

The Scouting Report – President Obama’s First 60 Days
Politico Senior Editor Fred Barbash and Darrell West, vice president Governance Studies
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12:29 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Welcome all. Darrell M. West is the vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings. His studies include campaigns and elections, political advertising, mass media, public opinion, technology policy and electronic government.

He's with us today to discuss Obama's first 60 days in office. Darrell...take it away.

12:29 [Comment From Laurie]

We're now more than halfway through the symbolic first 100 days of Obama's Administration. How do you think he's doing so far?

12:30 Darrell West:

President Obama is doing well so far. He has a 60% approval rating, while congressional Republicans are down at 38%. He has passed major legislation to help the economy, education, health care, and energy. He is what we need right now, which is someone who is optimistic about the future and communicates clearly with voters.

12:30 [Comment From Ron (Chevy Chase)]

What do you think Obama's biggest accomplishment has been thus far?

12:30 Darrell West:

His biggest accomplishment clearly has been the economic stimulus package. Not only will this bill jump-start the economy by later this year, it seeks to reposition the United States for the 21st century. The bill makes needed investments in health, education, and energy.

12:30 [Comment From George (DC)]

Has President Obama made any major mistakes so far?

12:31 Darrell West:

His biggest mistake so far has been the slow pace of presidential appointments. Every president needs his own team in place. Due to its high ethics standards, the administration has had difficulty recruiting the people it wanted into high-level positions. The president has adopted Mother Theresa standards in a city that has few saints. The resulting mismatch has hindered the ability of several departments (notably Treasury) to play with a full team on the field and address the major policy challenges we have today.

12:31 [Comment From Hong Cai (China Daily)]

While injecting billions of dollars in lifting the US economy out of recession, the president is urging a vast overhaul of health care, a plan to tax and thus limit tailpipe and smokestack emissions thought to cause global warming, the development of alternative

energy systems, a dramatic shift of the nation's tax burden, ambitious new education initiatives and a rewrite of financial regulations. Is Obama taking on too much at once?

12:33 Darrell West:

The president certainly has put forward an ambitious agenda. But the reason is that we face so many different challenges that the administration needs to move on a variety of fronts. What Obama will find, of course, is that when his proposals get into Congress, some will move while others will stagnate. So it still is going to months if not years to address these problems.

12:34 [Comment From Dana]

My name is Dana – I am diplomat here in Washington DC. What your assessments of President Obama's efforts to change the tone of the US in foreign policy – what he has really changed, what his new goals regarding Russia, Iran and China and how Central Asia region could feel itself in this new dynamics?

12:36 Darrell West:

What the president has done is to send Secretary Clinton on a global listening tour where she is visiting various countries and hearing their leaders' thoughts on what we need to be doing. Foreign leaders surely appreciate the chance to give input. The biggest substantive change will be the U.S. no longer is going to be the world's police officer. Countries will have to take more responsibility for problems in their backyards.

12:37 [Comment From Kate]

Obama has made some positive progress on women's issues - the Ledbetter act, rescinding the HHS "conscience" rule, and establishing the council on women and girls. Do you think these portend a real commitment to women's issues, or are they simply nods to the base in these early months?

12:38 Darrell West:

It is no accident the president chose the Ledbetter act as his first signing event. He wanted to signal his commitment in this area. This is not merely symbolic, but is the first of what will be a number of steps to address women's and family issues. Certainly, a number of initiatives in the economic stimulus package (especially health care and education) deal with issues of great concern to women.

12:39 [Comment From Jason]

To what former president's first 60 days would you compare Obama's first 60 days?

12:40 Darrell West:

The best parallel is Reagan. Both men faced enormous economic and foreign policy challenges. Reagan scored a big win early in his administration with passage of his tax and spending proposals. Obama has done the same thing with the economic stimulus. Both individuals were successful in part because they benefitted from a grass roots movement and were outstanding communicators.

12:40 [Comment From Hussain Abdul-Hussain]

On Foreign Policy, President Obama sent a delegation to Damascus, but has not done the same with Iran yet. Was it too early for Obama to engage Syria, or is it too late for him to engage Iran and why the discrepancy in engaging these two allied states?

12:42 Darrell West:

The president obviously is going to move carefully in this area. It doesn't surprise me that he starts with Syria before Iran because the latter is very complicated in terms both of the policy and the politics. But by sending a delegation to Damascus, he opens a backdoor to communications with Iran. I think Obama wants to see how Iran responds before he has more direct engagement with it.

