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What a Disaster Looks Like

By PEGGY NOONAN



ObamaCare will have been a colossal waste of time—if we're lucky.

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It is now exactly a year since President Obama unveiled his health care push and his decision to devote his inaugural year to it—his branding year, his first, vivid year.

What a disaster it has been.

At best it was a waste of history's time, a struggle that will not in the end yield something big and helpful but will in fact make future progress more difficult. At worst it may prove to have fatally undermined a new presidency at a time when America desperately needs a successful one.

In terms of policy, his essential mistake was to choose health-care expansion over health-care reform. This at the exact moment voters were growing more anxious about the cost and reach of government. The practical mistake was that he did not include or envelop congressional Republicans from the outset, but handed the bill's creation over to a Democratic Congress that was becoming a runaway train. This at the exact moment Americans were coming to be concerned that Washington was broken, incapable of progress, frozen in partisanship.

His political mistakes were myriad and perhaps can be reduced to this:



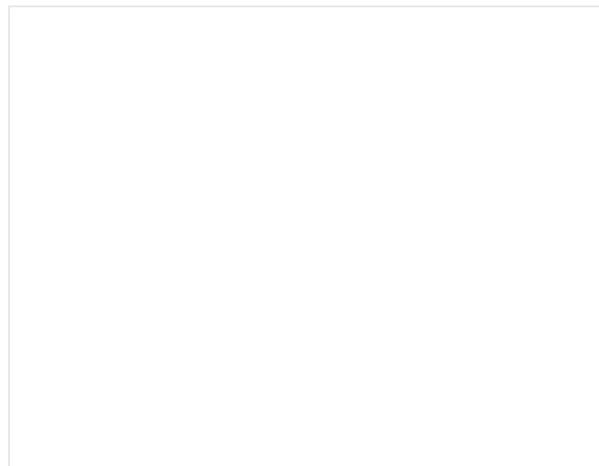
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Associated Press

President Barack Obama, accompanied by registered nurse Barbara Crane, speaks about health care reform.

There are all sorts of harm a new president can do to his presidency. Right now, part of the job of a new president in a hypermediaized environment is harm avoidance. This sounds defensive, and is at odds with the wisdom that presidents in times of crisis must boldly go forth and break through. But it all depends on what you're being bold about. Why, in 2009, create a new crisis over an important but secondary issue when we already have the Great Recession and two wars? Prudence and soundness of judgment are more greatly needed at the moment.

New presidents should never, ever, court any problem that isn't already banging at the door.



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Declarations

Peggy Noonan is a columnist for The Wall Street Journal whose work appears weekly in the Journal's Weekend Edition and on OpinionJournal.com.

They should never summon trouble. Mr. Obama did, boldly, perhaps even madly. And this is perhaps the oddest thing about No Drama Obama: In his first year as president he created unneeded political drama, and wound up seen by many Americans not as the hero but the villain.

In Washington among sympathetic political hands (actually, most of them sound formerly sympathetic) you hear the word "intervention," as in: "So-and-so tried an intervention with the president and it didn't work." So-and-so tried to tell him he's in trouble with the public and must moderate, recalibrate, back off from health care. The end of the story is always that so-and-so got nowhere. David Gergen a few weeks ago told the Financial Times the administration puts him in mind of the old joke: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb? Only one. But the lightbulb must want to change. I don't think President Obama wants to make any changes."

Sometimes when I look at the past three chief executives, I wonder if we were witnessing not three presidencies but three psychodramas played out on an intensely public stage.

What accounts for Mr. Obama's confidence and certainty?

Well, if you were a young progressive who'd won the presidency by a comfortable margin in a center-right country, you just might think you were a genius. You might not be surprised to find yourself surrounded by a cultish admiration: "They see him as a fabled figure," said a frequent White House visitor of some on the president's staff.

You might think the great strength you demonstrated during the campaign—an ability to stay in the game you're playing and not the game someone else is playing, an ability to proceed undistracted by the crises or the machinations of your opponents, but to just keep playing your slow and steady game—is a strength suitable to your presidency. If you choose to play health care, that's the game you play, straight through, no jeers from the crowd distracting you.

More Peggy Noonan

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If you were a young progressive who'd won the presidency against the odds, you probably wouldn't see yourself as someone who lucked out, with the stars perfectly aligned for a liberal victory. And you might

forget we are more or less and functionally a 50-50 country, and that you have to keep your finger very much on the pulse of the people if you're to survive and prosper.

And now here are two growing problems for Mr. Obama.

The first hasn't become apparent yet, but I suspect will be presenting itself, and soon. In order to sharpen the air of crisis he seems to think he needed to get his health-care legislation passed, in order to continue the air of crisis that might justify expanding government and sustaining its costs, and in order, always, to remind voters of George W. Bush, Mr. Obama has harped on what a horror the economy is. How great our challenges, how wicked our businessmen, how dim our future.

This is a delicate business. You can't be all rosy glow, you have to be candid. But attitude and mood matter. America has reached the point, a year and a half into the crisis, when frankly it needs some cheerleading. It can't always be mourning in America. We need some inspiration from the top, need someone who can speak with authority of what is working and can be made to work, of what is good and cause for pride. We are still employing 130 million people, and America is still competitive in the world, with innovative business leaders and practices.

The president can't be a hope purveyor while he's a doom merchant, and he appears to believe he has to be a doom merchant to justify ramming through his legislation. This particular legislation is not worth that particular price.

All this contributes to a second problem, which is a growing credibility gap. In his speech Wednesday, demanding an "up or down" vote, the president seemed convinced and committed—but nothing he said sounded true. His bill will "bring down the cost of health care for millions," it is "fully paid for," it will lower the long term deficit by a trillion dollars.

She is the author of eight books on American politics and culture. The most recent, "Patriotic Grace," was published in October 2008. Her first book, the bestseller "What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era," was published in 1990.

She was a special assistant to the president in the White House of Ronald Reagan. Before that she was a producer at CBS News in New York. In 1978 and 1979 she was an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University.

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Does anyone believe this? Does anyone who knows the ways of government, the compulsions of Congress, and how history has played out in the past, believe this? Even a little? Rep. Bart Stupak said Thursday that he and several of his fellow Democrats won't vote for the Senate version of the bill because it says right there on page 2,069 that the federal government would directly subsidize abortions. The bill's proponents say this isn't so. It would be a relief to have a president who could weigh in believably and make clear what his own bill says. But he seems to devote more words to obscuring than clarifying.

The only thing that might make his assertions sound believable now is if a group of congressional Republicans were standing next to him on the podium and putting forward a bill right along with him. Which, obviously, won't happen, for three reasons. First, they enjoy his discomfort. Second, they believe the bill is not worth saving, that at this point no matter what it contains—and at this point most people can no longer retain in their heads what it contains—it has been fatally tainted by the past year of mistakes and inadequacies.

And the third reason is that the past decade has taught them what a disaster looks like, and they've lost their taste for standing next to one.

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