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US politics

An assessment of Obama's first term

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Anthony J. Bennett's article, on p. 8 of this issue of the magazine, offers a comprehensive guide to the 'balance sheet' at the end of Obama's first term of office. Bennett reviews Obama's performance on matters of domestic, economic, energy and foreign policy — and he would appear to subscribe to the judgment that Obama gave himself on the Oprah Winfrey show when he was asked to consider his first year in charge: 'a solid B+'.

A polarising president

Following on from the polarising presidency of George W. Bush, Obama has himself been a polarising president. From the very start of the 111th Congress, the Republicans in the House (then in the minority) made it clear that their aim was to make him a 'one-term president' and the constant refrain from the right-wing media, dominated by Fox News, has been that Obama is the 'worst president ever'. Interestingly, however, the political left is split over Obama, with disappointment and disillusionment never too far from the surface. In a must-read article in *New York* magazine, Democratic commentator Jonathan Chait (2011) offered an incisive study of liberal angst over Obama, reaching the conclusion that: 'Liberals are dissatisfied with Obama because liberals, on the whole, are incapable of feeling satisfied with a Democratic president...they compare Obama with an imaginary president — either an imaginary Obama or a fantasy version of a past president'.

Taken in combination with Bennett's article in the magazine, this piece and the accompanying activity invite you to further consider Obama's record in office since January 2009, and to think about how it might be viewed by different factions and groupings within the Democratic Party.

Some of Obama's first-term achievements

2009

Brings Hilary Clinton into the fold: in a gamble that many said would not work, Obama sought to close the potentially damaging rift that had opened within the party during the fractious primary elections of 2008 by inviting Hilary Clinton to become his secretary of state. Clinton has gone on to be an unequivocal success at Foggy Bottom and is now considered a front-runner for the Democratic nomination in 2016.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: commonly known simply as 'the stimulus', it pumped \$787 billion into the economy at a time when it looked as though the USA was on the edge of another Great Depression. Unemployment, however, remains at near record levels and economic growth is still sluggish at best.

Saved GM and Chrysler: \$62 billion was used to put Detroit onto life support when many (including Mitt Romney) said it should be left to die. Since then the US auto industry has rebooted, adding over 100,000 jobs. The Treasury expects to get back all but \$16 billion of its stake.

2010

Patient Protection and Affordable Healthcare Act: the great goal of successive Democratic presidents was signed into law by Obama in March 2010. It will lead to 32 million uninsured Americans gaining health insurance cover and will introduce measures to tackle the long-term growth of healthcare costs. Some lamented the fact that there was no 'universal' provision, saying that the act did not go far enough. Others questioned its constitutionality and short-term cost.

2011

Troops out of Iraq: fulfilling an election campaign pledge, Obama announced that by the end of 2011 all US troops would be withdrawn from Iraq. Guantanamo Bay, however, remains open, and over 1,200 US service personnel have been killed in Afghanistan since Obama took office.

Don't ask, don't tell: Obama ended the discriminatory ruling that prevented US service personnel from being open about their homosexuality.

Assassination of Osama Bin Laden: after a covert intelligence operation, Obama took the high political stakes gamble of sending a US SEAL team into Pakistan to assassinate Osama Bin Laden. So much could have gone wrong with the mission but it was a complete success. Some commentators questioned the legality of the action and pointed to an increasing willingness of the Obama administration to resort to legally questionable tactics, such as assassinations and drone strikes.

Activity

President Obama has been sworn in for a second term as 44th president of the USA and he will never have to run for election again. However, the fabled donor and volunteer database that his Chicago team developed from 2007 is going to be called upon one more time — donations are needed for the Obama Presidential Library (to find out more about these fascinating institutions visit: www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries).

Having read about Obama's first term in office, complete the table on the following page, which will guide callers asking for donations. You will need to use your own knowledge of the different factions within the Democratic party, and you will need to know which issues will motivate someone to donate and which will cause them to hang up the telephone.

Faction (from most liberal to most centrist)	Key issue to talk about — likely to prompt a donation	Key issue to avoid talking about — likely to cause a hang up	Rationale — why have you made your choice?
Progressive Democrats (New Left e.g. Dennis Kucinich, OH)			
Liberal Democrats (e.g. Nancy Pelosi, CA; Barbara Boxer, CA)			
New Democrats (DLC, e.g. Clintons)			
Conservative Democrats (Blue Dog, e.g. Bob Casey, PA; Tim Kaine, VA)			

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