

Obama revealed: The man, the president - CNN.com

By Jessica Yellin , Gabriella Schwarz and Jennifer Hyde , CNN
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CNN chief White House correspondent Jessica Yellin's documentary "Obama Revealed: The Man, The President" will re-air this week on CNN.

Charlotte, North Carolina (CNN) -- President Barack Obama was elected in part on a promise of hope and change and a vow to unite Washington and the country. Towering expectations accompanied the candidate whose election symbolized much more than political change.

"I started crying," said U.S. Rep. John Lewis, who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. "For the sons and daughters of the slaves, their offspring, for the people who have built the Capitol ... it means so much to every human being that lives in this country."

Before Obama was sworn in, senior adviser David Axelrod said to the president-elect, "It's been an incredible ride, hasn't it?"

Obama replied, "And it's just beginning."

John King: To win, Obama must make history again

Crises on many fronts confronted the new president. There was anticipation among those who elected him, but the aftermath of the contentious election would shape his time in office and frame the 2012 election.



Previewing Obama's DNC speech



Obama: Being a hands-on dad

Former Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel described the atmosphere after Election Day as "rolling thunder."



Richardson: American people trust Obama



Obama's coronation: The rerun

"You could have taken the economics, you could have taken the auto, you could have taken the

financial, you could have taken Afghanistan, you could have taken Iraq," Emanuel said. "Usually when you have a series of things you have, that's an A, that's a B, you start to prioritize. What happens when all five are As?"

Economic adviser Austan Goolsbee, one of the brains assembled in Chicago to deal with the crisis, said that "it was basically awful" and pointed to indicators demonstrating the economy was in free fall.

Larry Summers and Christina Romer were also present at the briefings. Summers said everyone in the room was "struck with the gravity of the situation," while Romer told the incoming president this was his "holy bleep moment."

Goolsbee picks up the story: "When the briefing's over, I go up to the president-elect and I say, 'You know, that's got to be the worst briefing that the president-elect's had since 1932 and maybe since Abraham Lincoln in 1860,'" Goolsbee said. "And the president says, 'Goolsbee, that's not even my worst briefing this week.'"

'On the edge of a cliff'

With more than 11 million Americans unemployed and more than 13 million homes in foreclosure, Romer said the country at the time was "hanging on the edge of a cliff."

Some in the Obama administration, such as Romer, proposed a stimulus package close to \$1 trillion, while

Republicans balked at anything even half that amount.

"It's a funny thing to say, but every \$100 billion helps," Romer said.

But Republicans objected to the spending, not convinced the cash infusion would do enough to spur growth. Hoping for bipartisan support for what ended up being a \$787 billion plan, Obama met with Republicans at the White House before he took office, days after the inauguration and on Super Bowl Sunday. He pitched the plan as a bill that would give tax cuts to almost all Americans, pay salaries for teachers and police, and build roads and bridges.

Then-Minority Leader John Boehner said ideas presented during those meetings "were rejected."

Democratic convention to highlight parties' differing visions

Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine said the package set a poor tone for the new administration and that Obama did not give bipartisanship a chance.



Can Bernanke's actions help Obama?



Can Democrats get the love back?



Writer on Obama-Clinton relationship



Is honeymoon over for Obama?

"It was all under way without full involvement of bipartisan leadership to help map out how exactly are we going to address stimulus," Snowe said.

Obama said Republicans were united against him from the beginning,

adding that he's "received a lot of criticism from my own party for going out of my way to try to solicit Republican cooperation."

Emanuel said lines were drawn then.

"Two months after the election, the Republicans said, 'This is your problem; we're going to start planning for four years from now,' " he said.

House Republicans voted against the package en masse, and only three Senate Republicans backed the final measure.

"He just got off to a poor start, and -- unfortunately the wrong foot, and set the tone for the remainder of his administration that had only yet -- had begun," said Snowe, one of the three GOP members to back the plan.

With hindsight, some of the president's closest aides said there was probably room for more "schmoozing."

