

Obama's In-Box

Can President Obama avoid the 'second term curse' and tackle the many challenges facing the nation?

BY PATRICIA SMITH

For President Obama, the start of his second term on January 20 is a second chance.

After a bruising re-election campaign and a four-year education on the realities of getting things done in Washington, Obama is a very different leader from the man who was elected with great fanfare in 2008.

Four years ago, when voters sent an idealistic young senator to the White House as the nation's first black president, many Americans had incredibly high expectations. They wanted Obama to stop a severe recession from turning into a depression, reform health care, fix a broken immigration system, deal with climate change, and—as if all that wasn't enough—transform Washington's

increasingly partisan political culture. Obama's 2008 campaign slogan—"Hope and Change"—said it all.

Now, most voters simply want Obama to make Washington function again.

"He needs to do something dramatic

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PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVALES/AP PHOTO (OBAMA); ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (POST IT)

to reset the atmosphere and . . . demonstrate that he is very serious about finding bipartisan solutions,” says David Boren, a former senator who’s now president of the University of Oklahoma.

As a second-term president, Obama is in a better position to do that. He can’t run again (the 22nd Amendment limits presidents to two terms), so he doesn’t have to worry as much about his polls or his popularity. Instead, experts say, he’s likely to be more focused on his “place in history”—which will be determined largely by his ability to get things done before he leaves office in 2017.

Washington Gridlock

That’s no small task in a Washington mired in gridlock. With Republicans still in control of the House of Representatives and the Senate closely divided between Republicans and Democrats, the president will need Republican support to get any major legislation through Congress.

Members of both parties have expressed hope that some of the rancor can be toned down now that the election is over.

“I’m not suggesting we compromise on our principles,” Speaker of the House John Boehner, a Republican, said soon after Obama’s victory. “But I am suggesting we commit ourselves to creating an atmosphere where we can see common ground when it exists and seize it.”

At the top of everyone’s agenda in Washington is the economy. The



“OH GOOD! THE PLACE IS JUST HOW WE LEFT IT...”

unemployment rate, at 7.7 percent, is down but remains high. And the housing market—a critical component of the economy—is recovering in parts of the country, but is still fragile. (Of course, Washington’s next steps on the economy depend on how negotiations turn out between the White House and congressional Republicans over the “fiscal cliff” deadline on New Year’s Day. That wasn’t clear as *Upfront* went to press.)

Another big issue requiring a bipartisan solution is fixing America’s immigration system. Democrats have generally favored creating a path to citizenship for the 11 million

illegal immigrants in the United States. Republicans have generally opposed what they see as amnesty for lawbreakers. The Dream Act, which would have provided a path to citizenship for young people brought to the U.S. illegally as children, failed

in Congress in 2010 because it lacked enough Republican support. But Obama acted on his own to implement some of its provisions last summer.

Considering how crucial the Hispanic

Will partisan agendas be set aside now that the election is over?



At Home and Abroad: Civil war rages in Syria (destruction in Aleppo, above); Obama with Speaker of the House John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (top right); and advocates for immigration reform in Phoenix, Arizona (bottom right).

vote turned out to be in Obama's reelection and the growing clout of Latinos in general (see "The New Face of America," p. 6), many Republicans are now more eager to find common ground on immigration.

"It is patently obvious that unless Republicans do better among nonwhite voters, they will cease to be a viable national political party," says Republican pollster Whit Ayres.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which devastated parts of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, the issue of climate change is back on the national radar. Some Democrats are likely to push for legislation to cut America's carbon footprint, with the U.S. second only to China in annual carbon dioxide emissions. Obama failed to deliver on his first-term promise to tackle climate change.

Middle East Muddle

As many presidents before him have done, Obama is likely to devote more time in his second term to foreign

affairs: Presidents have freer hands in foreign affairs than at home since there's a lot they can do without congressional approval.

As much as Obama might want to turn his focus to Asia, the Middle East is sure to occupy a great deal of the administration's attention. The upheaval of the Arab Spring, which began two years ago and toppled several dictatorships, continues to roil the region. Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's decision in November to seize additional powers and rush approval of a new constitution sparked violent protests.

But the most pressing concerns are the bloody civil war in Syria, the standoff with Iran over its nuclear program, and the war in Afghanistan.

In Syria, rebels have been fighting for almost two years to overthrow the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad. But President Obama remains leery of being dragged into the conflict.

"At a time when he was running on a platform of ending wars in the Middle

East, he did not want to be seen as starting one," says Martin Indyk, a former American ambassador to Israel.

As for Iran it remains in defiance of the United Nations over its suspected bid for nuclear weapons. The U.S. and much of the international community have imposed economic sanctions designed to force Iran back to the bargaining table. But Israel is threatening its own military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, which could trigger a wider Middle East war.

