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Article 1.

The Washington Post

America is slipping to No. 2. Don't panic.

Charles Kenny

January 18, 2014 -- Charles Kenny is a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development. This essay is adapted from his new book, "The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest Is Good for the West."

America will soon cease to be the world's largest economy. You can argue about why, when and how bad, but the end is indeed nigh. According to the Penn World Tables — the best data to compare gross domestic product across countries — China's GDP was worth $10.4 trillion in 2011, compared with a U.S. GDP of $13.3 trillion . But with China's economy growing 7 to 10 percent a year, compared with the recent U.S. track record of less than 3 percent, China should take the lead by 2017 at the latest. Already, China is the world's top trading nation , edging the United States in total imports and exports in 2012. And Arvind Subramanian, an economist formerly with the International Monetary Fund, predicts that by 2030 the world will have four major economic players: China will be the heavyweight, followed by the United States and European Union, with economies about half as large, and then India close behind.

Time to panic? A recent Chicago Council survey found that only 9 percent of Americans believe that Chinese growth will mostly benefit the United

States, while 40 percent think it will be mostly negative for us. And a 2012 YouGov survey suggests that about half of Americans would prefer to see the United States stay on top, even with anemic economic growth, rather than grow rapidly but be overtaken by China. You only need recall President Obama and Mitt Romney sparring over who would be tougher on China to see how Washington channels this popular angst.

Certainly, China's growth poses some challenges — but the opportunities it offers far outweigh them. And no matter the hand-wringing, losing the title of largest economy doesn't really matter much to Americans' quality of life.

Regardless of its current perch atop the global economy, the United States is only the 19th least corrupt nation, according to Transparency International. It rates 67th in equality of pay between men and women according to the 2013 Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum. And among 31 high-income countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United States ranked third in GDP per capita as of 2011 — but 27th in life expectancy, 29th in infant mortality, 23rd in unemployment, 27th in math test scores (as of 2012) and 30th in income equality.

In fact, the link between the absolute size of your economy and pretty much any measure that truly matters is incredibly weak. Whenever China takes over the top spot, it will still lag far behind the world's leading countries on indicators reflecting quality of life. For starters, there are a lot more people sharing China's GDP; even the rosiest forecasts for the country's economic growth suggest that per capita income will be lower than in the United States for decades to come. The average American lives five years longer than the average person in China, and civil and political rights in the world's soon-to-be-biggest economy are routinely abused. Living in an America that ranks second in GDP to China will still be far, far better than living in China.

There are some real economic costs related to losing the top spot in the GDP rankings, but they are small and manageable. The dollar might lose its dominance as the currency of choice for central bank reserves and trading, and some predict that will increase the cost of U.S. borrowing and exporting. In fact, the dollar share of global reserves has already fallen from about 80 percent in the 1970s to about 40 percent today, with the euro

and the renminbi gaining ground, but there isn't much sign that that has spooked global markets. Meanwhile, businesses in the rest of the world still manage to export, even though they must go through the trouble of exchanging currencies.

And if you want further reassurance that you don't need to be large to be rich, remember that in tiny Luxembourg, average incomes are almost twice those in the United States.

Of more concern to Washington might be that having the world's largest economy helps the United States maintain the planet's largest defense budget. At the moment, America accounts for about four out of every 10 dollars in global defense spending; China, in second place, accounts for less than one out of 10. But one way to think about this is to ask how much the three-quarters increase in defense spending between 2000 and 2011 enhanced America's well-being. It is distinctly unclear that having one of the world's largest defense budgets, rather than the largest, poses an existential threat to U.S. citizens' quality of life.

While the downsides are limited, the upside to the United States of losing the top GDP spot is immense. The country's declining economic primacy is mainly a result of the developing economies becoming larger, healthier, more educated, more free and less violent. And there is little doubt the United States benefits from that. Just over the past few years, for example, U.S. export markets in Asia, Africa and Latin America have grown rapidly. Three-fifths of America's exports go to the developing world, and that suggests that about 6 million Americans are employed providing goods and services to emerging markets. As the developing world gets richer, it will import more — and create more jobs here.

The rest of the world is also inventing more stuff, from modular building techniques in China to new drug therapies and low-water cement-manufacturing processes in India to mobile banking applications in Kenya. We can benefit from those inventions as much as we already benefit from foreign innovators coming to the United States. Among the patents awarded in 2011 to teams at the 10 most innovative American universities, for example, three-quarters involved a foreign-born researcher, according to the Partnership for a New American Economy . As more people in developing countries go to college and as more firms there research and develop new products, there's a potential for increased innovation in both

the West and the Rest. That could bring faster progress in a number of different areas here at home, from connectivity to health.
And growth in the developing world, even if it means that some populous economies may eventually grow larger than the United States, also means that there are more places for Americans to travel in security and comfort, and more places to learn, work or while away our retirement years.
Americans can get health care at Bumrungrad International Hospital in Bangkok — accredited by the Joint Commission International, which certifies health-care organizations worldwide — for a fraction of the cost they can in Bethesda. Or their kids can attend college at the University of Cape Town, rated higher than Georgetown University in international rankings but one-fifth as expensive. Or perhaps they can get jobs at one of the new breed of world-class multinational firms based in the developing world, such as Tata or Huawei.
America's tenure on top is ending because much of the world is becoming more like America in many ways: richer, more democratic, more secure. The world increasingly shares aspirations, priorities and attitudes similar to ours. This is a success story for U.S. stewardship of the global economy. So celebrate with me: We're No. 2!

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Article 2.

The New Yorker

On and off the road with Barack Obama.

David Remnick

January 27, 2014 -- On the Sunday afternoon before Thanksgiving, Barack Obama sat in the office cabin of Air Force One wearing a look of heavy-lidded annoyance. The Affordable Care Act, his signature domestic achievement and, for all its limitations, the most ambitious social legislation since the Great Society, half a century ago, was in jeopardy. His

approval rating was down to forty per cent—lower than George W. Bush's in December of 2005, when Bush admitted that the decision to invade Iraq had been based on intelligence that "turned out to be wrong." Also, Obama said thickly, "I've got a fat lip."

That morning, while playing basketball at F.B.I. headquarters, Obama went up for a rebound and came down empty-handed; he got, instead, the sort of humbling reserved for middle-aged men who stubbornly refuse the transition to the elliptical machine and Gentle Healing Yoga. This had happened before. In 2010, after taking a self-described "shellacking" in the midterm elections, Obama caught an elbow in the mouth while playing ball at Fort McNair. He wound up with a dozen stitches. The culprit then was one Reynaldo Decerega, a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. Decerega wasn't invited to play again, though Obama sent him a photograph inscribed "For Rey, the only guy that ever hit the President and didn't get arrested. Barack."

This time, the injury was slighter and no assailant was named—"I think it was the ball," Obama said—but the President needed little assistance in divining the metaphor in this latest insult to his person. The pundits were declaring 2013 the worst year of his Presidency. The Republicans had been sniping at Obamacare since its passage, nearly four years earlier, and HealthCare.gov, a Web site that was undertested and overmatched, was a gift to them. There were other beribboned boxes under the tree: Edward Snowden's revelations about the National Security Agency; the failure to get anything passed on gun control or immigration reform; the unseemly waffling over whether the Egyptian coup was a coup; the solidifying wisdom in Washington that the President was "disengaged," allergic to the forensic and seductive arts of political persuasion. The congressional Republicans quashed nearly all legislation as a matter of principle and shut down the government for sixteen days, before relenting out of sheer tactical confusion and embarrassment—and yet it was the President's miseries that dominated the year-end summations.

Obama worried his lip with his tongue and the tip of his index finger. He sighed, slumping in his chair. The night before, Iran had agreed to freeze its nuclear program for six months. A final pact, if one could be arrived at, would end the prospect of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities and the hell that could follow: terror attacks, proxy battles, regional war—take

your pick. An agreement could even help normalize relations between the United States and Iran for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, in 1979. Obama put the odds of a final accord at less than even, but, still, how was this not good news?

The answer had arrived with breakfast. The Saudis, the Israelis, and the Republican leadership made their opposition known on the Sunday-morning shows and through diplomatic channels. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, called the agreement a "historic mistake." Even a putative ally like New York Senator Chuck Schumer could go on "Meet the Press" and, fearing no retribution from the White House, hint that he might help bollix up the deal. Obama hadn't tuned in. "I don't watch Sunday-morning shows," he said. "That's been a well-established rule." Instead, he went out to play ball.

Usually, Obama spends Sundays with his family. Now he was headed for a three-day fund-raising trip to Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, rattling the cup in one preposterous mansion after another. The prospect was dispiriting. Obama had already run his last race, and the chances that the Democratic Party will win back the House of Representatives in the 2014 midterm elections are slight. The Democrats could, in fact, lose the Senate.

For an important trip abroad, Air Force One is crowded with advisers, military aides, Secret Service people, support staff, the press pool. This trip was smaller, and I was along for the ride, sitting in a guest cabin with a couple of aides and a staffer who was tasked with keeping watch over a dark suit bag with a tag reading "The President."

Obama spent his flight time in the private quarters in the nose of the plane, in his office compartment, or in a conference room. At one point on the trip from Andrews Air Force Base to Seattle, I was invited up front for a conversation. Obama was sitting at his desk watching the Miami Dolphins–Carolina Panthers game. Slender as a switch, he wore a white shirt and dark slacks; a flight jacket was slung over his high-backed leather chair. As we talked, mainly about the Middle East, his eyes wandered to the game. Reports of multiple concussions and retired players with early-onset dementia had been in the news all year, and so, before I left, I asked if he didn't feel at all ambivalent about following the sport. He didn't.

“I would not let my son play pro football,” he conceded. “But, I mean, you wrote a lot about boxing, right? We’re sort of in the same realm.”
The Miami defense was taking on a Keystone Kops quality, and Obama, who had lost hope on a Bears contest, was starting to lose interest in the Dolphins. “At this point, there’s a little bit of caveat emptor,” he went on. “These guys, they know what they’re doing. They know what they’re buying into. It is no longer a secret. It’s sort of the feeling I have about smokers, you know?”
Obama chewed furtively on a piece of Nicorette. His carriage and the cadence of his conversation are usually so measured that I was thrown by the lingering habit, the trace of indiscipline. “I’m not a purist,” he said.

