

# The Importance of Being Experienced

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - October 21, 2011

After the inglorious defeat of his cross country campaign to win passage of his second stimulus bill in the Democratic Party controlled Senate, only diehard supporters still share President Obama's apparently unshaken confidence in his speech-making prowess. But it would be a mistake to dwell on his followers' idolization and the president's vanity.

Obama seems to believe that the soaring rhetoric that propelled him to the presidency supplies a way of governing that offsets his stunning lack of executive experience. Fawning admirers reinforce the illusion. But the illusion stems from the progressive academy from which the president emerged.

While his quest continues to spin economic policy straw into legislative gold, it is in foreign policy—where the president's actions are least subject to dilution or deflection by Congressional checks and balances—that Obama's belief in the magic of his words is most evident.

Consider Iran. The president's proudly touted policy of engagement—pursuing political goals by speaking more smartly and sympathetically—has been a complete bust. In March 2009, with a video New Year's message, the president sought to go over the mullahs' heads and communicate directly with the Iranian people. His striking silence three months later in the face of Iran's brutal suppression of citizens protesting the corrupt June 2009 Iranian presidential election suggested that he harbored hopes of winning over the mullahs, too.

Both charm offensives proved to no avail. Worse, by silently standing by as Tehran repeatedly flouted his repeatedly declared deadlines for suspending its enrichment of uranium, the president has permitted Iran's nuclear program, which presents grave threats to regional stability and international order, to approach or perhaps pass the point of no return. And now we learn that Iran has been plotting to commit acts of war against the United States by blowing up foreign officials on our soil.

In addition, Obama's words undermined negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Breaking new ground in 2009 by announcing that Israel must cease all construction beyond the Green Line (while imposing no new demands on the Palestinians), Obama compelled—or handed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas the opportunity—to insist that an Israeli construction freeze was a condition for continuing negotiations.

Abbas could not allow himself to appear to be less zealous on behalf of Palestinian interests than the President of the United States. Reaping what it has sown, the Obama administration was compelled to oppose—lamely, as it turned out—President Abbas’s reckless pursuit of a UN declaration of Palestinian statehood. The Obama administration will almost certainly find itself in the awkward position of vetoing Abbas’s end run around negotiations with Israel should his bid for Palestinian statehood come to a vote in the UN Security Council.

And Senator Obama waxed eloquent during the 2008 campaign about the fierce urgency of shuttering the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. In office, he quickly signed an executive order directing Gitmo’s closure within a year. This, he loftily proclaimed, would “restore the standards of due process and the core constitutional values that have made this country great even in the midst of war, even in dealing with terrorism.” But the president’s self-righteous speechifying collided with the complex considerations involved in balancing security and liberty. Almost three years later, the detention facility remains open with no alternative in sight.

Apologists, including the president, say that matters look different from the inside. But that’s a vital lesson of experience our leaders should be expected to acquire before they are sworn in.

Over-reliance on rhetoric and disdain for experience run deep in Obama, who himself arrived in the White House bereft of background in foreign policy and national security. In fact, no post-World War II administration has had less total foreign policy and national security experience among its top officials—Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and National Security Advisor—than has the Obama administration now.

Obama’s inflation of speech and depreciation of experience reflect two dominant theories in the legal academy in which he spent fifteen years, three as a student at Harvard Law School and twelve as a faculty member at the University of Chicago Law School.

One theory, deliberative democracy, purports to expand and improve conversation among citizens. In practice, however, it appropriates the term “democratic” and reserves it, regardless of where majorities stand, for public policies and laws that are derived from a complex system of abstract ideas. The operation of this system is comprehensible only to a small circle of professors and students, and its results are consistently progressive.

The other theory, pragmatism, takes pride in the open-minded and experimental search for workable political solutions. But it tends to display flexibility only in regard to means. Academic pragmatism holds tight, with dogmatic certainty, to progressive ends.

Both deliberative democracy and pragmatism are forms of progressivism masquerading as imperatives of reason. Both place a premium on vindicating policy theoretically and marketing it rhetorically. Both depend on the devotion of partisan intellectuals. And both downplay the knowledge gained from working in the field.

The American constitutional tradition provides a corrective. The Federalist lauds experience as “the least fallible guide of human opinions” (No. 6); “the oracle of truth” (No. 20); and “the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found” (No. 52). Experience is “nowhere more desirable or more essential,” according to Federalist 72, “than in the first magistrate of the nation.”

To be sure, our leaders can’t reasonably be expected to acquire experience in all relevant areas. But we can expect them to become students of history, which, Federalist 5 observes, provides the opportunity to learn from others’ “experience without paying the price which it cost them.”

The Founders, political men and soldier-citizens steeped in history, shared their contemporary Edmund Burke’s view that prudence, the knowledge nurtured by experience and the virtue of reasoning about concrete circumstances, is “the god of this lower world” and the “supreme guide” in politics.

Prudence is neither opposed to nor independent of principle. Indeed, no small part of prudence consists in shepherding principles—with a place of honor in a liberal democracy reserved for the principles of individual freedom and the consent of the governed—through the dense medium of politics.

This shepherding requires reckoning with the contingencies of human affairs and the certainty of unexpected events. It culminates in the fashioning of courses of action that cannot be derived from abstract ideas but are more faithful to both principle and reality than theory-driven policymaking.

Experience of course does not guarantee sound policy and execution. But its absence invites arrogance and foolhardiness.

President Obama’s belief in the supremacy of rhetoric has left him particularly incapable of drawing lessons from experience. His propensity to chalk up setbacks to deficiencies in explaining himself or, as he recently put it in an interview on Black Entertainment Television, “telling a story to the American people” is hardly surprising. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. If you believe that the essence of politics is speech, then you will perceive failure as failure to communicate.

In 2008, Obama claimed—to the approval of an adoring and credulous media—that running his presidential campaign gave him the necessary experience to be president. He certainly was astonishingly successful in simultaneously appealing to progressives and moderates while obscuring his transformative goals.

But not all knowledge is equal and not all experience is fungible. Knowledge of branding and selling oneself differs from knowledge of the economy, of foreign affairs, and national security. And experience in manufacturing and manipulating words and images is no

substitute for the experience of crafting wise policy and executing it responsibly.

So, with every passing day, confirms our speechmaker-in-chief.

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