

Obama's Fate—and Ours by Paul Starr

Will he go down in history as a Jimmy Carter or a Harry Truman? As a weak and indecisive Democratic president who ushered in a conservative era or as a strong leader who proved his critics wrong and won re-election? The next year will resolve that question about Barack Obama, but the answer may no longer depend on forces that

he can control, if it ever did.

For much of the past year, Obama was doing his best Carter imitation: cerebral and detached, unable or unwilling to articulate a clear and forceful Democratic message, steadily losing support as the economy stagnated. In his negotiations with congressional Republicans over the budget and debt ceiling, the president conceded too much too quickly and allowed his adversaries to set the terms of discussion. The White House insisted it knew what it was doing: claiming the center in the critical effort to win over independents. But Obama's concessions mainly helped move the center to the right while demoralizing the Democratic base—exactly what happened under Carter at the end of the 1970s. Like Carter, Obama conveyed a general impression of weakness, inviting scorn in his own party, among independents, and on the right.

The one great contrast to that picture in the past year came in developments abroad. In 1980, Carter's attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran was a fiasco, but Obama's mission to kill Osama bin Laden in 2011 succeeded. The triumph was an especially

personal one for Obama because the final call on the operation was his.

Developments on foreign shores may, however, also be Obama's undoing as he mounts a belated, Truman-like campaign against a do-nothing congressional opposition. After a summer of fruitless conciliation, Obama's September 7 speech on his jobs program announced a change not just in policy but in the tone of his presidency. It was as if he suddenly remembered he was a Democrat; here was the forceful leadership that many people had long been begging for.

But it may already be too late—too late because the Republican House will sabotage recovery efforts; too late because unfavorable public perceptions of the president have congealed; and too late because global economic developments may undermine any chance of a recovery in the United States in the next year.

Obama came into office in 2009 during an American financial crisis that was not of his own making, and he may now lose re-election because of another crisis not of his making, this one in Europe. The majority of the public was willing to cut Obama slack in the first case, though

he bears some responsibility for underestimating the magnitude of what needed to be done in 2009 and failing to prepare the country for additional measures. At that time, Obama at least had some chance of getting congressional action.

Now the political system has become completely dysfunctional, and the prospect of another crisis is all the more terrifying because

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Republicans have made it clear that they intend to block any action to revive the economy. Greece is teetering on the verge of a default that could undermine stability in Italy, Spain, and Portugal and the entire European financial system. If the dominoes fall, the United States cannot escape the effects. But this time, unlike 2008, Congress will likely be paralyzed.

Even if the worst case is averted, the recovery will almost certainly be anemic in 2012. Truman won re-election in 1948 with a growing economy and at a time when the United States had strong labor unions. Obama has

neither of those advantages.

According to research by political scientist Larry Bartels, the critical economic factor in presidential elections is growth in the preceding year. Although a president's policies may affect that final year's performance, elections are to some extent random moments of judgment when voters evaluate a president on the basis of recent conditions, no matter what their cause. That evaluation may be unfair because midterm elections often produce divided government, leaving presidents with little sway over policy just when they need it. The congress-

sional polarization Obama faces is just an extreme example of that pattern.

These larger realities about the global economy and the structural limitations of American government may influence historians' judgments about whether Obama ranks with Carter or Truman. But to the voters next year, they may only seem like excuses. Obama has to persuade the public that it's precisely when the private economy is failing that America most needs the kind of energetic and competent government that only he and his party can provide. The circumstances will make it a tough sell. □