

Obama too smart, too black for declining America

Barack Obama has to be one of the smartest, eloquent, calm and cool and psychologically well-balanced (think of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush or Richard Nixon) American presidents of modern times.

He's also one of the toughest, although he neither sounds it nor looks it. Shrewdly, and surprisingly candidly, an aide has recently described him as "the most unsentimental man I've ever met." Ruthlessness comes easily to Obama, that's to say, which is what it took for him to beat a presidential nomination rival as tough as Hillary Clinton.

And yet his popularity is dragging down toward 40 per cent and by all the omens his Democrats are about to get trounced in the November congressional elections.

Obama does have some serious problems. He's black.

Unquestionably, a lot of Americans hate their national leader



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being black, and, worse yet, a black who is the smartest man around. It's a variant, incomparably uglier, of the widespread loathing of John F. Kennedy for making people feel bad by being so handsome and sophisticated, sort of a presidential Clark Gable.

Then there's the economy. The lack of jobs is serious and perhaps even more so is the widespread insecurity among those who do have jobs. A double-dip recession is a real prospect.

Yet the truth — admittedly a near-irrelevancy in politics — is that Obama headed off a near-

depression caused by Bush and corporate greed and arrogance and stupidity, and by his stimulus package brought the economy back at least to consciousness.

Included in this was financial regulatory reform and reform of the auto companies (it's working unexpectedly well). Also health-care reform.

Now he's attempting a second stimulus package. It's been blocked by the Republicans, who are insisting that planned tax cuts be extended to the wealthy (incomes above \$250,000) as well as to the middle class.

This blockage of a second stimulus is being cheered on by the populist Tea Party movement. Go figure that, other than that many Tea Partiers undoubtedly can't stand the fact that he's black.

This is the point. Obama's problem, which indeed is sizeable, doesn't reside in himself, although he needs to learn the art of faking

sincerity that Clinton, with his "I feel your pain" pitch, was so good at. Obama's problem resides in America. It's become a near-dysfunctional society.

The Tea Party, which is a genuine grassroots movement, confirms it. It stands for "freedom." No more big government. No more meddling in people's lives. But instead, Sarah Palin.

That a sizeable number of people should want Palin for president is irrefutable evidence their society has gone dysfunctional. She's a third-rater, except in demagoguery (and in faking sincerity). Paris Hilton would do the job as well, probably better.

Why should this be so? My guess is that Tea Party members and a lot of others, including that Florida evangelical minister who wanted to burn the Qur'an, even though it would have put a lot of American soldiers at risk, have actually got onto something important.

That something is that the U.S. today is clearly in decline. This shouldn't be exaggerated. Americans have an astounding capacity for resilience. Once there was humiliation in Vietnam. Once all the experts were saying Japan was about to become No. 1. Both are now history.

The U.S. will always be powerful and wealthy. But it will never again bestride the world like a colossus towering above all others. It will be, rather, a big guy in a crowd.

America's conceit of "exceptionalism," or of being better than anyone else and fundamentally different from all other societies and countries, can no longer be sustained. It's exhausted its quota, a very large one indeed, of bright, confident mornings.

Obama's problem thus is stark and simple: He's the right guy at the wrong time.

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