

## The Limits of Presidential Power

Aurélie Godet

**When Barack Obama was inaugurated in January 2009, most Americans saw him as a president committed to bringing significant change. But his progressive ambitions soon ran up against indifference and even hostility in the electorate and in some of the political class. How could such an intelligent president find it so hard to get his message across?**

A review of George C. Edwards III, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, 248 pp., \$29.95.

With Mitt Romney and Barack Obama now neck and neck in the polls, assessment of the incumbent's record has clearly become timely. In the United States – as in France – academics and journalists are competing to summarize four years of Democratic governance, adding to the already overabundant works on the political and personal history of the forty-fourth president.<sup>1</sup> This new book by George C. Edwards joins in on this publishing trend, but it also fits into his more comprehensive reflections on the nature of presidential leadership, which began with *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* in 2003, and was followed up in 2009 by *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*.<sup>2</sup> In fact, *Overreach* is neither more nor less than a case study designed to test a number of conclusions that Edwards has reached as a political scientist during the past ten years. So although those already familiar with Edwards' work might not learn a lot from this book, it does constitute an interesting point of entry into the work of one of the best contemporary experts on the American presidency, and it offers a sober and careful reading of Obama's presidency to date.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the USA, see Ron Suskind, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President*, New York, Harper, 2011; Noam Scheiber, *The Escape Artists: How Obama's Team Fumbled the Recovery*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2012; and David Corn, *Showdown: The Inside Story of How Obama Fought Back Against Boehner, Cantor, and the Tea Party*, New York, William Morrow, 2012; and in France, the work assembled by Olivier Richomme and Vincent Michelot (eds.), *Le Bilan d'Obama*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2012. The authors in the Richomme and Michelot book provide a "mixed" assessment of the Obama presidency, while the authors of the other three books listed here are more openly critical of it, the virulence of the attack generally being in proportion to how much Obama as a candidate in 2008 had raised the author's expectations.

<sup>2</sup> George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003; and *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

## Quickly dashed hopes for a transformational presidency

When Barack Obama was inaugurated in January 2009, most Americans saw him as a president who was committed to bringing significant change, and who could deeply transform the nation's political climate and ideology. As Edwards recalls in the first chapter of his book, the president's advisers were unreservedly committed to this optimistic scenario. They thought that the historical election of 2008 and the arrival of a strengthened Democratic majority in Congress bore witness to a profound desire for a change of direction, and gave carte blanche to the executive to initiate a number of progressive reforms, including making health insurance coverage comprehensive, reforming financial regulation, and reorienting energy policy. Democrats should consider the economic crisis not as an obstacle to putting into place a liberal program, but an "opportunity." "Never let a serious crisis go to waste" was the slogan of Rahm Emanuel, then Obama's Chief of Staff.<sup>3</sup> No speech embodied this triumphal spirit more than Obama's Inaugural Address on 21 January 2009:

*Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions, who suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans. Their memories are short, for they have forgotten what this country has already done, what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage. What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them, that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply.*

However, the president's progressive ambitions quickly ran up against indifference and even hostility in the electorate and in some of the political class. The 787-million-dollar economic stimulus package and especially the healthcare reform were subjected to fierce criticism by activists and sympathizers of the "Tea Party" movement.<sup>4</sup>

So Obama sought to defend his program to the people and to Congress. Edwards discusses in detail the methods of this strategy, in Chapters 2 and 5 of the book, "Creating Opportunities? Going Public" and "Creating Opportunities? Leading Congress." President Obama appeared on television more than thirty times between February 2009 and June 2011 (once it was five times in a single day, 20 September 2009<sup>5</sup>), while the new White House New Media operation flooded social networks with motivating messages. At the same time, Obama often met with individual congressmen, both Democrats (especially members of the Blue Dog Coalition, made up of fiscal conservatives) and Republicans (primarily the moderates Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe), to persuade them to join his cause.

