~~Com~~pared to the recent record, Barack Obama's presidency has been a successful one thus far.

With the recent government shutdown and his expansion of the program of drone strikes in the Middle East, President Barack Obama has faced much criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike. **John Dumbrell** *assesses the President's record since he was first elected in 2008. He argues that, while evaluating presidential success is often not easy, Obama's has a comparatively accomplished record in domestic policy via his health care and other reforms, and in the foreign policy arena, he has supplied America with a direction of 'low-risk internationalism', appropriate to lean economic times.*

Accepted wisdom tells us that Barack Obama is a president in trouble. Obama is regularly attacked as the president who betrayed the hopes of 2008: the president who kept Guantanamo prison open, extended unarmed 'drone' strikes on Pakistan and the Middle East, as well as provoking a major conservative backlash in the shape of Republican Tea Partiers. Attacked from the right as a spineless appeaser and closet socialist, Obama has been assaulted from the left as 'Bush lite'. By any reckoning, Obama has not succeeded in everything he promised in 2008. Political brinkmanship in Washington and the recent 'government shutdown' illustrate Obama's failure to move America towards a 'post-partisan' politics. What then is the case *for* Obama?

Evaluating presidential success is a tricky business

A few preliminary points are in order. It should be emphasised that evaluating presidential performance is a tricky and subjective business. To be a 'success', a president needs – arguably – to do little more than be re-elected after four years and to avoid calamities on the scale of a disastrous war, impeachment, or national economic collapse. Such standards might seem rather modest, but two-term presidents who avoided calamity are actually very thin on the ground. Indeed, if we appreciate the various disasters associated with recent presidents (notably military interventions in Vietnam and Iraq, as well as the Clinton impeachment), only Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower emerge as plausibly 'successful'. A positive presidential record is one which aspires, within the confines of democratic politics, to transform the game of national, even of global, politics. Such aspirations have to be realistic, taking account of policy inheritance, inherited power structures and national political culture. Successful presidencies may be either (as in the case of Reagan) broadly 'transformative' of inherited practices and structures, or (like Eisenhower) distinguished by caution and continuity. Such presidencies must, however, shift the political and policy ground in a recognisable and not-entirely-reversible fashion.

Obama and the domestic agenda

Obama's shifting of the terms of African American politics is paradoxically among the more difficult aspects of his record to be seen as genuinely 'transformative'. Many commentators pointed out on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's 1963 'I Have A Dream' speech that the economic gap between white and black Americans had actually widened during the post-2007 recession. Obama has not presided over any substantial improvement in the economic prospects of African Americans, though some of his legislative successes (notably health care reform) do have relevant positive implications. However, the symbolic importance of the election of an African American – albeit an African American with no direct links to the legacy of slavery – was a resounding vindication of the hopes of 1963.

African Americans form a vital part of Obama's 'emerging Democratic majority': the coalition of racial minorities, younger voters and college-educated women which Obama's team mobilized in 2008 and consolidated in 2012. This coalition is not unbeatable. The Republican Party emerged from its 2012 presidential defeat with a new determination to recruit Hispanic voters. Obama's 'new' coalition was unable to breach the walls of conservatism surrounding the US House of Representatives, and is unlikely to fare much better in this respect in 2014. However, the emergence of Obama's coalition – socially liberal, young, urban, and ethnically diverse – has

changed the presidential electoral weather.

Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Barack Obama's domestic legislative record easily outshines that of Bill Clinton, America's only other post-1945 two-term Democratic president, though it lags far behind that of Lyndon Johnson, who served out John Kennedy's uncompleted term as well as completing one term in his own right. Health care reform, legislated in 2010, is the most important piece of liberal legislation enacted since LBJ. Surviving a major constitutional challenge in 2012, Obama's health care reform (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) remains profoundly controversial and faces guerrilla opposition at the level of state-by-state implementation. Yet it remains the most significant piece of liberal legislation to be passed by Congress since the 1960s. Other major domestic legislation emanating from the years 2009-10, when Obama held a Democratic majority on Capitol Hill, includes fair pay legislation, the massive spending stimulus enacted in 2009, child welfare programmes, and Wall Street reform. Some major domestic initiatives, notably those relating to gun control, look set to fail, though others (notably immigration reform) may yet see the statutory light of day. Even on gun control, Obama's efforts may one day come to be seen as contributing to eventual change.

Tensions in foreign policy

Obama's foreign policy embodies a fundamental tension between a realist commitment to fairly narrowly defined security interests on the one hand, and an agenda of democracy and human rights promotion on the other. Obama has tended to favour cautious, cost-conscious approaches to international crises. At times his foreign policy team has been seriously wrong-footed by events. White House handling of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis in September 2013 was sometimes chaotic. Maureen Dowd wrote in the *New York Times* of George W. Bush's 'mindless certainty' being replaced by 'mindful uncertainty'.

Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Aspects of Obama's cost-conscious realism are inherently extremely controversial. His administration has developed a foreign policy of 'light footprint' internationalism, far distant both from the imperialistic interventionism of the first George W. Bush term and from contemporary neo-isolationism. Obama favours low visibility and low-domestic-cost interventionism, whether in the form of drone strikes (largely immune from effective legislative oversight) or of computer sabotage of Iranian nuclear weapons systems. Such policies arguably contravene international, and possibly even American, law. 'Low-risk internationalism' also embodies the risk of America becoming seen as irrelevant to crises

of regional insecurity and humanitarian disaster. However, not least in terms of the 'rebalancing' towards the Far East – the White House no longer uses the term, 'pivot' -, Obama has supplied America with a foreign policy direction appropriate to lean economic times and to the post-War on Terror era. The prospect of some kind of breakthrough with Iran offers some positive prospect for the remainder of the term, despite the Obama administration's less than sure-footed response to the Arab Spring.

Obama as a successful president

Obama entered office with his country involved in two major wars and facing the biggest economic disaster since the 1930s. He extricated America from Iraq and (after the blunders of 'surge and exit') is now set to quit Afghanistan. The US economy is in recovery, not least as a result of the stimulus applied by the Obama administration in the form of the early legislated stimulus. Obama has supplied a new electoral direction in the form of his 'emerging Democratic majority'; a new domestic reform agenda, from the reform of federal social provision to policies such as support for gay marriage; and a new foreign policy direction suited to post-imperial times. That is the record, at least in recent comparative context, of a successful presidency.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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