"There wasn't a whole lot of time left over for sort of hand-holding and schmoozing. Perhaps we should have made more time for it. But at the time it seemed like he was spending his waking hours doing what he was supposed to do," Axelrod said.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the Recovery and Reinvestment Act saved or created more than 3 million jobs, but unemployment did not stay below 8%, as Romer predicted. Republicans slammed it as a failure.

Presidential historian Douglas Brinkley described the partisan divide as one between "the belief that government is going to solve your problem, to the belief that the era of big government is over."

Obama and his administration were trying to save the failing automobile industry at the same time as the push for the stimulus package.

"Literally they were talking about two weeks and bust," Emanuel said, describing the dire straits of American car companies.



Ex-assistant: Obama leads like he plays



DNC chair: U.S. 'absolutely better off'

Detroit squandered the first federal cash infusion from the Bush



Klein: Diversity a weakness for Democrats



Julian Castro compared to young Obama

administration. So when Chrysler and General Motors, months later, asked for more taxpayer dollars, Congress refused.

Going against the advice of some advisers, Obama bailed out the companies in a move that nearly three-quarters of Americans opposed.

The bailout ultimately saved jobs and provided the industry a safety net, but the president was not effective at selling it, indicative of a larger theme, said Obama biographer David Maraniss.

"In terms of communicating on specific issues ... he'd be great if you were sitting down for an hourlong lecture in a classroom but not necessarily trying to sell it to the public," Maraniss said. "He doesn't think in sound bites."

While the president pushed forward with his agenda, critics saw it as a string of liberal programs: stimulus, auto rescue and homeowner relief.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference the month after Obama's inauguration, conservatives railed against the Obama-supported initiatives.

"Obama is the world's best salesman of socialism," Republican Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina said at the gathering.

"Lenin and Stalin would love this stuff," former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said.

And perhaps most notably, Rick Santelli unofficially launched the tea party with a rant on CNBC.

"You know Cuba used to have mansions and a relatively decent economy. They moved from the individual to the collective," Santelli said in February 2009. "Now they're driving '54 Chevys. It's time for another tea party."

After asking for an additional \$300 billion for Wall Street, news came that failing insurance giant AIG, which had received \$170 billion in federal funds, paid millions to the executives accused of dragging down the banks.

Advisers said privately that Obama was outraged, but it took 10 months and more bonuses before the president showed his outrage in public, during an interview on CBS' "60 Minutes."

"I didn't run for office to help out a bunch of fat cat bankers running Wall Street," Obama said in December 2009.

Reggie Love, who was Obama's personal aide on the campaign trail and in the White House, said it's not the president's style to "get up on the sofa and yell and you know, scream and stomp his feet."

"I think people misconceive the expression of emotion with the idea of having emotion," Love said.

The bailout of the banking industry helped keep Wall Street alive and credit flowing, while Obama passed his Wall Street reform through Congress. But before his first 100 days were over, he managed to upset constituencies across the spectrum.

Emanuel said, "The heads of the banks hate him, and a lot of other people think all he's done is protect them. He's both a socialist and an advocate for the 1%. Go figure how you were both a socialist and an advocate for the 1% simultaneously."

End run on health care

Obama ran on a promise to reform the nation's health care system, but Emanuel was one of his confidants who cautioned against the politics of health care reform, telling the president he would "dedicate a year minimum" of his presidency to the push.

"The chances of success given 80 years is like, oh, one out of a million," Emanuel said.

Despite the warnings, reform topped the president's priorities, an initiative Maraniss said was tied to his drive to be a "great president," instead of just "another president."

Obama's plan to put the initial efforts in the hands of Congress resulted in a total impasse, with nearly a half-dozen plans floating around Capitol Hill.

Many GOP members attached words such as "government takeover," "mandated abortion" and "death panels" to the plans, while congressional committees continued to debate the legislation.

Rage soon erupted in constituent town halls across the country, and the tea party movement latched onto the health care plan as a pillar of its message, carried out through rallies, marches and speeches in the summer of 2009.