I—ON THE CLOCK

When Obama leaves the White House, on January 20, 2017, he will write a memoir. “Now, that’s a slam dunk,” the former Obama adviser David Axelrod told me. Andrew Wylie, a leading literary agent, said he thought that publishers would pay between seventeen and twenty million dollars for the book—the most ever for a work of nonfiction—and around twelve million for Michelle Obama’s memoirs. (The First Lady has already started work on hers.) Obama’s best friend, Marty Nesbitt, a Chicago businessman, told me that, important as the memoir might be to Obama’s legacy and to his finances, “I don’t see him locked up in a room writing all the time. His capacity to crank stuff out is amazing. When he was writing his second book, he would say, ‘I’m gonna get up at seven and write this chapter—and at nine we’ll play golf.’ I would think no, it’s going to be a lot later, but he would knock on my door at nine and say, ‘Let’s go.’ ”
Nesbitt thinks that Obama will work on issues such as human rights, education, and “health and wellness.” “He was a local community organizer when he was young,” he said. “At the back end of his career, I see him as an international and national community organizer.”
Yet no post-Presidential project—even one as worthy as Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs or Jimmy Carter’s efforts to eradicate the Guinea worm in Africa—can overshadow what can be accomplished in the White House with the stroke of a pen or a phone call. And, after a miserable year, Obama’s Presidency is on the clock. Hard as it has been to pass legislation since the Republicans took the House, in 2010, the coming year is a marker, the final interval before the fight for succession becomes politically all-consuming.

“The conventional wisdom is that a President’s second term is a matter of minimizing the damage and playing defense rather than playing offense,” Obama said in one of our conversations on the trip and at the White House. “But, as I’ve reminded my team, the day after I was inaugurated for a second term, we’re in charge of the largest organization on earth, and our capacity to do some good, both domestically and around the world, is unsurpassed, even if nobody is paying attention.”

In 2007, at the start of Obama’s Presidential campaign, the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and her husband, Richard Goodwin, who worked in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, visited him in his Senate office. “I have no desire to be one of those Presidents who are just on the list—you see their pictures lined up on the wall,” Obama told them. “I really want to be a President who makes a difference.” As she put it to me then, “There was the sense that he wanted to be big. He didn’t want to be Millard Fillmore or Franklin Pierce.”

The question is whether Obama will satisfy the standard he set for himself. His biggest early disappointment as President was being forced to recognize that his romantic vision of a post-partisan era, in which there are no red states or blue states, only the United States, was, in practical terms, a fantasy. It was a difficult fantasy to relinquish. The spirit of national conciliation was more than the rhetorical pixie dust of Obama’s 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, in Boston, which had brought him to delirious national attention. It was also an elemental component of his self-conception, his sense that he was uniquely suited to transcend ideology and the grubby battles of the day. Obama is defensive about this now. “My speech in Boston was an aspirational speech,” he said. “It was not a description of our politics. It was a description of what I saw in the American people.”

The structures of American division came into high relief once he was in office. The debate over the proper scale and scope of the federal government dates to the Founders, but it has intensified since the Reagan revolution. Both Bill Clinton and Obama have spent as much time defending progressive advances—from Social Security and Medicare to voting rights and abortion rights—as they have trying to extend them. The Republican Party is living through the late-mannerist phase of that revolution, fuelled less by ideas than by resentments. The moderate

Republican tradition is all but gone, and the reactionaries who claim Reagan's banner display none of his ideological finesse. Rejection is all. Obama can never be opposed vehemently enough.

The dream of bipartisan coöperation glimmered again after Obama won reëlection against Mitt Romney with fifty-one per cent of the popular vote. The President talked of the election breaking the "fever" in Washington. "We didn't expect the floodgates would open and Boehner would be Tip O'Neill to our Reagan," Dan Pfeiffer, a senior adviser to the President, said. But reëlection, he thought, had "liberated" Obama. The second Inaugural Address was the most liberal since the nineteen-sixties. Obama pledged to take ambitious action on climate change, immigration, gun control, voting rights, infrastructure, tax reform. He warned of a nation at "perpetual war." He celebrated the Seneca Falls Convention, the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, and the Stonewall riots as events in a narrative of righteous struggle. He pledged "collective action" on economic fairness, and declared that the legacy of Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid does "not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great." Pfeiffer said, "His point was that Congress won't set the limits of what I will do. I won't trim my vision. And, even if I can't get it done, I will set the stage so it does get done" in the years ahead. Then came 2013, annus horribilis.

Obama's election was one of the great markers in the black freedom struggle. In the electoral realm, ironically, the country may be more racially divided than it has been in a generation. Obama lost among white voters in 2012 by a margin greater than any victor in American history. The popular opposition to the Administration comes largely from older whites who feel threatened, underemployed, overlooked, and disdained in a globalized economy and in an increasingly diverse country. Obama's drop in the polls in 2013 was especially grave among white voters. "There's no doubt that there's some folks who just really dislike me because they don't like the idea of a black President," Obama said. "Now, the flip side of it is there are some black folks and maybe some white folks who really like me and give me the benefit of the doubt precisely because I'm a black President." The latter group has been less in evidence of late.

"There is a historic connection between some of the arguments that we have politically and the history of race in our country, and sometimes it's

hard to disentangle those issues," he went on. "You can be somebody who, for very legitimate reasons, worries about the power of the federal government—that it's distant, that it's bureaucratic, that it's not accountable—and as a consequence you think that more power should reside in the hands of state governments. But what's also true, obviously, is that philosophy is wrapped up in the history of states' rights in the context of the civil-rights movement and the Civil War and Calhoun. There's a pretty long history there. And so I think it's important for progressives not to dismiss out of hand arguments against my Presidency or the Democratic Party or Bill Clinton or anybody just because there's some overlap between those criticisms and the criticisms that traditionally were directed against those who were trying to bring about greater equality for African-Americans. The flip side is I think it's important for conservatives to recognize and answer some of the problems that are posed by that history, so that they understand if I am concerned about leaving it up to states to expand Medicaid that it may not simply be because I am this power-hungry guy in Washington who wants to crush states' rights but, rather, because we are one country and I think it is going to be important for the entire country to make sure that poor folks in Mississippi and not just Massachusetts are healthy."

Obama's advisers are convinced that if the Republicans don't find a way to attract non-white voters, particularly Hispanics and Asians, they may lose the White House for two or three more election cycles. And yet Obama still makes every effort to maintain his careful, balancing tone, as if the unifying moment were still out there somewhere in the middle distance. "There were times in our history where Democrats didn't seem to be paying enough attention to the concerns of middle-class folks or working-class folks, black or white," he said. "And this was one of the great gifts of Bill Clinton to the Party—to say, you know what, it's entirely legitimate for folks to be concerned about getting mugged, and you can't just talk about police abuse. How about folks not feeling safe outside their homes? It's all fine and good for you to want to do something about poverty, but if the only mechanism you have is raising taxes on folks who are already feeling strapped, then maybe you need to widen your lens a little bit. And I think that the Democratic Party is better for it. But that was a process. And I am confident that the Republicans will go through that same process."

For the moment, though, the opposition party is content to define itself, precisely, by its opposition. As Obama, a fan of the "Godfather" movies, has put it, "It turns out Marlon Brando had it easy, because, when it comes to Congress, there is no such thing as an offer they can't refuse."

II—THE LONG VIEW

At dusk, Air Force One touched down at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Obama and his adviser Valerie Jarrett stood for a moment on the tarmac gazing at Mt. Rainier, the snow a candied pink. Then Obama nodded. Moment over. They got in the car and headed for town. Obama's limousine, a Cadillac said to weigh as much as fifteen thousand pounds, is known as the Beast. It is armored with ceramic, titanium, aluminum, and steel to withstand bomb blasts, and it is sealed in case of biochemical attack. The doors are as heavy as those on a Boeing 757. The tires are gigantic "run-flats," reinforced with Kevlar. A supply of blood matching the President's type is kept in the trunk.

The Beast ascended the driveway of Jon Shirley, in the Seattle suburb of Medina, on Lake Washington. (Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates live in town, too.) Shirley earned his pile during the early days of high tech, first at Tandy and then, in the eighties, at Microsoft, where he served as president. Shirley's lawn is littered with gargantuan modern sculptures. A Claes Oldenburg safety pin loomed in the dark. The Beast pulled up to Shirley's front door.

One of the enduring mysteries of the Obama years is that so many members of the hyper-deluxe economy—corporate C.E.O.s and Wall Street bankers—have abandoned him. The Dow is more than twice what it was when Obama took office, in 2009; corporate profits are higher than they have been since the end of the Second World War; the financial crisis of 2008-09 vaporized more than nine trillion dollars in real-estate value, and no major purveyor of bogus mortgages or dodgy derivatives went to jail. Obama bruised some feelings once or twice with remarks about "fat-cat bankers" and "reckless behavior and unchecked excess," but, in general, he dares not offend. In 2011, at an annual dinner he holds at the White House with American historians, he asked the group to help him find a language in which he could address the problem of growing inequality without being accused of class warfare.

Inside Shirley's house, blue-chip works of modern art—paintings, sculpture, installations—were on every wall, in every corner: Katz, Kline,

Klein, Pollock, Zhang Huan, Richter, Arp, Rothko, Close, Calder. The house measures more than twenty-seven thousand square feet. There are only two bedrooms. In the library, the President went through a familiar fund-raiser routine: a pre-event private "clutch," where he shakes hands, makes small talk, and poses for pictures with an inner group—the host, the governor, the chosen.

Down the hall, in a room scaled like an airplane hangar, about seventy guests, having paid sixteen thousand dollars each to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee kitty, ate dinner and waited. Near some very artistic furniture, I stood with Valerie Jarrett, Obama's most intimate consigliere. To admirers, Jarrett is known as "the third Obama"; to wary aides, who envy her long history with the Obamas and her easy access to the living quarters of the White House, she is the Night Stalker. Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod, Robert Gibbs, David Plouffe, and many others in the Administration have clashed with her. They are gone. She remains—a constant presence, at meetings, at meals, in the Beast. While we were waiting for Obama to speak to the group, I asked Jarrett whether the health-care rollout had been the worst political fiasco Obama had confronted so far.

