

Barack Obama and the Limits of Prudence

Thomas Meaney and Stephen Wertheim • October 11, 2010

IF YOU have waited to see Barack Obama lose his cool, your moment has come. After the president finished giving the interview published in the October 15 issue of *Rolling Stone*, he charged back into the room to deliver a parting salvo. Stabbing at the air, Obama berated Democrats for “sitting on their hands complaining.” He even questioned their motives. “If people now want to take their ball and go home,” he said, “that tells me folks weren’t serious in the first place.”

How has it come to this—the president publicly doubting the motives of his own political base? Consider the grievance that stoked his anger: that progressives are unwilling to make the compromises necessary to achieve anything. Obama mocked the Left’s attitude toward health care reform: “Well, gosh, we’ve got this historic health care legislation that we’ve been trying to get for 100 years, but it didn’t have every bell and whistle that we wanted right now, so let’s focus on what we didn’t get instead of what we got.”

Saying this aloud may not help Obama. But his point is revealing. Obama and America are disenchanted today less because they have different values within the American political spectrum than because they have different orientations toward politics as a whole. More than any American president within memory, Barack Obama embodies the “ethic of responsibility” identified by the sociologist Max Weber in his lecture *Politics as a Vocation*. Obama weighs possible consequences carefully and tries to produce the best result. This comes in contrast to the “ethic of ultimate ends” favored by large swaths of the American public.

The president’s detractors—from the Tea Party to his progressive base—prefer moral imperatives to the weighing of consequences. Do what is right, they say, and if others lack the insight to follow, that’s their problem. Foreseeable consequences are beside the point. To Obama, this posture has always seemed like empty moralizing masquerading as morality, a rejection of politics itself. What seems truly right, to him, is to act in ways likely to make this world better, not to insist on noble extremes that will backfire.

An ethic of responsibility has both guided Obama’s biggest decisions to date and provoked the central criticisms he has faced. Take Afghanistan. For months the president weighed the various strategies presented by his generals and advisers. Then he rejected them all. He figured immediate withdrawal would spell certain disaster but calculated that the public would never accept another decade of nation-building, no matter how strenuously he sold the mission. In the end, he personally cobbled together the final strategy that provided 30,000 new troops yet a timetable



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for withdrawal—essential because, as Bob Woodward’s new book quotes Obama, “I can’t lose the whole Democratic Party.”

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The solution has excited no one. The Right thinks Obama abandoned democracy promotion while the Left smells a hawk. But to Obama what matters are likely consequences, not absolute principles. As he told *Rolling Stone*, “Keep in mind that the decision I have to make is always, ‘If we’re not doing this, then what does that mean? What are the consequences?’”

So, too, with economic policy. The president is not impressed with the absolute moral imperatives offered up by the Left and Right. He will not punish Wall Street for its own sake, nor does the free market strike him as inviolable. What counts are likely results, projected at the moment of decision.

He provided bailouts to prevent another Great Depression. Would you be happier, he wonders, if the entire economy went under? He loaded his stimulus with tax cuts even though his advisers said government spending stimulated the economy better. Why? To attract Republican support that might prove necessary to have a bill at all. “Usually what I’m doing is operating on the basis of a bunch of probabilities,” Obama explains. “I’m looking at the best options available based on the fact that there are no easy choices.”

In 2008 Americans wanted a prudent leader above all. They feared imminent economic collapse and regretted where George W. Bush’s moralizing had led. Now the economy has stabilized, but with unemployment unacceptably high. Band-aids no longer suffice. Americans are flirting with deeper programs for reform, whether an overhaul of financial regulation or a restoration of *laissez-faire* “freedom.” The irony cannot be lost on Obama. His success in governing pragmatically has restored the country’s appetite for principled leadership, which Bush sated more effectively.

No doubt the public should learn to appreciate, even admire, the prudence that looks like Obama’s cardinal virtue. But the public’s taste for principle will not go away simply because Obama lauds compromise. Nor should it completely. Obama has adhered so narrowly to an ethic of responsibility that he has failed to speak broadly about how he wants to change the country and lead the world. What level of social welfare does justice require? Where should the line between market activity and government authority be drawn? What kind of international society should America build or nurture?

Obama’s comments on these subjects have been so sporadic as to seem unserious and so vague as to appear disconnected from concrete policies and credible alternatives. They come across as they probably are to him: an afterthought. Without defining the overarching aims of his individual policies, Obama has made himself vulnerable to suspicions, however outlandish, that he harbors a secret agenda.

Only by recognizing the limits of his ethic of responsibility can Obama implement it well. The ethic of responsibility is not a moral value or a vision of a better society. It does not point the way toward either. It simply orients the pursuit of the values and visions one already has. It can become self-defeating if it freezes attention on quick fixes to the neglect of the values and visions that prudence is, after all, supposed to serve.

A politician who ranks prudence as the highest of all virtues lacks a vocation for politics. “Better than the alternatives” is a hollow mantra and worse slogan. It might give reason to vote for Democrats over Republicans, but it inspires little more. For

Obama's next two years, even prudence calls for principle. It's time to present a vision for America and lead.

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