

Obama Begins to Say Good-Bye

Channeling LBJ, the president made it clear he expects history to render a better judgment on his performance than the public.

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April 11, 2014

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/obama-begins-to-say-good-bye-20140411>

Because you can find anything on the Web, you can easily search and pull up a running clock that [tells](#) you just how long, to the second, Barack Obama has been president. It moves in real time. It only *feels* like it's speeding up.

Constrained by crises over which he has little power to impact events, hemmed in by a divided Congress more interested in scoring points with voters than in legislating, and watching as his potential successor assumes more and more of the political spotlight, Obama may be receding into history more quickly than either he or his aides ever anticipated.

It was impossible to listen to the president's speech Thursday at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Texas without hearing the trace of the valedictory. Certainly, it was not intended to be so—and Obama didn't deliver it as such. (Bill Clinton does wistful; Obama may not have that gear.) But his remarks were less a clarion call to action than a stern statement of principle, his mouth fixed flat for most of the address, his face betraying the weariness of almost six years of incessant conflict.

His demeanor matched that of his White House, dogged, hunkered down, like Butch and Sundance in Bolivia, surrounded by an increasingly tuned-out public, opportunistic Republicans, often feckless Democrats, and a skeptical press corps. For some time now, as Obama's approval rating has fallen and his political capital has dried up, his supporters have insisted that the long view will vindicate him, as if a contemporaneous verdict on his stewardship cannot be trusted. (And again, Friday, he vowed outgoing Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius would go "down in history" for her work to pass and implement Obamacare, despite the fierce criticism she faced.)

"The office humbles you," Obama said in Austin. "You're reminded daily that in this great democracy, you are but a relay swimmer in the currents of history, bound by decisions made by those who came before you, reliant on the efforts of those who will follow to fully vindicate your vision."

Coded in that statement is the disclaimer Obama has affixed to almost every major speech he has ever given on the economy, that he inherited a train wreck (or a car was driven into a ditch, among other metaphors) and that his efforts to turn things around have been stymied at every turn by those who couldn't see their way clear to support him. As *National Journal* [noted](#) earlier this week, Obama

was more explicitly critical of the forces buffeting him in his extended interview with *The New Yorker*, complaining that Johnson, for all of his legislative success, didn't have the problems with Republicans that he does.

Thursday, Obama fully embraced Johnson's vision of the Great Society as his own, placing both their presidencies on a continuum of change and suggesting that it may take years, if not decades, for the current chief executive to be fully appreciated, even as a critical reassessment of LBJ's work continues.

"Today we remain locked in this same great debate about equality and opportunity, and the role of government in ensuring each. As was true 50 years ago, there are those who dismiss the Great Society as a failed experiment and an encroachment on liberty; who argue that government has become the true source of all that ails us, and that poverty is due to the moral failings of those who suffer from it," Obama said. "There are also those who argue ... that nothing has changed; that racism is so embedded in our DNA that there is no use trying politics—the game is rigged. But such theories ignore history."

It was a full-throttle defense of big government as a means of ensuring equal opportunity to all, an honest distillation of his personal philosophy—one that shows him to be the progressive change agent that his supporters admire and his opponents fear. It was a manifesto more aligned with Mitt Romney's 47 percent. But it was also impossible not to hear Obama draw himself in his sketch of Johnson as an impoverished outsider. "Deprivation and discrimination—these were not abstractions to Lyndon Baines Johnson," Obama said.

"In so many ways, he embodied America with all our gifts and all our flaws, in our restlessness and all our big dreams," said the son of America and Africa alike, who wrote a best-seller about dreams.

Obama's invocation of race as a divisive political force was consistent with his more open approach about the subject in his second term, but it also helps explain why, as Jonathan Chait [detailed](#) in *New York* magazine, it may be nearly impossible to judge his tenure within the current political environment, so freighted as it has been with questions about whether some of the animosity toward his presidency is rooted in skin color. And that some cooling via the passage of time might be necessary.

The president seems to understand this—and perhaps is counting on it, that given distance and an economic rebound, his achievements, most notably the health care law in which he has invested so much, will turn indelible once the daily trench warfare ends. But, as his rocky second term has illustrated, that is by no means the guaranteed outcome. The bloodshed in Syria, the threat to Ukraine, the uneven recovery, the never-ending threat of terrorism, and yes, the Affordable Care Act's consequences, all may batter his record to the point where it becomes unsalvageable.

In the meantime, there is a legacy to build—and Thursday was a step in that direction. If it feels a bit too early, remember that Obama's final two years in office could be overshadowed by both a Republican Congress and an ascendant, media-hogging Hillary Clinton, a reality in which it would become increasingly difficult for this White House to get its message out.

Better to begin the farewell tour now—and start leaving the markers for history to follow.