"I really don't think so," she said. Like all Obama advisers, she was convinced that the problems would get "fixed"—just as Social Security was fixed after a balky start, in 1937—and the memory of the botched rollout would recede. That was the hope and that was the spin. And then she said something that I've come to think of as the Administration's mantra: "The President always takes the long view."

That appeal to patience and historical reckoning, an appeal that risks a maddening high-mindedness, is something that everyone around Obama trots out to combat the hysterias of any given moment. "He has learned through those vicissitudes that every day is Election Day in Washington and everyone is writing history in ten-minute intervals," Axelrod told me. "But the truth is that history is written over a long period of time—and he will be judged in the long term."

Obama stepped up to a platform and went to work. First ingratiation, then gratitude, then answers. He expressed awe at the sight of Mt. Rainier. Being in Seattle, he said, made him "feel the spirit of my mom," the late Ann Dunham, who went to high school nearby, on Mercer Island. He

praised his host's hospitality. ("The only problem when I come to Jon's house is I want to just kind of roam around and check stuff out, and instead I've got to talk.") Then came a version of the long-game riff: "One thing that I always try to emphasize is that, if you look at American history, there have been frequent occasions in which it looked like we had insoluble problems—either economic, political, security—and, as long as there were those who stayed steady and clear-eyed and persistent, eventually we came up with an answer."

As Obama ticked off a list of first-term achievements—the economic rescue, the forty-four straight months of job growth, a reduction in carbon emissions, a spike in clean-energy technology—he seemed efficient but contained, running at three-quarters speed, like an athlete playing a midseason road game of modest consequence; he was performing just hard enough to leave a decent impression, get paid, and avoid injury. Even in front of West Coast liberals, he is always careful to disavow liberalism—the word, anyway. "I'm not a particularly ideological person," Obama told Jon Shirley and his guests. "There's things, some values I feel passionately about." He said that these included making sure that everybody is "being treated with dignity or respect regardless of what they look like or what their last name is or who they love," providing a strong defense, and "leaving a planet that is as spectacular as the one we inherited from our parents and our grandparents." He continued, "So there are values I'm passionate about, but I'm pretty pragmatic when it comes to how we get there."

Obama said he'd take some questions—in "boy, girl, boy, girl" order. He tried to rally the Democrats and expressed dismay with the opposition. ("There are reasonable conservatives and there are those who just want to burn down the house.") He played both sides of the environment issues, rehearsing the arguments for and against the Keystone pipeline and sympathizing with the desire of China and India to lift millions out of poverty—but if they consume energy the way the United States has "we'll be four feet under water." This is the archetypal Obama habit of mind and politics, the calm, professorial immersion in complexity played out in front of ardent supporters who crave a rallying cry. It's what compelled him to declare himself a non-pacifist as he was accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, in Oslo, and praise Ronald Reagan in a Democratic primary debate.

And that was the end of the performance. A few minutes later, the motorcade was snaking through the streets of suburban Seattle—kids in pajamas holding signs and sparklers, the occasional protester, Obama secured in the back seat of the Beast. He could hear nothing. The windows of his car are five inches thick.

III—PRESIDENTIAL M&M'S

The next morning, a Monday, I woke early and turned on CNN. Senator Lindsey Graham, who is facing a primary challenge from four Tea Party candidates in South Carolina, was saying with utter confidence that Iran had hoodwinked the Administration in Geneva. Next came a poll showing that the majority of the country now believed that the President was neither truthful nor honest. The announcer added with a smile that GQ had put Obama at No. 17 on its "least influential" list—right up there with Pope Benedict XVI in his retirement, the cicadas that never showed up last summer, and Manti Te'o's fake dead girlfriend.

In the hotel lobby, I met Jeff Tiller, who works for the White House press operation. In college, he became interested in politics and later joined Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign. From there, he volunteered at the White House, which led to a string of staff jobs, and eventually he was doing advance work all over the world for the White House. The aides on the plane were like Tiller—committed members of a cheerful, overworked microculture who could barely conceal their pleasure in Presidential propinquity. I'm twenty-seven and this is my thirty-second time on Air Force One. "I pinch myself sometimes," Tiller said. Dan Pfeiffer, who has been with Obama since 2007, was so overworked last year that he suffered a series of mini-strokes. "But no worries," he told me. "I'm good!"

We arrived in San Francisco, and the motorcade raced along, free of traffic and red lights, from the airport to a community center in Chinatown named after Betty Ong, a flight attendant who perished when American Airlines Flight 11 was hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center. Obama was to give a speech on immigration. Out the window, you could see people waving, people hoisting their babies as if to witness history, people holding signs protesting one issue or another—the Keystone pipeline, especially—and, everywhere, the iPhone clickers, the Samsung snappers.

The Beast pulled under a makeshift security tent. Obama gets to events like these through underground hallways, industrial kitchens, holding rooms—all of which have been checked for bombs. At the Ong Center, he met with his hosts and their children. ("I think I have some Presidential M&M's for you!") People get goggle-eyed when it's their turn for a picture. Obama tries to put them at ease: "C'mon in here! Let's do this!" Sometimes there is teasing of the mildest sort: "Chuck Taylor All-Stars! Old style, baby!" A woman told the President that she was six months pregnant. She didn't look it. "Whoa! Don't tell that to Michelle. She'll be all . . ." The woman said she was having a girl. Obama was delighted: "Daughters! You can't beat 'em!" He pulled her in for the photo. From long experience, Obama has learned what works for him in pictures: a broad, toothy smile. A millisecond after the flash, the sash releases, the smile drops, a curtain falling.

A little later, Betty Ong's mother and siblings arrived. Obama drew them into a huddle. I heard him saying that Betty was a hero, though "obviously, the heartache never goes away." Obama really is skilled at this kind of thing, the kibbitzing and the expressions of sympathy, the hugging and the eulogizing and the celebrating, the sheer animal activity of human politics—but he suffers an anxiety of comparison. Bill Clinton was, and is, the master, a hyper-extrovert whose freakish memory for names and faces, and whose indomitable will to enfold and charm everyone in his path, remains unmatched. Obama can be a dynamic speaker before large audiences and charming in very small groups, but, like a normal human being and unlike the near-pathological personalities who have so often held the office, he is depleted by the act of schmoozing a group of a hundred as if it were an intimate gathering. At fund-raisers, he would rather eat privately with a couple of aides before going out to perform. According to the Wall Street Journal, when Jeffrey Katzenberg threw a multi-million-dollar fund-raiser in Los Angeles two years ago, he told the President's staff that he expected Obama to stop at each of the fourteen tables and talk for a while. No one would have had to ask Clinton. Obama's staffers were alarmed. When you talk about this with people in Obamaland, they let on that Clinton borders on the obsessive—as if the appetite for connection were related to what got him in such deep trouble.

“Obama is a genuinely respectful person, but he doesn’t try to seduce everyone,” Axelrod said. “It’s never going to be who he’ll be.” Obama doesn’t love fund-raising, he went on, “and, if you don’t love it in the first place, you’re not likely to grow fonder of it over time.”

Obama has other talents that serve him well in public. Like a seasoned standup comedian, he has learned that a well-timed heckler can be his ally. It allows him to dramatize his open-mindedness, even his own philosophical ambivalences about a particularly difficult political or moral question. Last May, at the National Defense University, where he was giving a speech on counter-terrorism, a woman named Medea Benjamin, the co-founder of the group Code Pink, interrupted him, loudly and at length, to talk about drone strikes and about closing the American prison at Guantánamo Bay. While some in the audience tried to drown her out with applause, and security people proceeded to drag her away, Obama asserted Benjamin’s right to “free speech,” and declared, “The voice of that woman is worth paying attention to.”

At the Ong Center, an undocumented immigrant from South Korea named Ju Hong was in the crowd lined up behind the President. Toward the end of Obama’s speech, Ju Hong, a Berkeley graduate, broke in, demanding that the President use his executive powers to stop deportations.

Obama wheeled around. “If, in fact, I could solve all these problems without passing laws in Congress, then I would do so, but we’re also a nation of laws,” he said, making his case to a wash of applause.

At the next event, a fund-raiser for the Democratic National Committee at a music venue, the SFJAZZ Center, Obama met the host’s family (“Hold on, we got some White House M&M’s”) and then made his way to the backstage holding area. You could hear the murmur of security communications: “Renegade with greeters”—Renegade being Obama’s Secret Service handle.

Obama worked with more enthusiasm than at the midday event. He did the polite handshake; the full pull-in; the hug and double backslap; the slap-shake; the solicitous arm-around-the-older woman. (“And you stand here. . . . Perfect!”)

The clutch over, the crowd cleared away, Obama turned to his aides and said, “How many we got out there?”

“Five hundred. Five-fifty.”

“Five-fifty?” Obama said, walking toward the wings of the stage. “What are we talking about? Politics? Can’t we talk about something else? Sports?”
The aides were, as ever, staring down at their iPhones, scrolling, tapping, mentally occupying a psychic space somewhere between where they were and the unspooling news cycle back in Washington.
“We’re off the cuff,” Pfeiffer said. No prepared speech.
“Off the cuff? Sounds good. Let’s go do it.”
Obama walked toward the stage and, as he was announced, he mouthed the words: “Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.”
Then it happened again: another heckler broke into Obama’s speech. A man in the balcony repeatedly shouted out, “Executive order!,” demanding that the President bypass Congress with more unilateral actions. Obama listened with odd indulgence. Finally, he said, “I’m going to actually pause on this issue, because a lot of people have been saying this lately on every problem, which is just, ‘Sign an executive order and we can pretty much do anything and basically nullify Congress.’ ”
Many in the crowd applauded their approval. Yes! Nullify it! Although Obama has infuriated the right with relatively modest executive orders on gun control and some stronger ones on climate change, he has issued the fewest of any modern President, except George H. W. Bush.
“Wait, wait, wait,” Obama said. “Before everybody starts clapping, that’s not how it works. We’ve got this Constitution, we’ve got this whole thing about separation of powers. So there is no shortcut to politics, and there’s no shortcut to democracy.” The applause was hardly ecstatic. Everyone knew what he meant. The promises in the second inaugural could be a long time coming.