12:42 [Comment From Iain Adams]

With numerous issues still hanging unsolved in Iraq (i.e. the Kirkuk question, oil revenue-sharing, millions of displaced Iraqis and the upcoming Parliamentary elections this December) is the President's strategy regarding Iraq workable for both the United States and Iraq regarding the current situation in Iraq? If not, what can the administration do in order to expedite the resolution of both the U.S. and Iraq in solving these problems?

12:44 Darrell West:

The president has laid out a clear timeline and strategy for Iraq. Whether his approach is workable really depends on the Iraqi people. What the U.S. is signaling is Iraqis have to bear a larger share of their security. We all pray that they rise to the challenge and take responsibility for their own future.

12:44 [Comment From Christine]

How does President Obama's "honeymoon period" compare to that of other Presidents? Has the GOP given him one on anything he has proposed so far?

12:46 Darrell West:

The president's honeymoon with voters has gone very well. He has outstanding poll numbers. People like him personally and appreciate his hard work in addressing complex problems. Obama's honeymoon with the media has been much trickier. He already has gotten beaten up a few times by reporters. But he needs to keep his eye on government performance and the economy. Ultimately, those things will determine whether he is a successful president.

12:46 [Comment From Megan]

You state the "U.S. no longer is going to be the world's police officer." Isn't this a lose-lose situation either way, i.e. leaders will then complain the U.S. is failing to take a lead with respect to humanitarian causes and intervention?

12:48 Darrell West:

I see this as win-win. Many people around the world didn't like the U.S. coming into their backyard and trying to dictate what happened. Most nations like to exercise power in their own geographical sphere of power. The U.S. should intervene when our

strategic interests clearly are at stake or when there is strong international consensus regarding the need for action. There certainly will be some humanitarian causes that meet one or the other of those criteria.

12:49 [Comment From Alanna]

I know the Economic Stimulus Package will provide temporary jobs but how will it help create long term jobs and cut the unemployment rate in half ?

12:50 Darrell West:

I don't think the stimulus package is going to cut the unemployment rate in half, but it should limit the rise of the unemployment rate. Right now, I expect unemployment to 9-10 % and then to stabilize. Both Larry Summers and Ben Bernanke expect the recession to end this year and the recovery to be well underway next year.

12:50 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Darrell: How do you think the administration has handled this AIG bonus controversy, and do you think this creates a serious problem for Obama when he has to come back to Congress for more bailout money? And if Congress won't approve more bailout money, isn't that potentially catastrophic?

12:53 Darrell West:

The administration's initial AIG bonus response of "we can't do much about contracts" clearly was too weak. If we gave that company \$170 billion in taxpayer money and have no power, then something is wrong. We have asked auto workers and people in other areas to renegotiate their deals. We should apply the same standard to AIG. Unless that situation gets resolved, the resulting populist backlash among the American public will make it virtually impossible for Congress to approve any more bailout money for anyone.

12:53 [Comment From Sally]

Interesting that you would compare Obama's first 100 days to Reagan. Do you think that comparison holds generally? And what about the parallels between Obama and FDR?

12:55 Darrell West:

I wouldn't compare Obama to FDR at this point because we don't have demonstrated results. If the economic stimulus package gets the economy going again next year and the president remains popular, then you can start to compare him to FDR. But we shouldn't be too quick to anoint Obama until we see policy results.

12:55 [Comment From Ted]

What do you think about the charge that Obama is "socialist" or "fomenting class warfare?" Are those legitimate criticisms?

12:56 Darrell West:

Obama is no more a socialist than Donald Trump is. Bush was the one who effectively nationalized the banks so it is short-sighted of Republicans to throw the socialist term at Obama.

12:56 [Comment From Megan]

Does Obama seem to be bucking the Democrats trend of paying homage to the teacher's union and remaining obstinate on charter schools and vouchers, or do you think he will begin to enact serious reform? He has made some moves that appear conflicting with respect to education policy.

12:58 Darrell West:

I think Obama is serious about fundamental school reform. He has endorsed pay for performance, which is something teacher's unions are not keen on. I don't see him as a big voucher advocate, but he does appear to like charter schools. His big education move was in the stimulus package, where he virtually doubled the Dept. of Education budget. We will have to monitor what we get for that investment one and two years down the road.

12:58 [Comment From Ron]

I feel like Obama and Geithner have failed to communicate effectively about the initial bank bailouts, AIG, and the potential need for another bank bailout. I feel like they look like they're powerless to do anything. Do you agree?

