

Obama's First Year: No Crystal Staircase

One year is too soon to measure a president or assess an administration. But here, in brief, are six propositions on Barack Obama's first year.

By Robert Borosage

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners...
— Langston Hughes*

Barack Obama is a leader of great capacities and great contradictions. Perhaps the measure of his capacities is the magnitude of his contradictions. He is a man of exceptional grace. But the grace misleads; this is a politician of intense ambition, discipline and grit. He understands and wields the power of the word. But his soaring oratory misleads, for his temperament is moderate; his predilection is for compromise. He rouses a new generation to politics, but prefers to cut the deals in the backrooms. He calls us to a new direction, then staffs his administration's team with the acolytes of the old ideas he scorns.

One year is too soon to measure a president or assess an administration. Hell, this administration has fewer than half of its political appointees in place. But here in brief are six propositions on Barack Obama's first year:

1) This is the most progressive president since Lyndon Johnson.

His election ushered in what could be the greatest era for progressive reform since the 1960s. After fighting for years simply to stave off further horrors, we're now fighting over how to get to comprehensive health care, how to address global warming, how to move the world towards nuclear disarmament. It is a big difference and should not be ignored.