IV—THE WELCOME TABLE

For every flight aboard Air Force One, there is a new name card at each seat; a catalogue of the Presidential Entertainment Library, with its hiply curated choices of movies and music; baskets of fruit and candy; a menu. Obama is generally a spare eater; the Air Force One menu seems designed for William Howard Taft. Breakfast one morning was “pumpkin spiced French toast drizzled with caramel syrup and a dollop of fresh whipped cream. Served with scrambled eggs and maple sausage links.” Plus juice,

coffee, and, on the side, a "creamy vanilla yogurt layered with blackberries and cinnamon graham crackers."

The most curious character on the plane was Marvin Nicholson, a tall, rangy man in his early forties who works as the President's trip director and ubiquitous factotum. He is six feet eight. Nicholson is the guy who is always around, who carries the bag and the jacket, who squeezes Purell onto the Presidential palms after a rope line or a clutch; he is the one who has the pens, the briefing books, the Nicorette, the Sharpies, the Advil, the throat lozenges, the iPad, the iPod, the protein bars, the bottle of Black Forest Berry Honest Tea. He and the President toss a football around, they shoot baskets, they shoot the shit. In his twenties, Nicholson was living in Boston and working as a bartender and as a clerk in a windsurfing-equipment shop, where he met John Kerry. He moved to Nantucket and worked as a caddie. He carried the Senator's clubs and Kerry invited him to come to D.C. Since taking the job with Obama, in 2009, Nicholson has played golf with the President well over a hundred times. The Speaker of the House has played with him once.

A fact like this can seem to chime with the sort of complaints you hear all the time about Obama, particularly along the Acela Corridor. He is said to be a reluctant politician: aloof, insular, diffident, arrogant, inert, unwilling to jolly his allies along the fairway and take a 9-iron to his enemies. He doesn't know anyone in Congress. No one in the House or in the Senate, no one in foreign capitals fears him. He gives a great speech, but he doesn't understand power. He is a poor executive. Doesn't it seem as if he hates the job? And so on. This is the knowing talk on Wall Street, on K Street, on Capitol Hill, in green rooms—the "Morning Joe" consensus.

There are other ways to assess the political skills of a President who won two terms, as only seventeen of forty-four Presidents have, and did so as a black man, with an African father and a peculiar name, one consonant away from that of the world's most notorious terrorist. From the start, however, the political operatives who opposed him did what they are paid to do—they drew a cartoon of him. "Even if you never met him, you know this guy," Karl Rove said, in 2008. "He's the guy at the country club with the beautiful date, holding a Martini and a cigarette, that stands against the wall and makes snide comments about everyone who passes by." The less malign version is of a President who is bafflingly serene, as committed to

his duties as a husband and father—six-thirty family dinner upstairs in the private residence is considered "sacrosanct," aides say—as he is to his duties as Cajoler-in-Chief.

Still, Obama's reluctance to break bread on a regular basis with his congressional allies is real, and a source of tribal mystification in Washington. "Politics was a strange career choice for Obama," David Frum, a conservative columnist, told me. "Most politicians are not the kind of people you would choose to have as friends. Or they are the kind who, like John Edwards, seem to be one thing but then turn out to have a monster in the attic; the friendship is contingent on something you can't see. Obama is exactly like all my friends. He would rather read a book than spend time with people he doesn't know or like." Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia who was elected to the Senate three years ago, said recently that Obama's distance from members of Congress has hurt his ability to pass legislation. "When you don't build those personal relationships," Manchin told CNN, "it's pretty easy for a person to say, 'Well, let me think about it.' "

Harry Truman once called the White House "the great white jail," but few Presidents seem to have felt as oppressed by Washington as Obama does. At one stop on the West Coast trip, Marta Kauffman, a Democratic bundler who was one of the creators of "Friends," told me that she asked him what had surprised him most when he first became President. "The bubble," Obama said. He said he hoped that one day he might be able to take a walk in the park, drop by a bookstore, chat with people in a coffee shop. "After all this is done," he said, "how can I find that again?"

"Have you considered a wig?" she asked.

"Maybe fake dreads," her son added.

The President smiled. "I never thought of that," he said.

Obama's circle of intimates is limited; it has been since his days at Columbia and Harvard Law. In 2008, Obama called on John Podesta, who had worked extensively for Bill Clinton, to run his transition process. When Clinton took office, there was a huge list of people who needed to be taken care of with jobs; the "friends of Bill" is a wide network. After Podesta talked to Obama and realized how few favors had to be distributed, he told a colleague, "He travels light."

Obama's favorite company is a small ensemble of Chicago friends—Valerie Jarrett, Marty Nesbitt and his wife, Anita Blanchard, an obstetrician, and Eric and Cheryl Whitaker, prominent doctors on the South Side. During the first Presidential campaign, the Obamas took a vow of "no new friends."

"There have been times where I've been constrained by the fact that I had two young daughters who I wanted to spend time with—and that I wasn't in a position to work the social scene in Washington," Obama told me. But, as Malia and Sasha have grown older, the Obamas have taken to hosting occasional off-the-record dinners in the residence upstairs at the White House. The guests ordinarily include a friendly political figure, a business leader, a journalist. Obama drinks a Martini or two (Rove was right about that), and he and the First Lady are welcoming, funny, and warm. The dinners start at six. At around ten-thirty at one dinner last spring, the guests assumed the evening was winding down. But when Obama was asked whether they should leave, he laughed and said, "Hey, don't go! I'm a night owl! Have another drink." The party went on past 1 A.M.

At the dinners with historians, Obama sometimes asks his guests to talk about their latest work. On one occasion, Doris Kearns Goodwin talked about what became "The Bully Pulpit," which is a study, in part, of the way that Theodore Roosevelt deployed his relentlessly gregarious personality and his close relations with crusading journalists to political advantage. The portrait of T.R. muscling obstreperous foes on the issue of inequality—particularly the laissez-faire dinosaurs in his own party, the G.O.P.—couldn't fail to summon a contrasting portrait.

The biographer Robert Caro has also been a guest. Caro's ongoing volumes about Lyndon Johnson portray a President who used everything from the promise of appointment to bald-faced political threats to win passage of the legislative agenda that had languished under John Kennedy, including Medicare, a tax cut, and a civil-rights bill. Publicly, Johnson said of Kennedy, "I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause." Privately, he disdained Kennedy's inability to get his program through Congress, cracking, according to Caro, that Kennedy's men knew less about politics on the Hill "than an old maid does about fucking." Senator Richard Russell, Jr., of Georgia, admitted that he and his Dixiecrat

colleagues in the Senate could resist Kennedy "but not Lyndon": "That man will twist your arm off at the shoulder and beat your head in with it." Obama delivers no such beatings. Last April, when, in the wake of the mass shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, eighty-three per cent of Americans declared themselves in favor of background checks for gun purchases, the Times ran a prominent article making the case that the Senate failed to follow the President's lead at least partly because of his passivity as a tactical politician. It described how Mark Begich, a Democratic senator from Alaska, had asked for, and received, a crucial favor from the White House, but then, four weeks later, when Begich voted against the bill on background checks, he paid no price. No one shut down any highway lanes in Anchorage; no Presidential fury was felt in Juneau or the Brooks Range. The historian Robert Dallek, another guest at the President's table, told the Times that Obama was "inclined to believe that sweet reason is what you need to use with people in high office."

Yet Obama and his aides regard all such talk of breaking bread and breaking legs as wishful fantasy. They maintain that they could invite every Republican in Congress to play golf until the end of time, could deliver punishments with ruthless regularity—and never cut the Gordian knot of contemporary Washington. They have a point. An Alaska Democrat like Begich would never last in office had he voted with Obama. L.B.J., elected in a landslide victory in 1964, drew on whopping majorities in both houses of Congress. He could exploit ideological diversity within the parties and the lax regulations on earmarks and pork-barrel spending. "When he lost that historic majority, and the glow of that landslide victory faded, he had the same problems with Congress that most Presidents at one point or another have," Obama told me. "I say that not to suggest that I'm a master wheeler-dealer but, rather, to suggest that there are some structural institutional realities to our political system that don't have much to do with schmoozing."

Dallek said, "Johnson could sit with Everett Dirksen, the Republican leader, kneecap to kneecap, drinking bourbon and branch water, and Dirksen would mention that there was a fine young man in his state who would be a fine judge, and the deal would be cut. Nowadays, the media would know in an instant and rightly yell 'Corruption!' "

Caro finds the L.B.J.-B.H.O. comparison ludicrous. “Johnson was unique,” he said. “We have never had anyone like him, as a legislative genius. I’m working on his Presidency now. Wait till you see what he does to get Medicare, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act through. But is Obama a poor practitioner of power? I have a different opinion. No matter what the problems with the rollout of Obamacare, it’s a major advance in the history of social justice to provide access to health care for thirty-one million people.”

At the most recent dinner he attended at the White House, Caro had the distinct impression that Obama was cool to him, annoyed, perhaps, at the notion appearing in the press that his latest Johnson volume was an implicit rebuke to him. “As we were leaving, I said to Obama, ‘You know, my book wasn’t an unspoken attack on you, it’s a book about Lyndon Johnson,’ ” Caro recalled. L.B.J. was, after all, also the President who made the catastrophic decision to deepen America’s involvement in the quagmire of Vietnam. “Obama seems interested in winding down our foreign wars,” Caro said approvingly.

When Obama does ask Republicans to a social occasion, he is sometimes rebuffed. In the fall of 2012, he organized a screening at the White House of Steven Spielberg’s film “Lincoln.” Spielberg, the cast, and the Democratic leadership found the time to come. Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, and three other Republicans declined their invitations, pleading the press of congressional business. In the current climate, a Republican, especially one facing challenges at home from the right, risks more than he gains by socializing or doing business with Obama. Boehner may be prepared to compromise on certain issues, but it looks better for him if he is seen to be making a deal with Harry Reid, in the Senate, than with Barack Obama. Obama’s people say that the President’s attitude is, Fine, so long as we get there. Help me to help you.

