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What Happened to Obama?

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IT was a blustery day in Washington on Jan. 20, 2009, as it often seems to be on the day of a presidential inauguration. As I stood with my 8-year-old daughter, watching the president deliver his inaugural address, I had a feeling of unease. It wasn't just that the man who could be so eloquent had seemingly chosen not to be on this auspicious occasion, although that turned out to be a troubling harbinger of things to come. It was that there was a story the American people were waiting to hear — and needed to hear — but he didn't tell it. And in the ensuing months he continued not to tell it, no matter how outrageous the slings and arrows his opponents threw at him.

The stories our leaders tell us matter, probably almost as much as the stories our parents tell us as children, because they orient us to what is, what could be, and what should be; to the worldviews they hold and to the values they hold sacred. Our brains evolved to "expect" stories with a particular structure, with protagonists and villains, a hill to be climbed or a battle to be fought. Our species existed for more than 100,000 years before the earliest signs of literacy, and another 5,000 years

would pass before the majority of humans would know how to read and write.

Stories were the primary way our ancestors transmitted knowledge and values. Today we seek movies, novels and “news stories” that put the events of the day in a form that our brains evolved to find compelling and memorable. Children crave bedtime stories; the holy books of the three great monotheistic religions are written in parables; and as research in cognitive science has shown, lawyers whose closing arguments tell a story win jury trials against their legal adversaries who just lay out “the facts of the case.”

When Barack Obama rose to the lectern on Inauguration Day, the nation was in tatters. Americans were scared and angry. The economy was spinning in reverse. Three-quarters of a million people lost their jobs that month. Many had lost their homes, and with them the only nest eggs they had. Even the usually impervious upper middle class had seen a decade of stagnant or declining investment, with the stock market dropping in value with no end in sight. Hope was as scarce as credit.

In that context, Americans needed their president to tell them a story that made sense of what they had just been through, what caused it, and how it was going to end. They needed to hear that he understood what they were feeling, that he would track down those responsible for their pain and suffering, and that he would restore order and safety. What they were waiting for, in broad strokes, was a story something like this:

“I know you're scared and angry. Many of you have lost your jobs, your homes, your hope. This was a disaster, but it was not a natural disaster. It was made by Wall Street gamblers who speculated with your lives and futures. It was made by conservative extremists who told us that if we just eliminated regulations and rewarded greed and recklessness, it would all work out. But it didn't work out. And it didn't work out 80 years ago, when the same people sold our grandparents the same bill of goods, with the same results. But we learned something from our grandparents about how to fix it, and we will draw on their wisdom. We will restore business confidence the old-fashioned way: by putting money back in the pockets of working Americans by putting them back to work, and by restoring integrity to

our financial markets and demanding it of those who want to run them. I can't promise that we won't make mistakes along the way. But I can promise you that they will be honest mistakes, and that your government has your back again." A story isn't a policy. But that simple narrative — and the policies that would naturally have flowed from it — would have inoculated against much of what was to come in the intervening two and a half years of failed government, idled factories and idled hands. That story would have made clear that the president understood that the American people had given Democrats the presidency and majorities in both houses of Congress to fix the mess the Republicans and Wall Street had made of the country, and that this would not be a power-sharing arrangement. It would have made clear that the problem wasn't tax-and-spend liberalism or the deficit — a deficit that didn't exist until George W. Bush gave nearly \$2 trillion in tax breaks largely to the wealthiest Americans and squandered \$1 trillion in two wars.

And perhaps most important, it would have offered a clear, compelling alternative to the dominant narrative of the right, that our problem is not due to spending on things like the pensions of firefighters, but to the fact that those who can afford to buy influence are rewriting the rules so they can cut themselves progressively larger slices of the American pie while paying less of their fair share for it.

But there was no story — and there has been none since.

In similar circumstances, Franklin D. Roosevelt offered Americans a promise to use the power of his office to make their lives better and to keep trying until he got it right. Beginning in his first inaugural address, and in the fireside chats that followed, he explained how the crash had happened, and he minced no words about those who had caused it. He promised to do something no president had done before: to use the resources of the United States to put Americans directly to work, building the infrastructure we still rely on today. He swore to keep the people who had caused the crisis out of the halls of power, and he made good on that promise. In a [1936 speech](#) at Madison Square Garden, he thundered, "Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me — and I welcome their hatred."

When Barack Obama stepped into the Oval Office, he stepped into a cycle of American history, best exemplified by F.D.R. and his distant cousin, Teddy. After a great technological revolution or a major economic transition, as when America changed from a nation of farmers to an urban industrial one, there is often a period of great concentration of wealth, and with it, a concentration of power in the wealthy. That's what we saw in 1928, and that's what we see today. At some point that power is exercised so injudiciously, and the lives of so many become so unbearable, that a period of reform ensues — and a charismatic reformer emerges to lead that renewal. In that sense, Teddy Roosevelt started the cycle of reform his cousin picked up 30 years later, as he began efforts to bust the trusts and regulate the railroads, exercise federal power over the banks and the nation's food supply, and protect America's land and wildlife, creating the modern environmental movement.