In spite of the president's persistence (emphasized by his opponents as well as by his entourage), the popularity of the Democratic administration steadily declined between 2009 and 2010, from 69% in January 2009 to 45% in October 2010,<sup>6</sup> while whole sections of the president's program (the cap-and-trade system to reduce greenhouse emissions, closing Guantanamo Bay detention camp) got bogged down in Congress. Worse, the mid-term elections resulted in the Democrats' loss of their majority in the House of Representatives (they won 192 seats, the Republicans 242) and substantial Republican gains in the Senate (6 additional seats). Edwards thus portrays presidential failure in Chapters 3 and 6 of *Overreach*. What about healthcare reform? Did that not pass in the end? Edwards recognizes that that was

---

<sup>3</sup> Emanuel was elected Mayor of Chicago in February 2011.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see my *Le Tea Party: Portrait d'une Amérique désorientée*, Paris, Vendémiaire, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> On ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Univision.

<sup>6</sup> Currently it is around 47%.

a significant achievement, especially in view of Bill Clinton's failure on this – in a more favourable political environment – in 1993. But he asserts that this was a Pyrrhic victory, which has made a progressive presidency impossible and has threatened to deprive Obama of a second term.

How did this come about? How could a president as intelligent as Obama find it so hard to get his message across to public opinion and Congress? Does he lack tactical strengths such as eloquence and adaptability? Edwards' explanation is different: an environment unreceptive to reforms, and an unrealistic strategy adopted by the White House. From this point of view, the failure of the Obama presidency was foreseeable as early as 2009.

### **An unreceptive environment and an unrealistic strategy**

In *The Strategic President* (2009), Edwards asserted that a president's success can be largely predicted by analysing his environment at the time he is elected. In Chapters 1 and 4 of *Overreach*, he reviews the main features of this environment in Obama's case, and suggests a view of it that is in every way opposed to the view that was taken by the Democratic administration.

First of all, according to Edwards, the economic crisis did not in any way constitute an "opportunity": "The scope of the response to the recession discouraged rather than encouraged demand for government services. [...] Despite voting for a presidential candidate espousing change, the public had not changed its basic skepticism of government or its resistance to paying for it" (p. 34-35), he explains, and he goes on to recall that the federal government had already been greatly expanded under the presidency of George W. Bush.

Next, Obama did not have a real popular mandate, because he had received only 53% of the vote, and, just after the election, 46% of Americans thought he should negotiate with the Republicans. Therefore it was unlikely that a majority of Americans would agree to his openly progressive initiatives, including those on healthcare reform.

Finally, rather than ending the country's ideological polarization, the election of 2008 had brought it to its highest level since the era of Reconstruction (1865-1877). In 2009, no more than 36% of Americans called themselves centrists (compared to 43% in 1992), and the moderate wing of the Republican party and the conservative wing of the Democratic party had virtually disappeared from the composition of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Moreover, according to Edwards, just as analysing the environment made it predictable that there would be almost instant gridlock, the strategy that President Obama adopted to get his program approved – namely, speaking directly to Americans and trying to persuade the opposition in Congress – was bound to fail. Contrary to Theodore Roosevelt's suggestion when he referred to the presidency as "such a bully pulpit," presidential speeches actually very rarely redefine established battle lines. Not even the most eloquent occupants of the White House (Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan) ever succeeded in persuading their opponents.<sup>7</sup> Even worse, as Edwards notes, the impact of presidents' speeches is forever declining, because they are lost in the mass of information that flows over Americans every day (American households receive an average of 111 television channels); because they are not always transmitted by the newer media that Americans are increasingly

---

<sup>7</sup> On this, see the conclusions that Edwards reaches in *On Deaf Ears*, op. cit.

fond of (audiences of CNN and Fox News often surpass those for the main networks); and because they are in competition with other influential voices (for example, the conservative radio presenter Rush Limbaugh). So Obama was wrong to spend so much time intervening in public debate. At best, he was preaching to the converted, and at worst, he risked being accused of overstepping the boundaries of his office by interfering with the legislative process.