When I asked Obama if he had read or seen anything that fully captured the experience of being in his office, he laughed, as if to say, You just have no idea. “The truth is, in popular culture the President is usually a side character and a lot of times is pretty dull,” he said. “If it’s a paranoid conspiracy-theory movie, then there’s an evil aide who is carrying something out. If it’s a good President, then he is all-wise and all-knowing”—like the characters played by Martin Sheen in “The West

Wing," and Michael Douglas in "The American President." Obama says that he is neither. "I'll tell you that watching 'Lincoln' was interesting, in part because you watched what obviously was a fictionalized account of the President I most admire, and there was such a gap between him and me that it made you want to be better." He spoke about envying Lincoln's "capacity to speak to and move the country without simplifying, and at the most fundamental of levels." But what struck him most, he said, was precisely what his critics think he most avoids—"the messiness of getting something done."

He went on, "The real politics resonated with me, because I have yet to see something that we've done, or any President has done, that was really important and good, that did not involve some mess and some strong-arming and some shading of how it was initially talked about to a particular member of the legislature who you needed a vote from. Because, if you're doing big, hard things, then there is going to be some hair on it—there's going to be some aspects of it that aren't clean and neat and immediately elicit applause from everybody. And so the nature of not only politics but, I think, social change of any sort is that it doesn't move in a straight line, and that those who are most successful typically are tacking like a sailor toward a particular direction but have to take into account winds and currents and occasionally the lack of any wind, so that you're just sitting there for a while, and sometimes you're being blown all over the place."

The politician sensitive to winds and currents was visible in Obama's coy talk of his "evolving" position on gay marriage. Obama conceded in one of our later conversations only that it's "fair to say that I may have come to that realization slightly before I actually made the announcement" favoring gay marriage, in May of 2012. "But this was not a situation where I kind of did a wink and a nod and a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn." The turn may not have been a sudden one-eighty; to say that your views are "evolving," though, is to say there is a position that you consider to be more advanced than the one you officially hold. And he held the "evolved" position in 1996, when, as a candidate for the Illinois state senate, he filled out a questionnaire from Outlines, a local gay and lesbian newspaper, saying, "I favor legalizing same-sex marriages."

When I asked Obama about another area of shifting public opinion—the legalization of marijuana—he seemed even less eager to evolve with any

dispatch and get in front of the issue. “As has been well documented, I smoked pot as a kid, and I view it as a bad habit and a vice, not very different from the cigarettes that I smoked as a young person up through a big chunk of my adult life. I don’t think it is more dangerous than alcohol.”
Is it less dangerous? I asked.
Obama leaned back and let a moment go by. That’s one of his moves. When he is interviewed, particularly for print, he has the habit of slowing himself down, and the result is a spool of cautious lucidity. He speaks in paragraphs and with moments of revision. Sometimes he will stop in the middle of a sentence and say, “Scratch that,” or, “I think the grammar was all screwed up in that sentence, so let me start again.”
Less dangerous, he said, “in terms of its impact on the individual consumer. It’s not something I encourage, and I’ve told my daughters I think it’s a bad idea, a waste of time, not very healthy.” What clearly does trouble him is the radically disproportionate arrests and incarcerations for marijuana among minorities. “Middle-class kids don’t get locked up for smoking pot, and poor kids do,” he said. “And African-American kids and Latino kids are more likely to be poor and less likely to have the resources and the support to avoid unduly harsh penalties.” But, he said, “we should not be locking up kids or individual users for long stretches of jail time when some of the folks who are writing those laws have probably done the same thing.” Accordingly, he said of the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington that “it’s important for it to go forward because it’s important for society not to have a situation in which a large portion of people have at one time or another broken the law and only a select few get punished.”
As is his habit, he nimbly argued the other side. “Having said all that, those who argue that legalizing marijuana is a panacea and it solves all these social problems I think are probably overstating the case. There is a lot of hair on that policy. And the experiment that’s going to be taking place in Colorado and Washington is going to be, I think, a challenge.” He noted the slippery-slope arguments that might arise. “I also think that, when it comes to harder drugs, the harm done to the user is profound and the social costs are profound. And you do start getting into some difficult line-drawing issues. If marijuana is fully legalized and at some point folks say, Well, we can come up with a negotiated dose of cocaine that we can show

is not any more harmful than vodka, are we open to that? If somebody says, We've got a finely calibrated dose of meth, it isn't going to kill you or rot your teeth, are we O.K. with that?"

V—MAGIC KINGDOMS

By Monday night, Obama was in Los Angeles, headed for Beverly Park, a gated community of private-equity barons, Saudi princes, and movie people. It was a night of fund-raisers—the first hosted by Magic Johnson, who led the Lakers to five N.B.A. championships, in the eighties. In the Beast, on the way to Johnson's house, Obama told me, "Magic has become a good friend. I always tease him—I think he supported Hillary the first time around, in '08."

"He campaigned for her in Iowa!" Josh Earnest, a press spokesman, said, still sounding chagrined.

"Yeah, but we have developed a great relationship," Obama said. "I wasn't a Lakers fan. I was a Philadelphia 76ers fan, because I loved Doctor J."—Julius Erving—"and then became a Jordan fan, because I moved to Chicago. But, in my mind, at least, what has made Magic heroic was not simply the joy of his playing." Obama said that the way Johnson handled his H.I.V. diagnosis changed "how the culture thought about that—which, actually, I think, ultimately had an impact about how the culture thought about the gay community." He also talked about Johnson's business success as something that was "deeply admired" among African-Americans—"the notion that here's somebody who would leverage fame and fortune in sports into a pretty remarkable business career."

"Do you not see that often enough, by your lights?" I asked.

"I don't," Obama said.

The Obamas are able to speak to people of color in a way that none of their predecessors could. And the President is quick to bring into the public realm the fact that, for all his personal cool, he is a foursquare family man. He has plenty of hip-hop on his iPod, but he also worries about the moments of misogyny. Once, I mentioned to him that I knew that while Malia Obama, an aspiring filmmaker, was a fan of "Girls," he and Michelle Obama were, at first, wary of the show.

"I'm at the very young end of the Baby Boom generation, which meant that I did not come of age in the sixties—took for granted certain freedoms, certain attitudes about gender, sexuality, equality for women, but didn't

feel as if I was having to rebel against something," Obama said. "Precisely because I didn't have a father in the home and moved around a lot as a kid and had a wonderfully loving mom and grandparents, but not a lot of structure growing up, I emerged on the other side of that with an appreciation for family and marriage and structure for the kids. I'm sure that's part of why Michelle and her family held such appeal to me in the first place, because she did grow up with that kind of structure. And now, as parents, I don't think we're being particularly conservative—we're actually not prudes. . . . But, as parents, what we have seen, both in our own family and among our friends, is that kids with structure have an easier time of it."

He talked about a visit that he made last year to Hyde Park Academy, a public high school on Chicago's South Side, where he met with a group of about twenty boys in a program called Becoming a Man. "They're in this program because they're fundamentally good kids who could tip in the wrong direction if they didn't get some guidance and some structure," Obama recalled. "We went around the room and started telling each other stories. And one of the young men asked me about me growing up, and I explained, You know what? I'm just like you guys. I didn't have a dad. There were times where I was angry and wasn't sure why I was angry. I engaged in a bunch of anti-social behavior. I did drugs. I got drunk. Didn't take school seriously. The only difference between me and you is that I was in a more forgiving environment, and if I made a mistake I wasn't going to get shot. And, even if I didn't apply myself in school, I was at a good enough school that just through osmosis I'd have the opportunity to go to college.

"And, as I'm speaking, the kid next to me looks over and he says, 'Are you talking about you?' And there was a benefit for them hearing that, because when I then said, You guys have to take yourselves more seriously, or you need to have a backup plan in case you don't end up being LeBron or Jay Z . . . they might listen. Now, that's not a liberal or a conservative thing. There have been times where some thoughtful and sometimes not so thoughtful African-American commentators have gotten on both Michelle and me, suggesting that we are not addressing enough sort of institutional barriers and racism, and we're engaging in sort of up-by-the-bootstraps, Booker T. Washington messages that let the larger society off the hook."

Obama thought that this reaction was sometimes knee-jerk. “I always tell people to go read some of Dr. King’s writings about the African-American community. For that matter, read Malcolm X. . . . There’s no contradiction to say that there are issues of personal responsibility that have to be addressed, while still acknowledging that some of the specific pathologies in the African-American community are a direct result of our history.”

The higher we went up into Beverly Hills, the grander the houses were. This was where the big donors lived. But Obama’s thoughts have been down in the city. The drama of racial inequality, in his mind, has come to presage a larger, transracial form of economic disparity, a deepening of the class divide. Indeed, if there is a theme for the remaining days of his term, it is inequality. In 2011, he went to Osawatomie, Kansas, the site of Theodore Roosevelt’s 1910 New Nationalism speech—a signal moment in the history of Progressivism—and declared inequality the “defining issue of our time.” He repeated the message at length, late last year, in Anacostia, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., this time noting that the gap between the rich and the poor in America now resembled that in Argentina and Jamaica, rather than that in France, Germany, or Canada. American C.E.O.s once made, on average, thirty times as much as workers; now they make about two hundred and seventy times as much. The wealthy hire lobbyists; they try to secure their interests with campaign donations. Even as Obama travels for campaign alms and is as entangled in the funding system at least as much as any other politician, he insists that his commitment is to the middle class and the disadvantaged. Last summer, he received a letter from a single mother struggling to support herself and her daughter on a minimal income. She was drowning: “I need help. I can’t imagine being out in the streets with my daughter and if I don’t get some type of relief soon, I’m afraid that’s what may happen.” “Copy to Senior Advisers,” Obama wrote at the bottom of the letter. “This is the person we are working for.”

In one of our conversations, I asked him what he felt he must get done before leaving office. He was silent for a while and then broke into a pained grin. “You mean, now that the Web site is working?” Yes, after that. “It’s hard to anticipate events over the next three years,” he said. “If you had asked F.D.R. what he had to accomplish in 1937, he would have told you, ‘I’ve got to stabilize the economy and reduce the deficit.’ Turned out

there were a few more things on his plate." He went on, "I think we are fortunate at the moment that we do not face a crisis of the scale and scope that Lincoln or F.D.R. faced. So I think it's unrealistic to suggest that I can narrow my focus the way those two Presidents did. But I can tell you that I will measure myself at the end of my Presidency in large part by whether I began the process of rebuilding the middle class and the ladders into the middle class, and reversing the trend toward economic bifurcation in this society."

