

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



August 22, 2009

Op-Ed Columnist

Voices of Anxiety

By BOB HERBERT

Barack Obama is a guy who is easy to underestimate. Six years ago hardly anyone outside of Illinois had ever heard of him. Now he's America's first Zen-master president.

On Thursday, he made a jocular reference to the tendency of pundits and others to declare periodically that he's off his game and headed for disaster. He noted that in August 2008, with his poll numbers wavering and the Republicans energized by the addition of Sarah Palin to the national ticket, a lot of people were convinced that, as he put it, "Obama's lost his mojo."

"You remember all that?" he asked, smiling. "There is something about August going into September where everybody in Washington gets all wee-weed up."

Wee-weed up? I don't know what that means, but the president seemed pretty relaxed when he said it. This was the same day that he went on a radio program and did his Joe Namath routine, guaranteeing that health care reform would get done.

The president may be sanguine, but the same cannot be said of the general public, including some of Mr. Obama's most ardent supporters. The American people are worried sick over the economy, which may be sprouting green shoots from Ben Bernanke's lofty perspective but not from the humble standpoint of the many millions who are unemployed, or those who are still

working but barely able to pay their bills and hold onto their homes.

This is the reality that underlies the anxiety over the president's ragged effort to achieve health care reform. Forget the certifiabes who are scrawling Hitler mustaches on pictures of the president. Many sane and intelligent people who voted for Mr. Obama and sincerely want him to succeed have legitimate concerns about the timing of this health reform initiative and the way it is unfolding.

The president has not made it clear to the general public why health care reform is his top domestic priority when the biggest issue on the minds of most Americans is the economy. Men and women who once felt themselves to be securely rooted in the middle or upper middle classes are now struggling with pay cuts, job losses and home foreclosures — and they don't feel, despite the rhetoric about the recession winding down, that their prospects are good.

People worried about holding on to their standard of living need to be assured, unambiguously, that an expensive new government program is in their — and the country's — best interest. They need to know exactly how the program will work, and they need to be confident that it's affordable.

Mr. Obama, who has a command of the English language like few others, has been remarkably opaque about his intentions regarding health care. He left it up to Congress to draft a plan and he has not gotten behind any specific legislation. He has seemed to waffle on the public option and has not been at all clear about how the reform that is coming will rein in runaway costs. At times it has seemed as though any old "reform" would be all right with him.

It's still early, but people are starting to lose faith in the president. I hear almost daily from men and women who voted enthusiastically for Mr. Obama but are feeling disappointed. They

feel that the banks made out like bandits in the bailouts, and that the health care initiative could become a boondoggle. Their biggest worry is that Mr. Obama is soft, that he is unwilling or incapable of fighting hard enough to counter the forces responsible for the sorry state the country is in.

More and more the president is being seen by his own supporters as someone who would like to please everybody, who is naïve about the prospects for bipartisanship, who believes that his strongest supporters will stay with him because they have nowhere else to go, and who will retreat whenever the Republicans and the corporate crowd come after him.

People want more from Mr. Obama. They want him to be their champion. But they don't feel that he is speaking to them in a language that they understand. He is seen as more comfortable speaking the Wall Street lingo. People don't feel that the voices of anxiety are being heard.

Maybe they're wrong. Maybe the economy really is turning around. Maybe Mr. Obama is working on a bipartisan deal that will take us a few small steps down the road to real health care reform.

It's possible that we've been without mature leadership for so long that it's difficult to recognize it when we see it. Mr. Obama has proved the naysayers wrong time and again. But if it turns out that this time he's wrong, hold onto your hats. Because right now there is no Plan B.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)[Terms of Service](#)[Search](#)[Corrections](#)[RSS](#)[First Look](#)[Help](#)[Contact Us](#)[Work for Us](#)[Site Map](#)