Trying to overcome partisan cleavages and to adopt a strategy resembling Clintonian “triangulation”<sup>8</sup> was also wishful thinking, because since the 1990s the two major parties have made voting discipline a golden rule. In fact, only the most moderate Republicans responded to Obama’s appeals, and even they only rarely did; for example, none of them voted for the stimulus package or the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (though Louisiana’s Republican Representative Anh Cao, elected in a traditionally Democratic district in 2008, had supported an earlier version of it).

Ultimately, Obama’s great mistake (and that of many presidents before him) was to take too seriously the idea of the “transformational president” popularized by political scientists like James MacGregor Burns<sup>9</sup>. Edwards goes against this “folklore” (p. 180), which he says can only lead to disappointment and thus reinforce Americans’ scepticism about their institutions. As for those who support their views by quoting Richard Neustadt’s famous aphorism – “presidential power is the power to persuade” – Edwards notes that Neustadt was actually rather sceptical about the capacity of presidents to persuade.<sup>10</sup>

Well then, if presidents cannot persuade, transform, and create new opportunities, what exactly is the nature of presidential power? Edwards replies to this question with an original (and, to say the least, modest) definition of presidential leadership: “presidents do not succeed by persuading others to support them but rather by recognizing and exploiting effectively the opportunities already present in their environments” (p. ix). With those opportunities becoming increasingly rare, we would be tempted to conclude that today there is very little that presidents can do. But rather than ending his book with this observation about presidents’ powerlessness, Edwards explains that their best chance for success is in their exploitation of favourable climates of opinion, and in the mobilization of their allies (in Obama’s case, Democrats in Congress).

Barack Obama took note of these “lessons” and in the middle of his term he gave his presidency a more centrist direction, which earned him some victories (repeal of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” law on homosexuals in the military; ratification of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty; lengthening of unemployment benefits; designation of new protected wilderness areas). But this late shift might be insufficient for his re-election in 2012. According to Edwards, Obama should actually have abandoned his healthcare reform (which was supported only by a minority of Americans) and concentrated on a priority that enjoyed greater consensus, creating jobs.

---

<sup>8</sup> “Triangulation” is a form of compromise that consists of taking over some of the Republicans’ conservative ideas in order to combine them with ideas in the Democrats’ program or philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> For an outline of James MacGregor Burns’ theses, see one of his most recent books, *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> “Although Neustadt encouraged the belief that presidential persuasion was possible, he began with the premise that presidents would have to struggle to get their way. As he put it, ‘The power to persuade is the power to bargain.’ Indeed, it was the inherent weakness of the presidency that made it necessary for presidents to understand how to use their resources most effectively.” Edwards, *Overreach*, p. 179.

## Should healthcare reform have been abandoned?

*Overreach* is a clear and instructive essay, which, with an impressive amount of data (polls, television audience statistics, Congressional voting, and so on), confirms the arguments Edwards has been making since 2003. It would appear from Obama's case that contemporary presidents fail when they overestimate the power of their speech and their capacity to generate bipartisan consensus – in other words, when they succumb to the “sin of pride” (which is the meaning here of the word “overreach.”)

But however convincing the work is as a whole, certain parts of it give rise to frustration and scepticism. In the first place, one could imagine a better ending for Edwards' fifth book than a simple reference to the debate about raising the debt ceiling that took place in the summer of 2011.<sup>11</sup> Couldn't the publisher have waited for the results of the bipartisan commission on the debt and the early Republican primaries, in order to have a good assessment of the Obama presidency?

Edwards explains that presidents should base their leadership on the exploitation of existing opportunities, but he doesn't really define what he means by “opportunity.” Is it the emergence of a majority in public opinion, so that the president must govern with one eye glued to the polls, with all their well-known limits? Or is it a simple Congressional majority, so that the president must abandon any ambition to govern the whole of the country, in order to concentrate on the role of party leader?