Obama met last summer with Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist who became famous for a book he wrote on social atomization, "Bowling Alone." For the past several years, Putnam and some colleagues have been working on a book about the growing opportunity gap between rich and poor kids. Putnam, who led a Kennedy School seminar on civic engagement that Obama was in, sent the President a memo about his findings. More and more, Putnam found, the crucial issue is class, and he believes that a black President might have an easier time explaining this trend to the American people and setting an agenda to combat it. Other prominent politicians—including Hillary Clinton, Paul Ryan, and Jeb Bush—have also consulted Putnam. Putnam told me that, even if legislation combatting the widening class divide eludes Obama, "I am hoping he can be John the Baptist on this." And Obama, for his part, seems eager to take on that evangelizing role.

"You have an economy," Obama told me, "that is ruthlessly squeezing workers and imposing efficiencies that make our flat-screen TVs really cheap but also puts enormous downward pressure on wages and salaries. That's making it more and more difficult not only for African-Americans or Latinos to get a foothold into the middle class but for everybody—large majorities of people—to get a foothold in the middle class or to feel secure there. You've got folks like Bob Putnam, who's doing some really interesting studies indicating the degree to which some of those 'pathologies' that used to be attributed to the African-American community in particular—single-parent households, and drug abuse, and men dropping out of the labor force, and an underground economy—you're now starting to see in larger numbers in white working-class communities as well, which would tend to vindicate what I think a lot of us always felt."

VI—A NEW EQUILIBRIUM

After the event at Magic Johnson's place—the highlight was a tour of an immense basement trophy room, where Johnson had installed a gleaming hardwood basketball floor and piped in the sound of crowds cheering and announcers declaring the glories of the Lakers—the Beast made its way to the compound that the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers built. Haim Saban, who made his billions as a self-described "cartoon schlepper," was born in Egypt, came of age in Israel, and started his show-business career as the bass player in the Lions of Judah. His politics are not ambiguous. "I am a one-issue guy," he once said, "and my issue is Israel." His closest political relationship is with Bill and Hillary Clinton, and he was crushed when she lost to Obama, in 2008. Saban publicly expressed doubts about whether Obama was sufficiently ardent about Israel, but he has come around.

The main house on Saban's property is less of an art museum than Jon Shirley's, though it features a Warhol diptych of Golda Meir and Albert Einstein over the fireplace. The fund-raiser was held in back of the main house, under a tent. Addressing a hundred and twenty guests, and being peppered with questions about the Middle East, Obama trotted around all the usual bases—the hope for peace, the still strong alliance with Israel, the danger of "lone wolf" terror threats. But, while a man who funds the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution may have warmed to Obama, there is no question that, in certain professional foreign-policy circles, Obama is often regarded with mistrust. His Syria policy—with its dubious "red line" and threats to get rid of Bashar al-Assad; with John Kerry's improvised press-conference gambit on chemical weapons—has inspired little confidence. Neither did the decision to accelerate troop levels in Afghanistan and, at the same time, schedule a withdrawal.

Obama came to power without foreign-policy experience; but he won the election, in part, by advocating a foreign-policy sensibility that was wary of American overreach. If George W. Bush's foreign policy was largely a reaction to 9/11, Obama's has been a reaction to the reaction. He withdrew American forces from Iraq. He went to Cairo in 2009, in an attempt to forge "a new beginning" between the United States and the Muslim world. American troops will come home from Afghanistan this year. As he promised in his first Presidential campaign—to the outraged protests of Hillary Clinton and John McCain alike—he has extended a hand to

traditional enemies, from Iran to Cuba. And he has not hesitated in his public rhetoric to acknowledge, however subtly, the abuses, as well as the triumphs, of American power. He remembers going with his mother to live in Indonesia, in 1967—shortly after a military coup, engineered with American help, led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people. This event, and the fact that so few Americans know much about it, made a lasting impression on Obama. He is convinced that an essential component of diplomacy is the public recognition of historical facts—not only the taking of American hostages in Iran, in 1979, but also the American role in the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, in 1953.

The right's response has been to accuse Obama of conducting a foreign policy of apology. Last year, Republican senators on the Foreign Affairs Committee, including Marco Rubio, of Florida, demanded to know if Samantha Power, Obama's nominee for U.N. Ambassador and the author of "A Problem from Hell," a historical indictment of American passivity in the face of various genocides around the world, would ever "apologize" for the United States. (In a depressing Kabuki drama, Power seemed forced to prove her patriotic bona fides by insisting repeatedly that the U.S. was "the greatest country on earth" and that, no, she would "never apologize" for it.) Obama's conservative critics, both at home and abroad, paint him as a President out to diminish American power. Josef Joffe, the hawkish editor of Die Zeit, the highbrow German weekly, told me, "There is certainly consistency and coherence in his attempt to retract from the troubles of the world, to get the U.S. out of harm's way, in order to do 'a little nation-building at home,' as he has so often put it. If you want to be harsh about it, he wants to turn the U.S. into a very large medium power, into an XXL France or Germany."

Obama's "long game" on foreign policy calls for traditional categories of American power and ideology to be reordered. Ben Rhodes, the deputy national-security adviser for strategic communications, told me that Washington was "trapped in very stale narratives."

"In the foreign-policy establishment, to be an idealist you have to be for military intervention," Rhodes went on. "In the Democratic Party, these debates were defined in the nineties, and the idealists lined up for military intervention. For the President, Iraq was the defining issue, and now Syria

is viewed through that lens, as was Libya—to be an idealist, you have to be a military interventionist. We spent a trillion dollars in Iraq and had troops there for a decade, and you can't say it wielded positive influence. Just the opposite. We can't seem to get out of these boxes."

Obama may resist the idealism of a previous generation of interventionists, but his realism, if that's what it is, diverges from the realism of Henry Kissinger or Brent Scowcroft. "It comes from the idea that change is organic and change comes to countries in its own way, modernization comes in its own way, rather than through liberation narratives coming from the West," Fareed Zakaria, a writer on foreign policy whom Obama reads and consults, says. Anne-Marie Slaughter, who worked at the State Department as Hillary Clinton's director of policy planning, says, "Obama has a real understanding of the limits of our power. It's not that the United States is in decline; it's that sometimes the world has problems without the tools to fix them." Members of Obama's foreign-policy circle say that when he is criticized for his reaction to situations like Iran's Green Revolution, in 2009, or the last days of Hosni Mubarak's regime, in 2011, he complains that people imagine him to have a "joystick" that allows him to manipulate precise outcomes.

Obama told me that what he needs isn't any new grand strategy—"I don't really even need George Kennan right now"—but, rather, the right strategic partners. "There are currents in history and you have to figure out how to move them in one direction or another," Rhodes said. "You can't necessarily determine the final destination. . . . The President subscribes less to a great-man theory of history and more to a great-movement theory of history—that change happens when people force it or circumstances do." (Later, Obama told me, "I'm not sure Ben is right about that. I believe in both.")

The President may scorn the joystick fantasy, but he does believe that his words—at microphones from Cairo to Yangon—can encourage positive change abroad, even if only in the long run. In Israel last March, he told university students that "political leaders will never take risks if the people do not push them to take some risks." Obama, who has pressed Netanyahu to muster the political will to take risks on his own, thinks he can help "create a space"—that is the term around the White House—for forward

movement on the Palestinian issue, whether he is around to see the result or not.

Administration officials are convinced that their efforts to toughen the sanctions on Iran caused tremendous economic pain and helped Hassan Rouhani win popular support in the Iranian Presidential elections last year. Although Rouhani is no liberal—he has revolutionary and religious credentials, which is why he was able to run—he was not Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's favored candidate. Khamenei is an opaque, cautious figure, Administration officials say, but he clearly acceded to Rouhani as he saw the political demands of the population shift.

The nuclear negotiations in Geneva, which were preceded by secret contacts with the Iranians in Oman and New York, were, from Obama's side, based on a series of strategic calculations that, he acknowledges, may not work out. As the Administration sees it, an Iranian nuclear weapon would be a violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and a threat to the entire region; it could spark a nuclear arms race reaching Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. (Israel has had nukes since 1967.) But the White House is prepared to accept a civilian nuclear capacity in Iran, with strict oversight, while the Israelis and the Gulf states regard any Iranian nuclear technology at all as unacceptable. Obama has told Netanyahu and Republican senators that the absolutist benchmark is not achievable. Members of Obama's team believe that the leaders of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, who are now allied as never before, want the U.S. to be their proxy in a struggle not merely for de-nuclearization in Iran but for regime change—and that is not on the Administration's agenda, except, perhaps, as a hope.

Republican and Democratic senators have expressed doubts about even the interim agreement with Iran, and have threatened to tighten sanctions still further. "Historically, there is hostility and suspicion toward Iran, not just among members of Congress but the American people," Obama said, adding that "members of Congress are very attentive to what Israel says on its security issues." He went on, "I don't think a new sanctions bill will reach my desk during this period, but, if it did, I would veto it and expect it to be sustained."

Ultimately, he envisages a new geopolitical equilibrium, one less turbulent than the current landscape of civil war, terror, and sectarian battle. "It

would be profoundly in the interest of citizens throughout the region if Sunnis and Shias weren't intent on killing each other," he told me. "And although it would not solve the entire problem, if we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion—not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon—you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare.

"With respect to Israel, the interests of Israel in stability and security are actually very closely aligned with the interests of the Sunni states." As Saudi and Israeli diplomats berate Obama in unison, his reaction is, essentially, Use that. "What's preventing them from entering into even an informal alliance with at least normalized diplomatic relations is not that their interests are profoundly in conflict but the Palestinian issue, as well as a long history of anti-Semitism that's developed over the course of decades there, and anti-Arab sentiment that's increased inside of Israel based on seeing buses being blown up," Obama said. "If you can start unwinding some of that, that creates a new equilibrium. And so I think each individual piece of the puzzle is meant to paint a picture in which conflicts and competition still exist in the region but that it is contained, it is expressed in ways that don't exact such an enormous toll on the countries involved, and that allow us to work with functioning states to prevent extremists from emerging there."

