liberal constituency](#), teachers' unions, Lamar Alexander, the supposedly temperate senator from Tennessee, has [characterized the president](#) as pushing “a Soviet-style, European, and even Asian higher-education model where the government manages everything.” Mitt Romney has now [started a full-tilt campaign](#) to angrily challenge the indisputable reality that “Obamacare” resembles his own health care reform package in Massachusetts.

What's clear is that Obama largely remains a fixed point even while the rest of us keep wildly revising our judgments, whether looking at him through the prism of partisan politics, race, media melodrama or any other we choose. It's our recession-tossed country, not his

presidency, that is rocked by violent mood swings.

That doesn't mean his presidency will be successful. Being consistent is not the same as being a forceful leader. If there's been an overarching, nonideological failing so far in Obama, it's been his execution of the levers of power. Whether in articulating his health care bottom line, or closing Guantánamo Bay, or moving forward on repealing "don't ask, don't tell," he has often seemed tardy or unfocused, at times missing deadlines he has set himself. The narrative that might link his presidential policies into a clear, mobilizing vision for the country remains murky, which in turn facilitates the caricature of his views from all sides.

But in the immediate aftermath of his health care victory, at least, there does seem to be real, not imagined, change in Obama's management modus operandi. Whether [challenging Karzai and Bibi](#), or [pushing through 15 recess appointments](#), or taunting those who would repeal the health care law to "[go for it](#)," this is a far more energized executive than the sometimes tentative technocrat we've often seen thus far. The pace has picked up — if not to faster-than-a-speeding-bullet Superman velocity, then at least as much as the inherent sclerosis of Washington will allow.

And not a moment too soon. The speed with which Obama navigates out of the recession, as [measured by new jobs](#) and serious financial reform, remains by far the most determinative factor in how he, his party and, most of all, the country will fare in the fractious year of 2010. If he succeeds in that all-important challenge — or, for that matter, if he fails — the enigmatic, Rorschach-test phase of Obama's still young relationship to the American people may rapidly draw to a close. It will be the moment of clarity that allows us to at last judge him, as we should all presidents, on what he's actually done rather than on who we imagine he is.

