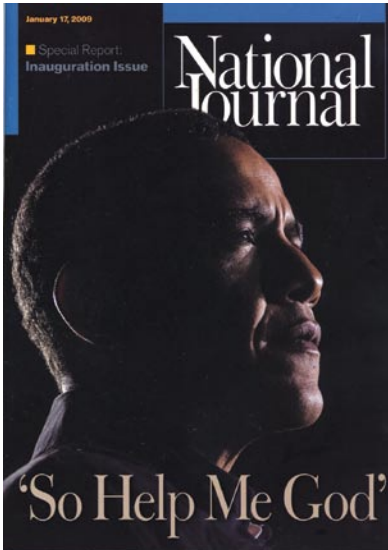




10 Keys to a Successful Presidency



Sweat a Little

With his public-approval ratings in the stratosphere, with adulation for his person emanating from so many corners of the planet, now is the time—precisely the time—for Obama to take heed of a cautionary tale: the myth of Narcissus. That's the one about the handsome youth who fell in love with

his own reflection in a pool—and perished from an excess of self-regard.

Although Obama has good reason to feel heady, he should take note that Americans will grant their president some conceit, but not too much. The trait is too redolent of royalty, of aristocracy for the leveling American sensibility. Walt Whitman, that most American of all poets, took withering aim at the upturned nose in “Song of Myself.” Of America, as the “nation of many nations,” Whitman writes: *Of every hue and caste am I ... And am not stuck up.*

As things are now, Obama straddles the line of permissible conceit. This is, admittedly, a somewhat fuzzy line. It's surely within bounds for a proud, bare-chested Obama to show off his workout-toned pectorals—OK, he's a hunk, and he knows it—but perhaps out of bounds for him to invite repeated parallels with his great hero, Abraham Lincoln, whose Bible he plans to use when he takes the oath of office on January 20. In the American pantheon, there is only one Lincoln and there can be only one Lincoln.

Based on the jokes he occasionally tells on himself, Obama is aware that he can come off as something less than humble. If this is a core character trait, it is unalterable; but surely there are many things he can do imagewise to counter the peril that this attribute is apt to present to the success of his presidency once his honeymoon with the American and foreign publics ends.

He can start by getting his hands dirty—literally. William Galston, a domestic policy adviser in the Clinton White House, would like to see Obama out and about with a shovel in hand—“jacket off, shirtsleeves rolled up”—to be “visibly identified” with the raft of public-works projects that his administration will push to dig the country out of its economic hole.

And that's only for starters. At *National Journal's* request, Ruth Sherman, a Connecticut-based image and communications con-

sultant for clients in politics, business, and the entertainment industry, prepared a list of suggestions for, in effect, bringing Obama down to earth. “Right now, although we know intellectually that Obama came from nothing and overcame enormous obstacles, we don't feel it in our bones, because all we've seen is a guy who ran a perfect campaign ... with a perfect family that has been living in a perfect house in a perfect neighborhood. We haven't seen many flaws,” she noted in an e-mail.

In addition to equipping Obama with a shovel, Sherman would also put a basketball in his hands: “I love the idea of him getting out there to shoot some hoops.... And it would be great to see him miss a few, too. Basketball is not an elite sport in the way tennis, golf, or racquetball are.” And don't just play on the White House court, Sherman added in her advisory missive: “Obama should show up from time to time at some city courts for pickup games.”

Then there is Obama's unconquered cigarette habit—which might be helpfully presented as another mark of imperfection. Sherman does not want to see Obama smoking in public, but she would like to see him talk frankly about his struggles with quitting rather than make end-runs on the topic.

This matter of displaying one's blemishes can no doubt be taken too far. The point is, while Americans may choose to put Obama on a pedestal, as is their democratic right, he should not be seen as overly eager to claim the spot. Show some resistance.

A humanizing, everyman strategy is no guarantee of success. Jimmy Carter exuded anti-imperial pretensions, donning a cardigan sweater for his first presidential “chat” to the nation from the White House—and look where that got him. George W. Bush went from highly popular to deeply unpopular in the public mind, all the while never deviating from his open-throttle bicycle rides and mangled conversational syntax.

Asked how Obama can best present himself as being in touch with ordinary American values and habits, Peter Wehner, who handled assorted policy and communications tasks for the Bush White House, rolled his eyes. The success of Obama's presidency will be “driven overwhelmingly by facts and circumstances,” he said. If the country's prospects improve, then Obama's aloof bearing will be viewed positively as a badge of seriousness. If the nation stays in a rut, then that very same trait will be negatively seen as a sign of bloodlessness, as an absence of passion, Wehner said. In other words, nothing succeeds like success.

Points well taken. Still, the image-driven, *YouTube* presidency is an inescapable reality of the times. Obama is well advised to hone a strategic plan about how he would like to be seen. Hoops, anyone?

—Paul Starobin