During Obama's performance under Saban's tent, there was no talk of a Sunni-Israeli alignment, or of any failures of vision on Netanyahu's part. Obama did allow himself to be testy about the criticism he has received over his handling of the carnage in Syria. "You'll recall that that was the previous end of my Presidency, until it turned out that we are actually getting all the chemical weapons. And no one reports on that anymore."

VII—HAMMERS AND PLIERS

Obama's lowest moments in the Middle East have involved his handling of Syria. Last summer, when I visited Za'atari, the biggest Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, one displaced person after another expressed anger and dismay at American inaction. In a later conversation, I asked Obama if he was haunted by Syria, and, though the mask of his equipoise rarely slips, an indignant expression crossed his face. "I am haunted by what's

happened," he said. "I am not haunted by my decision not to engage in another Middle Eastern war. It is very difficult to imagine a scenario in which our involvement in Syria would have led to a better outcome, short of us being willing to undertake an effort in size and scope similar to what we did in Iraq. And when I hear people suggesting that somehow if we had just financed and armed the opposition earlier, that somehow Assad would be gone by now and we'd have a peaceful transition, it's magical thinking. "It's not as if we didn't discuss this extensively down in the Situation Room. It's not as if we did not solicit—and continue to solicit—opinions from a wide range of folks. Very early in this process, I actually asked the C.I.A. to analyze examples of America financing and supplying arms to an insurgency in a country that actually worked out well. And they couldn't come up with much. We have looked at this from every angle. And the truth is that the challenge there has been, and continues to be, that you have an authoritarian, brutal government who is willing to do anything to hang on to power, and you have an opposition that is disorganized, ill-equipped, ill-trained, and is self-divided. All of that is on top of some of the sectarian divisions. . . . And, in that environment, our best chance of seeing a decent outcome at this point is to work the state actors who have invested so much in keeping Assad in power—mainly the Iranians and the Russians—as well as working with those who have been financing the opposition to make sure that they're not creating the kind of extremist force that we saw emerge out of Afghanistan when we were financing the mujahideen."

At the core of Obama's thinking is that American military involvement cannot be the primary instrument to achieve the new equilibrium that the region so desperately needs. And yet thoughts of a pacific equilibrium are far from anyone's mind in the real, existing Middle East. In the 2012 campaign, Obama spoke not only of killing Osama bin Laden; he also said that Al Qaeda had been "decimated." I pointed out that the flag of Al Qaeda is now flying in Falluja, in Iraq, and among various rebel factions in Syria; Al Qaeda has asserted a presence in parts of Africa, too.

"The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant," Obama said, resorting to an uncharacteristically flip analogy. "I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the

homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.

"Let's just keep in mind, Falluja is a profoundly conservative Sunni city in a country that, independent of anything we do, is deeply divided along sectarian lines. And how we think about terrorism has to be defined and specific enough that it doesn't lead us to think that any horrible actions that take place around the world that are motivated in part by an extremist Islamic ideology are a direct threat to us or something that we have to wade into."

He went on, "You have a schism between Sunni and Shia throughout the region that is profound. Some of it is directed or abetted by states who are in contests for power there. You have failed states that are just dysfunctional, and various warlords and thugs and criminals are trying to gain leverage or a foothold so that they can control resources, populations, territory. . . . And failed states, conflict, refugees, displacement—all that stuff has an impact on our long-term security. But how we approach those problems and the resources that we direct toward those problems is not going to be exactly the same as how we think about a transnational network of operatives who want to blow up the World Trade Center. We have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically, so that we're not using a pliers where we need a hammer, or we're not using a battalion when what we should be doing is partnering with the local government to train their police force more effectively, improve their intelligence capacities."

This wasn't realism or idealism; it was something closer to policy particularism (this thing is different from that thing; Syria is not Libya; Iran is not North Korea). Yet Obama's regular deployment of drones has been criticized as a one-size-fits-all recourse, in which the prospect of destroying an individual enemy too easily trumps broader strategic and diplomatic considerations, to say nothing of moral ones. A few weeks before Obama left Washington to scour the West Coast for money, he invited to the White House Malala Yousafzai, the remarkable Pakistani teen-ager who campaigned for women's education and was shot in the head by the Taliban. Yousafzai thanked Obama for the material support that the U.S. government provided for education in Pakistan and Afghanistan and

among Syrian refugees, but she also told him that drone strikes were "fuelling terrorism" and resentment in her country.

"I think any President should be troubled by any war or any kinetic action that leads to death," Obama told me when I brought up Yousafzai's remarks. "The way I've thought about this issue is, I have a solemn duty and responsibility to keep the American people safe. That's my most important obligation as President and Commander-in-Chief. And there are individuals and groups out there that are intent on killing Americans—killing American civilians, killing American children, blowing up American planes. That's not speculation. It's their explicit agenda."

Obama said that, if terrorists can be captured and prosecuted, "that's always my preference. If we can't, I cannot stand by and do nothing. They operate in places where oftentimes we cannot reach them, or the countries are either unwilling or unable to capture them in partnership with us. And that then narrows my options: we can simply be on defense and try to harden our defense. But in this day and age that's of limited—well, that's insufficient. We can say to those countries, as my predecessor did, if you are harboring terrorists, we will hold you accountable—in which case, we could be fighting a lot of wars around the world. And, statistically, it is indisputable that the costs in terms of not only our men and women in uniform but also innocent civilians would be much higher. Or, where possible, we can take targeted strikes, understanding that anytime you take a military strike there are risks involved. What I've tried to do is to tighten the process so much and limit the risks of civilian casualties so much that we have the least fallout from those actions. But it's not perfect."

It is far from that. In December, an American drone flying above Al Bayda province, in Yemen, fired on what U.S. intelligence believed was a column of Al Qaeda fighters. The "column" was in fact a wedding party; twelve people were killed, and fifteen were seriously injured. Some of the victims, if not all, were civilians. This was no aberration. In Yemen and Pakistan, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, American drones have killed between some four hundred and a thousand civilians—a civilian-to-combatant ratio that could be as high as one to three. Obama has never made it clear how the vast populations outraged and perhaps radicalized by such remote-control mayhem might figure into his calculations about American security.

"Look, you wrestle with it," Obama said. "And those who have questioned our drone policy are doing exactly what should be done in a democracy—asking some tough questions. The only time I get frustrated is when folks act like it's not complicated and there aren't some real tough decisions, and are sanctimonious, as if somehow these aren't complicated questions. Listen, as I have often said to my national-security team, I didn't run for office so that I could go around blowing things up."

Obama told me that in all three of his main initiatives in the region—with Iran, with Israel and the Palestinians, with Syria—the odds of completing final treaties are less than fifty-fifty. "On the other hand," he said, "in all three circumstances we may be able to push the boulder partway up the hill and maybe stabilize it so it doesn't roll back on us. And all three are connected. I do believe that the region is going through rapid change and inexorable change. Some of it is demographics; some of it is technology; some of it is economics. And the old order, the old equilibrium, is no longer tenable. The question then becomes, What's next?"

VIII—AMONG THE ALIENS

On his last day in Los Angeles, Obama romanced Hollywood, taking a helicopter to visit the DreamWorks studio, in Glendale. Jeffrey Katzenberg, Obama's host and the head of DreamWorks Animation, is one of the Democrats' most successful fund-raisers. But it is never a good idea for the White House to admit to any quid pro quo. When one of the pool reporters asked why the President was going to Katzenberg's studio and not, say, Universal, a travelling spokesman replied, "DreamWorks obviously is a thriving business and is creating lots of jobs in Southern California. And the fact of the matter is Mr. Katzenberg's support for the President's policies has no bearing on our decision to visit there."

That's pretty rich. Katzenberg has been a supporter from the start of Obama's national career, raising millions of dollars for him and for the Party's Super PACs. Nor has he been hurt by his political associations. Joe Biden helped pave the way with Xi Jinping and other officials so that DreamWorks and other Hollywood companies could build studios in China. (In an awkward postscript, the S.E.C. reportedly began investigating, in 2012, whether DreamWorks, Twentieth Century Fox, and the Walt Disney Company paid bribes to Chinese officials, in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.)

A flock of military helicopters brought the Obama party to Glendale, and, after a short ride to DreamWorks Animation, Katzenberg greeted the President and gave him a tour. They stopped in a basement recording studio to watch a voice-over session for a new animated picture called "Home," starring the voice of Steve Martin. Greeting Martin, Obama recalled that the last time they saw each other must have been when Martin played banjo with his band at the White House.

Martin nodded. "I always say the fact that I played banjo at the White House was the biggest thrill of his life."

Katzenberg explained that "Home" was the story of the Boov, an alien race that has taken over the planet. Martin is the voice of Captain Smek, the leader of the Boov.

"Where did we go?" Obama asked Tim Johnson, the director. "Do they feed us?"

"Mostly ice cream."

Katzenberg said that, unlike dramatic films with live actors, nineteen out of twenty of DreamWorks' animated pictures succeed.

"My kids have aged out," Obama said. "They used to be my excuse to watch them all."

Katzenberg led Obama to a conference room, where the heads of most of the major movie and television studios were waiting. There would be touchy questions about business—particularly about the "North versus South" civil war in progress between the high-tech libertarians in Silicon Valley and the "content producers" in Los Angeles. The war was over intellectual-property rights, and Obama showed little desire to get in the middle of these two constituencies. If anything, he knows that Silicon Valley is ascendant, younger, more able to mobilize active voters, and he was not about to offer the studio heads his unqualified muscle.

Finally, the subject switched to global matters. Alan Horn, the chairman of Walt Disney Studios, raised his hand. "First," he said, "I do recommend that you and your family see 'Frozen,' which is coming to a theatre near you. "

Then he asked about climate change.

