

The Big Mistakes Obama Has Already Made

By Patrick Marren

As the economy fails to recover instantaneously, and foreign enemies bluster, President Obama is taking increasing heat from expert critics. It is clear that his administration has made many missteps already in its handling of the economy, foreign policy, and virtually every other area. Some of these mistakes will take years, if not decades, for the United States to recover from.

All that remains uncertain is exactly what those mistakes will turn out to have been.

Even those considered great presidents make big mistakes. FDR tried to pack the Supreme Court. Kennedy had the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam. Reagan had the Iran-Contra scandal unfold under his watch. Lincoln appointed a whole string of incompetent generals. Washington must have made some mistakes. Even Andrew Jackson rebuked himself at the end of his second term for not shooting his own vice president – a regret Mr. Obama may feel occasionally himself.

So mistakes are inevitable, and Obama need not worry about maintaining a perfect record, because it is utterly impossible for him to do so. In fact, the only conceivable way to avoid mistakes would be to do nothing – which would be just another catastrophic mistake.

However, there is one species of mistake that President Obama could possibly have avoided, and almost certainly has not. The crisis atmosphere in which he entered office, and his perceived inexperience, almost certainly contributed mightily to it; but it was an avoidable mistake, and one I am fairly certain he will end up spending a lot of time trying to make up for later in his term.

That mistake is the failure to step back and take a blank-sheet look at the full range of plausible future scenarios he might face – in foreign affairs, the econ-

omy, on health care, terrorism, the environment, and every other major policy area.

THE ELUSIVE “BLANK SHEET”

President Obama is not the first president to make this mistake; in fact, almost all of his predecessors have made it, to one degree or another. Several generic forces militate against an incoming president taking such a blank-sheet approach.

First of all, a president is elected on a platform of programs and policies on which he or she must at least attempt to deliver, for political reasons. Votes can be seen as expressions of public support for a certain view of reality, and for a president to reject that electorate-endorsed scenario in favor of starting with a blank slate and a new set of multiple scenarios could, if handled wrong, be political suicide. Everyone is for open-mindedness in the abstract, but too open a mind, and a president may find him or herself accused by supporters of being unprincipled.

Second, a president faces hellacious pressure to “already know the answer.” He or she is expected to exude confidence, competence, and certainty at all times, even on topics about which only a fool would pretend certainty. The public, and even more, a congenitally skittish, hypercritical, front-running media, will leap upon any evidence that the new leader is diffident, non-omniscient, or inconsistent (“hypocritical” or a “flip-flopper”).

This urge to pretend to know all is exacerbated by the people a new president usually finds around him or her. These people have not gotten where they are by telling their boss “I don’t know.” Indeed, they are where they are, at least partly, as the result of a long competition among experts to see who turned out to be “right” about where reality was headed during the campaign. Those who were

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“wrong,” at least during the duration of the campaign, fell by the wayside; those remaining were lucky enough for reality not to have contradicted their predictions – yet. Leaders tend to want “points of view,” because leaders are all about making decisions under time pressure.

Some of the people surrounding the new president will be there because they truly know what they are talking about; some of them will be there because they were lucky enough for their flawed theories not to have been “disproved” during the campaign.

There is usually no way to distinguish between these two groups in the present. Neither group will be particularly open to a blank-sheet approach to reality that considers alternative scenarios of the future that do not follow the rigid logic implicit in their “expertise.” They, too, will feel severe pressure to “already know the answer.” One of the foremost examples of this passed away just weeks ago – Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who felt so strongly that he could not show weakness that he continued to advise President Johnson to continue the Vietnam War years after he had decided it was doomed to failure.

Third, in this particular case, the president is entering office during a time of extreme turmoil and uncertainty and crisis. There is a perceived crying need for immediate action – and very little stomach for stepping back and taking a look at the full range of plausible recession and recovery scenarios, or economic scenarios in general, or foreign policy scenarios, or environmental scenarios, or health care scenarios. Whatever recession and recovery planning he will do under these circumstances is very likely to be predetermined by whatever his aides have already proposed, modified, of course, to fit political realities on Capitol Hill. There is no time for “navel-gazing” or “blue-skying.” Hard-headed realism is the order of the day.

MISTAKES WILL BE MADE

I can already tell you, from experience, what will happen as a result. Not in particular, but in general. Some significant portion of the actions taken during this crisis will turn out to be mistaken, either in concept or in execution. Usually, the failures will be due to the actions being overwhelmed by some heretofore unconsidered large-scale event or force that renders the action either ineffective or irrelevant. Many of the Bush administration’s plans were rendered utterly

irrelevant by 9/11. In turn, that crisis rendered “navel-gazing” off-limits until the second term, when the failure of many of the policies undertaken (without consideration of the full range of plausible scenarios for them) in response to 9/11 became far too obvious to be ignored.

Sometime later, when failure can no longer be denied for some of the Obama administration’s policies, when the rigorous expertise of the president’s advisers has been rendered moot by non-rigorous reality, at a moment when the acute crisis has passed, somewhere in the administration, someone will propose that people take a breath, step back, and take a blank-sheet approach to the full range of plausible future scenarios.

Of course, it would have been so much more effective if it had been done up front – or, even better, even before the campaign started, when there was time to contemplate these issues in some tranquility and arrive at a truly robust platform that could weather anything that politics, economics, and even climatic change could possibly throw at it. It’s always better to do this kind of deep thinking before the crisis hits. But human nature being what it is, it’s only after the crisis has hit and then passed that most leaders – even very good ones – are willing to be caught conjecturing about a lot of things that might never happen at all ... which, when you think about it, is the only possible way to anticipate the really significant things that WILL happen.

SCENARIO PLANNING TO AVOID STRATEGIC SURPRISE

I’ll cut to the chase: the Obama administration should have started doing scenario planning the day after the election, if not years before. (Obviously, we’re biased here, because it’s what we do. But we do it for a reason – it answers a crying need.) There are mistakes that really could have been avoided, for example, by developing a range of future scenarios for the recession and recovery, and planning within that analytical framework, using them to test the pet plans and theories of the experts. I don’t know what those mistakes are yet – we all will have to deal with them in years to come. But having worked with the last two administrations, I can pretty much guarantee you that they have already been made.

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Why should scenario planning logically and temporally precede any other type of planning? Because scenario planning is the right-brain preamble to the more familiar, common, and specific modes of planning, the left-brain, implementation-and-execution, quantitative plans many of us learned in business school. To paraphrase Edward DeBono, scenario planning is about lateral thinking; traditional planning, which is still quite necessary, is about vertical thinking. To borrow another picture from DeBono, traditional planning is about digging deep for gold; scenario planning is about choosing WHERE to dig.

Of course, presidential administrations are not the only ones who too often pursue the necessary broad, blank-sheet approach only after crisis has passed. Other government and business organizations do this far too often as well. They, too, can fear looking woolly-headed and imprecise and indecisive. And that's too bad. Because in an ideal world, every incoming CEO would be tasked with the development

of a fresh set of alternative scenarios by which he or she could anticipate potential "out-of-left-field" hazards and opportunities and large-scale changes to the operating environment.

It's how they do things at the United States Coast Guard, where their Evergreen process provides a broad-gauge strategic backdrop of a new set of multiple scenarios for each Commandant's tenure. Scenarios, even at the Coast Guard, are not an infallible, end-to-end planning process, and no methodology can anticipate absolutely everything. But without them, or something very much like them, the great enemies of strategic vision – habit, numerical extrapolation, expertise, and ideology bred from past experience, especially past success – will make avoidable strategic surprises inevitable.

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