When Republican Scott Brown won the Senate seat in Massachusetts once occupied by Sen. Ted Kennedy, the late liberal lion, in January 2010, the president lost the last vote he needed to pass health care. His staff urged him to abandon the effort or return to it later.

Longtime friend and aide Valerie Jarrett said the mood in the White House was dark.

"We were in the Oval Office, and everyone was discouraged, and one of his senior advisers said to him, 'You know, Mr. President, unless you're feeling lucky, I just don't think this is gonna happen.' "

Jarrett recalls the president saying, "Look, my name's Barack Obama. And I'm in the Oval Office. I've got to be lucky."

Maraniss said the president is cautious and deliberative most of the time but is also capable of making incredibly bold moves.

He lobbied Congress and ultimately passed a bill through a procedural end run.

"The president I believe is the ultimate three-point shooter with a second left on the clock," Emanuel said. "He is, and to his credit, he's got a lot to show for it."

He accomplished something that had eluded presidents for 75 years that allowed children to stay on their parents' health care longer and prohibited insurance companies from denying coverage to those with pre-existing conditions, among other perceived successes.

But it also mandated coverage, and opponents say it will drive up the cost of coverage in the future, aspects that have only deepened partisan divides, hurried the growth of the tea party movement and supplied Republicans with talking points.

A restless base

An exchange at a town hall with Obama in September 2010 was evidence some of the president's supporters were frustrated with the economy and the status of some of his campaign promises.

At a CNBC event, supporter Velma Hart told Obama she was "exhausted of defending you, defending your administration, defending the mantle of change that I voted for and deeply disappointed with where we are right now."

Looking back on the moment, Hart said she and her friends were not "feeling the change that we were all so

excited about."

Many Latino voters were disappointed that the president failed to push for immigration reform in his first year as he had vowed.

In addition, Republicans blocked the DREAM Act that would have allowed children of undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States. **Obama's administration deported more illegal immigrants than any other.** Although he appointed Sonia Sotomayor as the first Hispanic Supreme Court justice, many Latinos, who make up an ever-growing voting bloc, were disappointed.

"I think a lot of people came in with the sort of, sort of narrower focus on what he would do for them, not really understanding he's more pragmatic perhaps than they expected," Maraniss said.

The gay community, another group that overwhelmingly supported Obama in 2008, was also disappointed heading toward the midpoint of the Obama presidency.

Candidate Obama promised a repeal of the "don't ask don't tell" military policy that barred openly gay men and women from serving in the military, but once in office he asked members of the community to wait patiently despite increased pressure in public and behind the scenes.

Jarrett said the president wanted "buy-in," including that of military leaders, to ensure "gays could serve in the military proudly and without being alienated or ostracized, and have the support."

The repeal passed through Congress and became law almost two years after Obama was elected. Jarrett said it was "one of his largest civil rights accomplishments."

As the nation's first African-American president, **Obama** was perhaps expected to tackle issues of race in ways previous presidents have not. He recently told Black Enterprise magazine he is "not the president of Black America. I'm the president of the United States of America."

Comments around two incidents with **racial undertones** received intense media coverage. **He spoke out after the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. by a white police officer outside his home, saying the police "acted stupidly."**

And more **recently Obama said if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon Martin**, the unarmed Florida teenager shot and killed by a neighborhood watchman.

While some **African-Americans have been critical of the president's failure to speak out on problems disproportionately facing the community, such as high incarceration rates and unemployment**, Harvard professor Randall Kennedy said that "great masses of black Americans have been quite realistic and have understood the special burdens that Barack Obama faced."

A shellacking

The 2010 elections were a culmination of the frustration felt around the country. Bolstered by the tea party, Republicans claimed six seats in the Senate, and 63 Republicans swept into the House, giving the GOP the majority.

Obama conceded he experienced a "shellacking" at the time, while it appeared the **American people had buyer's remorse, rejecting the president they embraced so warmly just two years earlier.**

While support for the president's policies has not been consistent, he has continued to score with his personality.

"Most Americans, polls show, like Barack Obama," Brinkley said. "They like him as a person; it's the politics they don't like."