However, the most problematic assertion in the book is that healthcare reform was a strategic error because it jeopardized Obama's re-election. From a purely electoral point of view, this is undoubtedly true, but should a president think only in these terms? Does presidential leadership not also reside in the capacity for lasting influence on thinking, beyond the president's term of office?

In fact, the main criticism that one can make of Edwards' book is that it has normative judgements concealed by sociology's empirical mask. Whereas Noam Scheiber just bluntly asserts that Obama should have abandoned healthcare reform the day after Scott Brown's victory in the special Senatorial election in Massachusetts in January 2010,<sup>12</sup> Edwards assembles numbers showing that the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) was very costly in terms of political capital, in particular, that the Democrats lost between 25 and 40 seats in the mid-term elections as a direct result of their support for the President's initiative. What Edwards forgets here is that a decision to abandon this reform after Brown's election would not necessarily have benefited the Democratic party in 2010. On the contrary, it would have created difficulties for elected Democrats who had defended the reform in 2008 but who would not have had any legislative success to boast of two years later. Moreover, even if ditching the reform would have made it possible for the Democrats to save some of the seats

---

<sup>11</sup> In July 2011, by refusing to raise the ceiling from 14.3 billion to 15.1 billion, the Republican party held over the United States the threat of a default and forced the president to negotiate. After several weeks of deadlock, a bipartisan agreement was finally signed on 3 August 2011, thus avoiding the country being humiliated by being declared insolvent. On a positive note, Obama did obtain an increase in the debt ceiling big enough to avoid having to go through another negotiation in the middle of the election campaigns of 2012. And he managed to impose on his adversaries the idea that defense will not be exempt from the coming budget cuts. But he also had to consent to a drastic reduction in public spending (2.4 trillion dollars over ten years) and to 4% cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, the very items he had promised to protect at the beginning of his term.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Noam Scheiber, *The Escape Artists*, op. cit.

that they were to lose in 2010 – let’s adopt the most realistic scenario here, 25 seats saved – this would not have fundamentally altered the post-2010 balance of power. As it actually happened, the midterm elections gave the Republicans a majority of 49 seats in the House, almost double the number of seats that they might have saved by abandoning the reform. In this scenario, if the Democrats had dropped the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Republicans would still have become a “blocking minority” (with 217 seats, against the Democrats’ 218), and the President’s program would therefore still have been stalled in Congress between 2010 and 2012.

It is not perfectly clear from the Supreme Court’s Obamacare decision of 29 June 2012 (*National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*) whether Obama’s gamble was worth it or not. Although Chief Justice John Roberts (chosen by George W. Bush to replace William Rehnquist in 2005) surprised many observers by confirming the constitutionality of Obamacare, including its mandate that individuals buy health insurance or suffer financial penalties,<sup>13</sup> this decision is in fact less progressive than it looks, especially because it prevents Congress from penalizing states who do not accept an extension of the Medicare programme to cover the poorest Americans. Given the states’ dire financial situation, they will no doubt invoke this clause in order to resist the centralizing federalism of the progressive persuasion, which is at the heart of Barack Obama’s political project. However that may be, it is still possible to have a more elevated vision of the presidency, in which short-term failure is weighed against long-term political success. Lyndon Johnson would reply to timid advisers begging him not to defend civil rights legislation too intensively: “Well, what the hell’s the presidency for?”<sup>14</sup> Therein lies food for thought by experts on political leadership.

First published in French, in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr) and in English on [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net) on October, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. Text translated by John Zvesper, with the support of the Foundation Florence Gould.

©[booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)

---

<sup>13</sup> The Chief Justice’s move here has been attributed firstly to his wish to save the Court’s reputation (much shaken in 2000 by the *Bush v. Gore* decision), and secondly to his belief that the federal government was not compelling individuals to enter the health insurance market, because they were already part of it.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2012, p. xv. In this particular case, the political cost of the presidential decision would turn out to be greater in the medium than in the short term.