IX—LISTENING IN

On the flight back to Washington, Obama read and played spades with some aides to pass the time. (He and his former body man Reggie Love

took a break to play spades at one point during the mission to kill Osama bin Laden.) After a while, one of the aides led me to the front cabin to talk with the President some more. The week before, Obama had given out the annual Presidential Medals of Freedom. One went to Benjamin C. Bradlee, the editor who built the Washington Post by joining the Times in publishing the Pentagon Papers, in 1971, and who stood behind Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein as they began publishing the Watergate exposés that led to the fall of the Nixon Presidency. I asked Obama how he could reconcile such an award with his Administration's aggressive leak investigations, which have ensnared journalists and sources, and its hostility to Edward Snowden's exposure of the N.S.A.'s blanket surveillance of American and foreign communications.

After a long pause, Obama began to speak of how his first awareness of politics came when, as an eleven-year-old, he went on a cross-country bus trip with his mother and grandmother and, at the end of each day, watched the Watergate hearings on television. "I remember being fascinated by these figures and what was at stake, and the notion that even the President of the United States isn't above the law," he said. "And Sam Ervin with his eyebrows, and Inouye, this guy from Hawaii—it left a powerful impression on me. And so, as I got older, when I saw 'All the President's Men,' that was the iconic vision of journalism telling truth to power, and making sure our democracy worked. And I still believe that. And so a lot of the tensions that have existed between my White House and the press are inherent in the institution. The press always wants more, and every White House, including ours, is trying to make sure that the things that we care most about are what's being reported on, and that we're not on any given day chasing after fifteen story lines."

Then Obama insisted that what Snowden did was "not akin to Watergate or some scandal in which there were coverups involved." The leaks, he said, had "put people at risk" but revealed nothing illegal. And though the leaks raised "legitimate policy questions" about N.S.A. operations, "the issue then is: Is the only way to do that by giving some twenty-nine-year-old free rein to basically dump a mountain of information, much of which is definitely legal, definitely necessary for national security, and should properly be classified?" In Obama's view, "the benefit of the debate he generated was not worth the damage done, because there was another way

of doing it." Once again, it was the President as Professor-in-Chief, assessing all sides, and observing the tilt of the scales. (The day before his speech last week on reforming the N.S.A., he told me, "I do not have a yes/no answer on clemency for Edward Snowden. This is an active case, where charges have been brought.")

The coverage of the leaks, Obama complained, paints "a picture of a rogue agency out there running around and breaking a whole bunch of laws and engaging in a 'domestic spying program' that isn't accurate. But what that does is it synchs up with a public imagination that sees Big Brother looming everywhere." The greater damage, in his view, was the way the leaks heightened suspicions among foreign leaders. Obama enjoyed a good relationship with Angela Merkel, but he admitted that it was undermined by reports alleging that the U.S. tapped her cell phone. This, he said, felt "like a breach of trust and I can't argue with her being aggravated about that."

But, he said, "there are European governments that we know spy on us, and there is a little bit of Claude Rains in 'Casablanca'—shocked that gambling is going on." He added, "Now, I will say that I automatically assume that there are a whole bunch of folks out there trying to spy on me, which is why I don't have a phone. I do not send out anything on my BlackBerry that I don't assume at some point will be on the front page of a newspaper, so it's pretty boring reading for the most part."

Obama admitted that the N.S.A. has had "too much leeway to do whatever it wanted or could." But he didn't feel "any ambivalence" about the decisions he has made. "I actually feel confident that the way the N.S.A. operates does not threaten the privacy and constitutional rights of Americans and that the laws that are in place are sound, and, because we've got three branches of government involved and a culture that has internalized that domestic spying is against the law, it actually works pretty well," he said. "Over all, five years from now, when I'm a private citizen, I'm going to feel pretty confident that my government is not spying on me."

Obama has three years left, but it's not difficult to sense a politician with an acute sense of time, a politician devising ways to widen his legacy without the benefit of any support from Congress. The State of the Union speech next week will be a catalogue of things hoped for, a resumption of

the second inaugural, with an added emphasis on the theme of inequality. But Obama knows that major legislation—with the possible exception of immigration—is unlikely. And so there is in him a certain degree of reduced ambition, a sense that even well before the commentariat starts calling him a lame duck he will spend much of his time setting an agenda that can be resolved only after he has retired to the life of a writer and post-President.

"One of the things that I've learned to appreciate more as President is you are essentially a relay swimmer in a river full of rapids, and that river is history," he later told me. "You don't start with a clean slate, and the things you start may not come to full fruition on your timetable. But you can move things forward. And sometimes the things that start small may turn out to be fairly significant. I suspect that Ronald Reagan, if you'd asked him, would not have considered the earned-income-tax-credit provision in tax reform to be at the top of his list of accomplishments. On the other hand, what the E.I.T.C. has done, starting with him, being added to by Clinton, being used by me during the Recovery Act, has probably kept more people out of poverty than a whole lot of other government programs that are currently in place."

Johnson's Great Society will be fifty years old in 2014, but no Republican wants a repeat of that scale of government ambition. Obama acknowledges this, saying, "The appetite for tax-and-transfer strategies, even among Democrats, much less among independents or Republicans, is probably somewhat limited, because people are seeing their incomes haven't gone up, their wages haven't gone up. It's natural for them to think any new taxes may be going to somebody else, I'm not confident in terms of how it's going to be spent, I'd much rather hang on to what I've got." He will try to do things like set up partnerships with selected cities and citizens' groups, sign some executive orders, but a "Marshall Plan for the inner city is not going to get through Congress anytime soon."

Indeed, Obama is quick to show a measure of sympathy with the Reagan-era conservative analysis of government. "This is where sometimes progressives get frustrated with me," he said, "because I actually think there was a legitimate critique of the welfare state getting bloated, and relying too much on command and control, top-down government programs to address it back in the seventies. It's also why it's ironic when

I'm accused of being this raging socialist who wants to amass more and more power for their own government. . . . But I do think that some of the anti-government rhetoric, anti-tax rhetoric, anti-spending rhetoric that began before Reagan but fully flowered with the Reagan Presidency accelerated trends that were already existing, or at least robbed us of some tools to deal with the downsides of globalization and technology, and that with just some modest modification we could grow this economy faster and benefit more people and provide more opportunity.

"After we did all that, there would still be poverty and there would still be some inequality and there would still be a lot of work to do for the forty-fifth through fiftieth Presidents," he went on, "but I'd like to give voice to an impression I think a lot of Americans have, which is it's harder to make it now if you are just the average citizen who's willing to work hard and has good values, and wasn't born with huge advantages or having enjoyed extraordinary luck—that the ground is less secure under your feet."

In the White House, advisers are resigned by now to the idea that some liberal voters, dismayed by a range of issues—drones, the N.S.A., the half measures of health care and financial reform—have turned away from Obama and to newer figures like Elizabeth Warren or Bill de Blasio. "Well, look, we live in a very fast-moving culture," Obama said. "And, by definition, the President of the United States is overexposed, and it is natural, after six, seven years of me being on the national stage, that people start wanting to see . . ."

"Other flavors?"

"Yes," he said. " 'Is there somebody else out there who can give me that spark of inspiration or excitement?' I don't spend too much time worrying about that. I think the things that are exciting people are the same things that excite me and excited me back then. I might have given fresh voice to them, but the values are essentially the same."

X—WHAT TIME ALLOWS

Obama came home from Los Angeles in a dark, freezing downpour. The weather was too rotten even for Marine One. He hustled down the steps of Air Force One and ducked into his car.

A few weeks later, I was able to see him for a last conversation in the Oval Office. The Obamas had just had a long vacation in Hawaii—sun, golf, family, and not much else. The President was sitting behind his desk—the

Resolute desk, a gift from Queen Victoria to Rutherford B. Hayes—and he was reading from a folder marked "Secret." He closed it, walked across the room, and settled into an armchair near the fireplace. "I got some rest," he said. "But time to get to work."

Obama has every right to claim a long list of victories since he took office: ending two wars; an economic rescue, no matter how imperfect; strong Supreme Court nominations; a lack of major scandal; essential support for an epochal advance in the civil rights of gays and lesbians; more progressive executive orders on climate change, gun control, and the end of torture; and, yes, health-care reform. But, no matter what one's politics, and however one weighs the arguments of his critics, both partisan and principled, one has to wonder about any President's capacity to make these decisions amid a thousand uncertainties, so many of which are matters of life and death, survival and extinction.

"I have strengths and I have weaknesses, like every President, like every person," Obama said. "I do think one of my strengths is temperament. I am comfortable with complexity, and I think I'm pretty good at keeping my moral compass while recognizing that I am a product of original sin. And every morning and every night I'm taking measure of my actions against the options and possibilities available to me, understanding that there are going to be mistakes that I make and my team makes and that America makes; understanding that there are going to be limits to the good we can do and the bad that we can prevent, and that there's going to be tragedy out there and, by occupying this office, I am part of that tragedy occasionally, but that if I am doing my very best and basing my decisions on the core values and ideals that I was brought up with and that I think are pretty consistent with those of most Americans, that at the end of the day things will be better rather than worse."

The cheering crowds and hecklers from the West Coast trip seemed far away now. In the preternaturally quiet office, you could hear, between every long pause that Obama took, the ticking of a grandfather clock just to his left.

"I think we are born into this world and inherit all the grudges and rivalries and hatreds and sins of the past," he said. "But we also inherit the beauty and the joy and goodness of our forebears. And we're on this planet a pretty short time, so that we cannot remake the world entirely during this

little stretch that we have." The long view again. "But I think our decisions matter," he went on. "And I think America was very lucky that Abraham Lincoln was President when he was President. If he hadn't been, the course of history would be very different. But I also think that, despite being the greatest President, in my mind, in our history, it took another hundred and fifty years before African-Americans had anything approaching formal equality, much less real equality. I think that doesn't diminish Lincoln's achievements, but it acknowledges that at the end of the day we're part of a long-running story. We just try to get our paragraph right."

A little while later, as we were leaving the Oval Office and walking under the colonnade, Obama said, "I just wanted to add one thing to that business about the great-man theory of history. The President of the United States cannot remake our society, and that's probably a good thing." He paused yet again, always self-editing. "Not 'probably,' " he said. "It's definitely a good thing."

David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker since July, 1998, is the author of several books, including "King of the World," "Resurrection," and "Lenin's Tomb," for which he received both the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction and a George Polk Award for excellence in journalism. Remnick's most recent book, "The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama," was published by Knopf Doubleday in April 2010.