Brinkley said the president wins points with the public when he "sings a little song," as he did with Al Green in 2012, "acts a little cool," shoots baskets or tells a joke.

"People still swoon over him," Brinkley added.

In his book, "Barack Obama: The Story," Maraniss used the Hawaiian phrase, "cool head, main thing" to describe **Obama's even-keeled temperament.** He said elements of that philosophy have played out in his presidency "for better and worse."

His closest aides said that "cool" nature has been an asset in the Oval Office.

"When things get challenging, he's at his best," Axelrod said. "So that coolness is a great quality in a leader."

Obama says fatherhood trumps schmoozing

But that characteristic has not always been an asset -- Obama has placed a priority on his time as a father over schmoozing in the capital.

Maraniss said his priorities work well for a balanced life but are "not necessarily good for a president."

The president acknowledged more efforts may be required on both sides of the aisle should he be elected for a second term to get things done. But those efforts will not come at the expense of his being a father.

Jarrett points out that Obama grew up largely without a father.

"His father abandoned him, and he's lived with that kind of missing piece in him," Jarrett said. "At a very young age, he decided he wasn't going to be the kind of father he had. He wanted to be a present father."

When asked about the role that first lady Michelle Obama plays in the president's life, Goolsbee, who has worked with the president since his time in the Senate, said, "Fundamentally he's a guy who really loves his wife."

Brinkley described her role as keeping him "grounded, to make sure his ego isn't a Macy's float that takes off."

First lady to set tone for convention

A fierce competitor, who even coaches his daughter Sasha's basketball team the Vipers, Obama is a famously avid basketball player. His aide Love often plays with the president and said he leads the country like he plays the sport.

"You know, sometimes ... you get a bad call," Love said. "But you can't extend or overextend too much emotion worrying about what just happened."

"From an efficiency standpoint, you know, you can cry about the call or you can look to the next play," Love added.

Longest 40 minutes

That calm nature was on display in one of Obama's largest national security tests.

While Obama was delivering his stand-up routine at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in 2011, halfway around the world a group of Navy SEALs was moving into position to capture or kill the world's most wanted terrorist, Osama bin Laden.

Planning for the raid started in secret months before then.

David Sanger, who chronicled the raid in his book "Confront and Conceal," said the president was intimately involved in the planning of the raid and ordered more helicopters to land inside Pakistan, where bin Laden was hiding.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said given the disagreement on how to proceed within the national security team, it was ultimately the president's call.

"He asked each and every one of us -- in the small group of the National Security Council that was -- at the table -- what our opinion was. And there was disagreement," Clinton said. "So it came down as it does in these situations -- with the hard decision having to go to the president."

When making decisions, the president said he tries to "pull back a little bit and take the long view."

"I think for me (to) be able to step back and say, 'All right, what's best for the country?' and not get caught up in the immediate fears, risks, concerns ... and pressures that you're feeling right then has probably been helpful," Obama said.

The president has described the operation as the longest 40 minutes of his life, but the path he chose, the riskiest of the options, paid off.

"To those on the left who watched how the Obama presidency played out, the surprise was his aggressiveness," Sanger said. "To those on the right, the surprise was his aggressiveness. They kept thinking

he was a community organizer from Chicago who had no concept of how to use American power."

Peter Bergen: Sense and nonsense about Obama and Osama

Long before the bin Laden raid, Obama had promised a change to American foreign policy, a change that resulted in a Nobel Peace Prize just 10 months after taking office.

Since then, he has pulled troops from Iraq, created a plan for withdrawal from Afghanistan, is believed to have unleashed a covert cyberwar against Iran's nuclear program and drastically expanded the use of armed drones to target terrorists.

The topic of drones is one the president addressed only once before.

"My most sacred duty as president and commander in chief is to keep the American people safe," Obama said. "Drones are one tool that we use."

And the policy extends to American citizens believed to be targeting the United States.

"When an American has made the decision to affiliate itself with al Qaeda and target fellow Americans ... there is a legal justification for us to try to stop them from carrying out plots," Obama said.

Asked if he struggled with the policy, Obama replied, "Absolutely."