Finally, there's the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. November's clashes between Israel and Hamas, the militant Islamic group that controls Gaza, demonstrated how quickly the conflict can heat up. Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are stalled, and it remains to be seen whether President Obama will throw himself into that issue—which has bedeviled many American presidents.

As for Afghanistan, the war is now in its 12th year, with 2,100 Americans dead. Obama has promised an end to the U.S. role in Afghanistan, and hopes to oversee an orderly exit. The planned withdrawal by the end of next year of the 66,000 U.S. troops there threatens to

Challenges abroad include Iran, Syria, China, and Afghanistan

AP/GETTY IMAGES (ALEPPO, SYRIA); OLIVER DOULIER/WUPU; LANDOV (OBAMA, BOEHNER & REID); JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES (ACTIVISTS)

throw the country back into chaos—and possibly enable the return of the Taliban, the radical Islamic group that harbored Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

And just next door is Pakistan, an unstable nuclear state whose relationship with Washington has been rocky. Pakistan's support for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has been wobbly at best, and the government still resents the fact that it was not alerted in advance to the U.S. mission to get Bin Laden.

Elsewhere in Asia, Obama will need to deal with the growing influence of China, which continues to flex its economic and military muscles. He'll need to forge a relationship with China's new president, Xi Jinping. One longstanding concern is China's manipulation of its exchange rate, which makes its products less expensive and therefore harder for American manufacturers to compete against.

Just as tricky is the relationship with Russia and President Vladimir Putin, whose growing authoritarianism (*See Voices*, p. 29) troubles American officials. The U.S. will need Russia's help on Iran, Syria, and other issues.

Enter the Lame Duck?

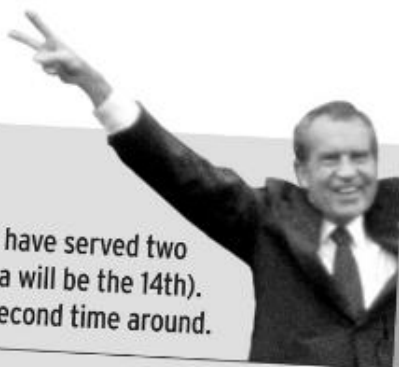
Closer to home, there's the prospect of improving relations with Cuba, a longtime adversary just 90 miles off the Florida coast. Even with the introduction of limited reforms, Cubans still suffer from economic hardships and lack personal freedoms under the Communist regime of Raúl Castro. Obama must weigh whether improving relations would help the island nation transition to democracy or simply prop up the 54-year Castro brothers dictatorship.

While his to-do list is long, Obama is acutely aware that time for progress is limited in any second term, as he increasingly becomes a lame duck.

Historically, most second terms are less successful than first terms; historians call it "the second-term curse" (*see box*). Obama's predecessor, George

Take Two

Thirteen of America's 44 presidents have served two full terms in the White House (Obama will be the 14th). Some fared better than others the second time around.



SUCCESS

Andrew Jackson (Democrat; 1829-1837)

After Jackson was re-elected in 1832, he won his battle against the Bank of the United States, preventing it from becoming the national bank. He also paid off the entire national debt and prevented South Carolina from seceding.



Ronald Reagan (Republican; 1981-1989)

Reagan won a second term in a landslide in 1984. He then oversaw popular tax reform and negotiated a landmark nuclear arms-reduction treaty with the Soviet Union.



DISAPPOINTMENT

Woodrow Wilson (Democrat; 1913-1921)

He won re-election in 1916 on promises to keep the U.S. out of World War I, but did the opposite the following year. After the war, Wilson failed to win Senate approval for the Treaty of Versailles and to join the League of Nations.



Richard Nixon (Republican; 1969-1974)

He easily won a second term in 1972, but Nixon's presidency quickly became overshadowed by the Watergate scandal. Facing impending impeachment, Nixon (*shown above*, just after the 1972 election) resigned on Aug. 9, 1974—the only president ever to do so.

pass immigration reform, as casualties mounted from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, was impeached during his second term by the House of Representatives—only the second president to be impeached—for lying about his affair with a White House intern. (He was acquitted by the Senate.)

Even FDR, remembered as a great president for lifting the country out of the Depression and steering it through World War II, had a second term that his biographer, Jean Edward Smith, calls "a disaster." His 1937 attempt to pack the

along with his decision to cut federal spending, which sent the nation's fragile economy back into recession.

President Obama himself is aware of the tightrope he's walking as he tries to balance fighting for issues he believes in with compromising to get things done.

"I'm more than familiar with all the literature about presidential overreach in second terms," Obama said during his first post-election news conference. "We are very cautious about that. On the other hand, I didn't get re-elected just to bask in re-election." ●

What Do You Think?

What do you think the author means by "second-term curse"? What makes a president's second term different than the first? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

How might the fact that Obama can't run again change his style of governing?

What do you think is the most important issue for President Obama to tackle in the next four years? Why?

What does former Senator David Boren mean when he says Obama needs to "resent the atmosphere"? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