Those were the shoes — that was the historic role — that Americans elected Barack Obama to fill. The president is fond of referring to “the arc of history,” paraphrasing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous statement that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But with his deep-seated aversion to conflict and his profound failure to understand bully dynamics — in which conciliation is always the wrong course of action, because bullies perceive it as weakness and just punch harder the next time — he has broken that arc and has likely bent it backward for at least a generation.

When Dr. King spoke of the great arc bending toward justice, he did not mean that we should wait for it to bend. He exhorted others to put their full weight behind it, and he gave his life speaking with a voice that cut through the blistering force of water cannons and the gnashing teeth of police dogs. He preached the gospel of nonviolence, but he knew that whether a bully hid behind a club or a poll tax, the only effective response was to face the bully down, and to make the bully show his true and repugnant face in public.

IN contrast, when faced with the greatest economic crisis, the greatest levels of economic inequality, and the greatest levels of corporate influence on politics since the Depression, Barack Obama stared

into the eyes of history and chose to avert his gaze. Instead of indicting the people whose recklessness wrecked the economy, he put them in charge of it. He never explained that decision to the public — a failure in storytelling as extraordinary as the failure in judgment behind it. Had the president chosen to bend the arc of history, he would have told the public the story of the destruction wrought by the dismantling of the New Deal regulations that had protected them for more than half a century. He would have offered them a counternarrative of how to fix the problem other than the politics of appeasement, one that emphasized creating economic demand and consumer confidence by putting consumers back to work. He would have had to stare down those who had wrecked the economy, and he would have had to tolerate their hatred if not welcome it. But the arc of his temperament just didn't bend that far.

The truly decisive move that broke the arc of history was his handling of the stimulus. The public was desperate for a leader who would speak with confidence, and they were ready to follow wherever the president led. Yet instead of indicting the economic policies and principles that had just eliminated eight million jobs, in the most damaging of the tic-like gestures of compromise that have become the hallmark of his presidency — and against the advice of multiple Nobel-Prize-winning economists — he backed away from his advisers who proposed a big stimulus, and then diluted it with tax cuts that had already been shown to be inert. The result, as predicted in advance, was a half-stimulus that half-stimulated the economy. That, in turn, led the White House to feel rightly unappreciated for having saved the country from another Great Depression but in the unenviable position of having to argue a counterfactual — that something terrible might have happened had it not half-acted.

To the average American, who was still staring into the abyss, the half-stimulus did nothing but prove that Ronald Reagan was right, that government is the problem. In fact, the average American had no idea what Democrats were trying to accomplish by deficit spending because no one bothered to explain it to them with the repetition and evocative imagery that our brains require to make an idea, particularly a paradoxical one, “stick.” Nor did anyone explain what health care reform was supposed to accomplish (other than the unbelievable and even more uninspiring claim that it would “bend the

cost curve”), or why “credit card reform” had led to an increase in the interest rates they were already struggling to pay. Nor did anyone explain why saving the banks was such a priority, when saving the homes the banks were foreclosing didn’t seem to be. All Americans knew, and all they know today, is that they’re still unemployed, they’re still worried about how they’re going to pay their bills at the end of the month and their kids still can’t get a job. And now the Republicans are chipping away at unemployment insurance, and the president is making his usual impotent verbal exhortations after bargaining it away.

What makes the “deficit debate” we just experienced seem so surreal is how divorced the conversation in Washington has been from conversations around the kitchen table everywhere else in America. Although I am a scientist by training, over the last several years, as a messaging consultant to nonprofit groups and Democratic leaders, I have studied the way voters think and feel, talking to them in plain language. At this point, I have interacted in person or virtually with more than 50,000 Americans on a range of issues, from taxes and deficits to abortion and immigration.

The average voter is far more worried about jobs than about the deficit, which few were talking about while Bush and the Republican Congress were running it up. The conventional wisdom is that Americans hate government, and if you ask the question in the abstract, people will certainly give you an earful about what government does wrong. But if you give them the choice between cutting the deficit and putting Americans back to work, it isn’t even close. But it’s not just jobs. Americans don’t share the priorities of either party on taxes, budgets or any of the things Congress and the president have just agreed to slash — or failed to slash, like subsidies to oil companies. When it comes to tax cuts for the wealthy, Americans are united across the political spectrum, supporting a message that says, “In times like these, millionaires ought to be giving to charity, not getting it.”

When pitted against a tough budget-cutting message straight from the mouth of its strongest advocates, swing voters vastly preferred a message that began, “The best way to reduce the deficit is to put Americans back to work.” This statement is far more consistent with what many economists are saying publicly — and what investors apparently believe, as evident in the nosedive the stock market

took after the president and Congress “saved” the economy.