"It's very easy to slip into a situation in which you end up bending rules thinking that the ends always justify the means," Obama said.

When America is threatened, the president has not hesitated to act on his own. But in humanitarian crises, such as Libya's, the president prefers company. Without it, he has failed to act, as with the ongoing crisis in Syria.

"Syria has created great outrage and terrible humanitarian anguish," Clinton said. "But we don't have any international consensus about the way forward."

He is aggressive at times and reserved at times, a combination some call the "Obama doctrine," and critics have charged is an example of his reluctance to lead.

"The Obama doctrine is 'less blood, less treasure, less intervention of a lengthy kind,'" Sanger said.

Failed negotiations a turning point

Eight months after the Simpson-Bowles deficit commission offered up painful solutions to help tackle the country's fiscal problems that were largely ignored by Washington and eight months after significant Democratic congressional losses in the midterms, Obama and Boehner, now House speaker, met on the golf course.

It was the start of long negotiations as both men attempted to reach an agreement to avoid a national default on America's loans and a path forward to decrease the ever-expanding debt.

"The president and I like each other," Boehner said. "I mean, we actually do get along."

While Vice President Joe Biden publicly worked on a deal with members of Congress, the president and House speaker met repeatedly in an attempt to reach a compromise.

Republicans advocated significant cuts to spending. Democrats wanted to limit tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans.

The plan constructed by Obama and Boehner would raise the debt ceiling and include changes to Social Security, Medicare, tax policy and defense spending, proposals that were difficult for members on both sides of the political aisle to swallow.

"I think he genuinely thought that there was an opportunity to do something big and meaningful to deal with our long-term debt and have what he considered productive discussions with John Boehner," Axelrod said.

Boehner insisted the two had a deal, but the president changed the terms. Obama insisted he didn't -- rather the speaker could not control his conference.

Boehner has described working with the White House as "like working with Jell-O."

Obama balked at that description, saying, "I'm sure that that is how he puts it."

"I was prepared to make ... some cuts and some changes that were very unpopular in my base and among Democrats if I got a little bit of compromise from the other side on revenue," Obama said.

Boehner said the breakdown was his greatest disappointment in his two years as speaker and it served as a turning point for the president.

Brinkley said he sees the failed negotiations as a turning point.

"It took him, I think, two years to the debt ceiling debate to understand that he was not going to be able to be the conciliatory president, the mediator in chief," Brinkley said. "He was going to be the 99-to-1 guy. He was going to have to engage in the kind of Theodore Roosevelt, roll up your shirt sleeves and pound the opponent campaign style if he wanted to get re-elected."

A year after the breakdown of the deal, the president said he will work with Republicans, where he can, but where "they don't want to compromise, I'll work around them." And that was the path he took.

2012 election

Seared after losing the grand bargain on debt reduction, the president turned his attention to a new battle: re-election.

"I think his naïveté has been finally squashed," Brinkley said. "And I don't think you'll see that naïve, 'Yes, we can' man of 2008 ever again. ... He's been through too many combat zones ... to return to that kind of innocence."

Barreling toward his battle for re-election, the president shifted his focus from wooing Republicans to winning back disappointed supporters. Women voters were chief among them.

He stood by his controversial decision to make most health care plans cover contraception and often reminds women he acted to ensure with equal pay through the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the first bill he signed as president.

For three years, the president said little on the issue of same-sex marriage. But after a statement of support from Biden during an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press," the president stopped "evolving" on the issue and came out in support of same-sex unions.

"He is not a person that likes to leave the box," Brinkley said. "But when he does, he's done it decisively. I think his embracing of gay marriage was very bold."

And in June, the administration temporarily halted the deportation of the children of undocumented immigrants.

"He said, 'OK, enough is enough. And now we're going to take administrative action,'" Jarrett recounted.

Five things to know about big change in immigration policy

For the president to be the kind of transformational leader he wants to be, he needs two terms, Brinkley said.

"You can't do it in one," Brinkley said. "So everything is riding on this election for Barack Obama."

Opinion: Obama's second term would look different

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