

Obama will be neck-and-neck with G.W. Bush as the most incompetent U.S. president of our time

by Conrad Black

Gary Mason wrote in the Globe and Mail on May 27 a column presumably entitled by his editors "Obama's Imperfections Already Fading." The contents of his piece justify the title, and my subject here is that column, not Mason himself. I am afraid those imperfections are not fading. Certainly, I agree with him that it was a great and uplifting event for a non-Caucasian to be elected president and a testimony to the liberality of mind of the American public. There cannot be a more absurd reason to vote against someone than a candidate's race or pigmentation.

Given the onset of the economic crisis, and the earned unpopularity of the hapless outgoing incumbent, George W. Bush, anyone the Democrats nominated was likely to win the election. Where Obama does deserve credit is in taking the nomination out from under the Clintons. Bill and Hillary Clinton are seasoned political hard-ballers and Obama came from nowhere and won despite losing the primaries to Mrs. Clinton. His subliminal message, brilliantly conceived and delivered, to the party elders who gave him the nomination as ex officio super-delegates, was that the great, decent, white majority of Americans could get rid of their shame at the treatment of the African-Americans, what Abraham Lincoln called "the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil," and the century of segregation that followed, and as a bonus not have to listen to charlatans like Jesse Jackson again, if they just put Obama in the White House. The time and the message were

perfectly matched.

I start to dissent from Mason's column at the reference to circumstances that "appeared to rob Mr. Obama of the extraordinary powers everyone felt he possessed." Despite the accumulation of advantages in favour of the Democratic candidate, he only won 53 per cent to 46 per cent, a safe but not overwhelming margin. There was no shortage of Americans untainted by racial prejudice who had real reservations about the qualifications of a candidate who had no appreciable public record, and had ridden affirmative action and the corrupt Chicago political machine to the U.S. Senate. His chief pre-political activity was squandering \$100 million of philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg's money teaching Marxism in lower-income Chicago primary schools with former urban terrorist Bill Ayers, and he sat contentedly for 20 years in the church of Jeremiah Wright, who believed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were justified and that AIDS is a white racist plot.

The Mason theory that the president was "quickly and viciously turned on" for failure to provide "indulgent grandiloquence" is untrue. If any previous president had doubled the accumulated national debt of 233 years in seven years to produce economic growth of two per cent, and had produced a foreign policy of almost relentless self-humiliation, he would not have won a second term. Nor would Obama have been re-elected against a less clumsy opponent than Mitt Romney, a former consultant who faced in all four directions on every important issue.

From this point on, Mason and I seem to have been living on different planets. According to Mason, "the critics were almost universally wrong. The United States is in a better economic position now, on many fronts, than it was before the financial recession struck." Not on any fronts I can find. I agree that the "reforms brought to Wall Street ... didn't go far enough," but not that they "have changed the place for the

better." They have passed the status of world financial centre back to London, persecuted law-abiding financial companies and their senior personnel, assured sluggishness in the entire sector, and left most abuses unassailed. Stimulus money did not "improve education outcomes;" it funded the "shovel-ready" boondoggles of the Democratic congressional barons. "The green energy initiatives that have paid dividends" were an egregious waste of money deployed to fight the now vanished bogeyman of global warming. Obama's health-care measure was dishonestly presented and two thirds of Americans want it repealed and replaced with a better designed plan. I agree that Obama was right not to allow most of the U.S auto industry to fail completely. But he should not have given control of General Motors and Chrysler to the United Auto Workers, who were far from blameless for their parlous condition. He has done almost nothing for the African-Americans, whom his election was generally intended to assist.

I agree with Mason that the Republicans have generally been hopeless, destructive boobs, but that doesn't give Obama a free pass for effectively quadrupling the money supply under the spurious cover of "quantitative easing," and maintaining minimal interest rates by selling trillions of dollars of unbought bonds to the Federal Reserve, a 100 per cent subsidiary of the Treasury, "paid for" by the issuance of notes. It is a shell game that would be attacked in the private sector with the usual Savonarolan fervour of American prosecutors (whom Obama has done nothing to civilize, though an inordinate number of their victims are African-Americans).



Win McNamee / Getty Images President Barack Obama speaks about Iraq in the Brady Briefing room of the White House.

The high points of his foreign policy have been allowing the Western alliance to atrophy; failure to render any assistance to Ukraine, abruptly departing Iraq and ensuring its

disintegration and the near-capture of Baghdad by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, drawing a "red line" against the Assad regime in Syria gassing its own civil population and then abdicating military command to Congress, and dropping the issue into the inhospitable lap of Russia. His solemn pledge to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear military power evolved into a green light for Iran to put nuclear warheads on its missiles in 10 years. The *pièce de résistance* has been blundering into the position of having Iran and Russia as allies against ISIL in Iraq, while (ineffectually) opposing Iranian and Russian support of Assad in Syria. American irresolution has been the chief cause of an immense humanitarian crisis.

"Historians" we read with astonishment, "even see him eventually being mentioned in the same breath as Franklin Roosevelt and even Lincoln himself." As a Roosevelt biographer, I have not heard of any. Roosevelt led the country out of the Great Depression, supplied the assistance that enabled Britain and Canada to stay in the Second World War, and led the alliance to the brink of victory in Western Europe and the Pacific. He won four consecutive presidential elections and seven consecutive congressional elections. As all the world knows, President Lincoln saved the Union and emancipated the slaves, and was one of the greatest and most eloquent exponents of democratic government in history. Not even the eradication of Obama's "imperfections" puts him in this company.

Obama's job approval rating has rarely reached as lofty a figure as 50 per cent in the last six years, and three quarters of Americans think the condition of the country is deteriorating. Certainly much of this is due to the failures of George W. Bush, and some to the errors of Bill Clinton, especially in promoting the housing bubble and the sub-prime mortgage time bomb. It has been 20 years of misgovernment that have done terrible damage to the world's greatest country, and

considerable harm to the world.

Having taken issue with Mason, I should make my own prediction about Obama. I think that he will be in a neck-and-neck race with George W. Bush as the most incompetent U.S. president since James Buchanan (1857-61). Bush and Obama are the most unsuccessful presidents who have ever been re-elected.

Mason refers to Donald Trump as a "buffoon;" and he sometimes is. But his achievement in coming from a non-political career and evicting the entire leadership of one of America's national political parties is unique in U.S. history. (Famous generals like Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower were selected by the Republican grandees, and Horace Greeley in 1872 and Wendell Willkie in 1940 did not get control of their party as Trump has.) Trump is the last chance for policy moderation (unless Hillary Clinton can be carried over the electoral goal-line by the Clinton organization without Sanders attached to her like a limpet), and we had all better hope that the next president makes a better job of governing than the last two. If that does not happen, the next nominees will be extrapolations off the charts from Cruz and Sanders, and the world really will have cause to tremble.

First published in the