So where does that leave us?

Like most Americans, at this point, I have no idea what Barack Obama — and by extension the party he leads — believes on virtually any issue. The president tells us he prefers a “balanced” approach to deficit reduction, one that weds “revenue enhancements” (a weak way of describing popular taxes on the rich and big corporations that are evading them) with “entitlement cuts” (an equally poor choice of words that implies that people who’ve worked their whole lives are looking for handouts). But the law he just signed includes only the cuts. This pattern of presenting inconsistent positions with no apparent recognition of their incoherence is another hallmark of this president’s storytelling. He announces in a speech on energy and climate change that we need to expand offshore oil drilling and coal production — two methods of obtaining fuels that contribute to the extreme weather Americans are now seeing. He supports a health care law that will use Medicaid to insure about 15 million more Americans and then endorses a budget plan that, through cuts to state budgets, will most likely decimate Medicaid and other essential programs for children, senior citizens and people who are vulnerable by virtue of disabilities or an economy that is getting weaker by the day. He gives a major speech on immigration reform after deporting around 800,000 immigrants in two years, a pace faster than nearly any other period in American history.

THE real conundrum is why the president seems so compelled to take both sides of every issue, encouraging voters to project whatever they want on him, and hoping they won’t realize which hand is holding the rabbit. That a large section of the country views him as a socialist while many in his own party are concluding that he does not share their values speaks volumes — but not the volumes his advisers are selling: that if you make both the right and left mad, you must be doing something right.

As a practicing psychologist with more than 25 years of experience, I will resist the temptation to diagnose at a distance, but as a scientist and strategic consultant I will venture some hypotheses.

The most charitable explanation is that he and his advisers have succumbed to a view of electoral success to which many Democrats succumb — that “centrist” voters like “centrist” politicians. Unfortunately, reality is more complicated. Centrist voters prefer honest politicians who help them solve their problems. A second possibility is that he is simply not up to the task by virtue of his lack of experience and a character defect that might not have been so debilitating at some other time in history. Those of us who were bewitched by his eloquence on the campaign trail chose to ignore some disquieting aspects of his biography: that he had accomplished very little before he ran for president, having never run a business or a state; that he had a singularly unremarkable career as a law professor, publishing nothing in 12 years at the University of Chicago other than an autobiography; and that, before joining the United States Senate, he had voted "present" (instead of "yea" or "nay") 130 times, sometimes dodging difficult issues.

A somewhat less charitable explanation is that we are a nation that is being held hostage not just by an extremist Republican Party but also by a president who either does not know what he believes or is willing to take whatever position he thinks will lead to his re-election. Perhaps those of us who were so enthralled with the magnificent story he told in “Dreams From My Father” appended a chapter at the end that wasn't there — the chapter in which he resolves his identity and comes to know who he is and what he believes in.

Or perhaps, like so many politicians who come to Washington, he has already been consciously or unconsciously corrupted by a system that tests the souls even of people of tremendous integrity, by forcing them to dial for dollars — in the case of the modern presidency, for hundreds of millions of dollars. When he wants to be, the president is a brilliant and moving speaker, but his stories virtually always lack one element: the villain who caused the problem, who is always left out, described in impersonal terms, or described in passive voice, as if the cause of others' misery has no agency and hence no culpability. Whether that reflects his aversion to conflict, an aversion to conflict with potential campaign donors that today cripples both parties' ability to govern and threatens our democracy, or both, is unclear.

A final explanation is that he ran for president on two contradictory platforms: as a reformer who would clean up the system, and as a unity candidate who would transcend the lines of red and blue. He has pursued the one with which he is most comfortable given the constraints of his character, consistently choosing the message of bipartisanship over the message of confrontation.

But the arc of history does not bend toward justice through capitulation cast as compromise. It does not bend when 400 people control more of the wealth than 150 million of their fellow Americans. It does not bend when the average middle-class family has seen its income stagnate over the last 30 years while the richest 1 percent has seen its income rise astronomically. It does not bend when we cut the fixed incomes of our parents and grandparents so hedge fund managers can keep their 15 percent tax rates. It does not bend when only one side in negotiations between workers and their bosses is allowed representation. And it does not bend when, as political scientists have shown, it is not public opinion but the opinions of the wealthy that predict the votes of the Senate. The arc of history can bend only so far before it breaks.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 8, 2011

An earlier version of this essay referred incorrectly to the number of deportations of immigrants during President Obama's term. Around 800,000 immigrants were deported during his first two years in office; it is not the case that a million immigrants were deported in 2010, the year Mr. Obama gave a speech on immigration reform. Also, a larger number of deportations occurred during the two terms of Mr. Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush; Mr. Obama has not overseen more deportations than any other president.

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