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A disturbing failure to lead

In the face of towering challenges, Obama's accomplishments have been mediocre

BY GLORIA FELDT

Every new president sweeps in on a wave of promised change then disappoints his base when confronted by governing's harsh reality. President Obama crested at such a high water mark that his plunge has been especially disheartening.

True, Obama faces so many enormous problems that he deserves some slack. Feminist Majority's Ellie Smeal ticked off to me a dozen positive things he's done for women and the AAUW congratulates him for forming the President's Council on Women and Girls, nominating Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court and signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act.

Still, he's failed to exercise three essential aspects of leadership, not so much by what he's done as by how he has done it:

He's resisted staking out a concrete, decisive agenda. The first responsibility of a leader is to create meaning, and the executive's most important power is to set the agenda. Having seen President Clinton falter on healthcare by presenting a full-blown bill to Congress, Obama presented no bill; hence the committee-designed "camel." Now, nobody's happy.

He hasn't asked for sacrifice in a tough time. Franklin D. Roosevelt recruited business leaders to work for a dollar a year creating ways to increase employment; Obama recruited business leaders, drawing full pay, whose ties to the failed financial industry make their solutions suspect. Though he's likened to JFK, Obama hasn't issued "ask not" challenges such as the Peace Corps or moon shot. There's nobility in pulling together to solve big problems; leaders elevate our aspirations beyond our own personal needs. Obama did it during the primary with his speech on race. He should do it now.

He hasn't tethered his actions to principles espoused during his campaign. At the netroots conference last summer, close advisor Valerie Jarrett made clear that if progressives wanted this president to expend political capital, even if he'd supported their pet policies in the campaign, they must mobilize visible support. True, advocates should activate their constituencies. But this "show me you can deliver support then we'll act on our principles" message is calculation worthy of the most callous Chicago pol. With health reform, he's delicately danced around whether he wanted or didn't care about a public option. Was pandering to Olympia Snowe to get a faux bipartisan health bill fruitful? Hardly. She opposed it in the end, and the delay brought daily diminution of his power. Similarly, his misbegotten "Common Ground" effort on abortion and jettisoning the Freedom of Choice Act, which he'd previously declared a top priority, squandered pro-choice goodwill. Have anti-choice Common Grounders helped pass the stimulus or health reform? No. Still, Obama threw women under the bus, by not vigorously opposing Stupak and Nelson antiabortion amendments.

Obama's presidency is young. Perhaps he'll grow in willingness to stake out his agenda and lead America to its higher self. I take to heart author Courtney Martin's point that Obama is exercising leadership when he says citizens must lead ourselves by participating in the process not just during elections, but every day.

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-- Gloria Feldt