1:00 Darrell West:

Secretary Geithner has not been an effective communicator so far. But keep in mind he is not playing with a full team. Many of his top staff positions remain vacant. Some of the problems in terms of not having filled in all the policy details arise from the fact that he does not have the staff in place to help him. This has to be a top priority for Obama's administration, getting the Treasury staff in place.

1:00 [Comment From Megan]

Do you believe the current strife in Mexico will add fuel to the argument that the US needs a tougher immigration policy? Is this something the Republicans will capitalize on, or are they too distracted by the economic stimulus package to form a unified response to immigration?

1:02 Darrell West:

Mexico does need to get its act together. But we should not let this distract us from the need for serious, bipartisan immigration reform. Virtually no one likes the current status quo, business, labor, higher education, and advocacy organizations. We need to figure out how to move forward on this important area. The current system is a mess.

1:02 [Comment From Fred]

The media puts a lot of weight on the first 100 days of a presidency. Obama himself has spoken about the need to measure his accomplishments over the first 1,000 days rather than the first 100 days. When is it appropriate to really start analyzing Obama's presidency?

1:04 Darrell West:

Yesterday. Let's face it, Washington, DC and the country at large is filled with Monday morning quarterbacks. We all like to assess how things are going, especially with all the worries about rising unemployment. We don't have the luxury of waiting months to analyzing the Obama presidency. All of us will monitor him every step along the way and decide for ourselves whether he is doing a good job.

1:04 [Comment From Melissa]

Michelle Obama has also been busy during her first few weeks in the White House. What do you think about the projects she has chosen to work on?

1:06 Darrell West:

The First Lady has started strong. She has visited schools and started to identify the areas that will become her signature issues. She has great potential to be effective because she is smart, focused, and an excellent communicator. And yes, we shouldn't be paying as much attention as we do to her WARDROBE!

1:06 [Comment From Rolinda (Silver Spring)]

Obama has posted a weekly video address every Saturday morning on WhiteHouse.gov. What do you think about this?

1:07 Darrell West:

This is an excellent idea. It follows the Reagan tradition of a Saturday radio address, but just updates it to video forum. Obama was terrific at using new technologies during his presidential campaign. Now he is seeking to bring that same sense of innovation to the public sector. The question is when will he start Twittering?

1:08 [Comment From Hong Cai (China Daily)]

Can US really keep China's investments in US treasury bonds safe as Obama and his economic advisors promised last week? Thanks for your comment.

1:09 Darrell West:

We need to keep China's investments in Treasury securities safe because this is vital to our economic future. We cannot rebuild our economy unless countries around the world feel confident about the long-term health of the United States.

1:09 [Comment From Joanna]

Does the President's seeming reticence to attract attention to some of his moves on social issues -- both his rescission of the conscience rule and his reversal of the stem cell research ban came down towards close of business on a Friday, for instance - indicate an overall hesitancy to deal with these issues, or is it more circumstantial, based on the bigger economic fish to fry? I'm curious as to what we might expect on the more "hot button" questions in the near future, if anything...

1:10 Darrell West:

I expect President Obama to remain somewhat low-profile on various social issues because he wants to maintain his and the country's focus on economic issues. But

eventually, these issues will take center stage. If he ever has a vacancy on the Supreme Court, there will be LOTS of attention to those issues then.

1:11 [Comment From Guest]

Should Obama be doing more to engage Russia, or do you believe he is "waiting it out" to gauge his idea policy approach?

1:13 Darrell West:

Obama is engaging Russia. He already had Secretary Clinton meet with Russia's leadership and gave them her famous "reset" button. We clearly need to keep Russia within the international community one because it is an important country and two we need to keep it from retreating into a nationalist, aggressive foreign policy.

1:13 [Comment From Annie]

What do you think of the Obama girls' new swing set?

1:15 Darrell West:

A new swing set? I have to await my invitation for a play-date at the White House before I can comment.

1:15 [Comment From Guest]

From your perspective, is it unlikely that Obama's administration will push for a new trade negotiations round in the next few years?

1:17 Darrell West:

It has been nearly 10 years since we had a major multi-lateral trade agreement so clearly the tide has turned against those kinds of agreements. Even efforts to ratify bilateral agreements have proven difficult. So I am not optimistic on this front.

1:17 [Comment From Edward]

Former President Bush has stated that President Obama deserves his silence and has refused to publicly criticize him. How long can we expect that to last?

1:19 Darrell West:

Right now, there is a good cop/bad cop routine going on. Bush is maintaining the respective silence that every former president gives his successor, while Cheney is pounding away accusing Obama of not keeping the country safe. With his unpopularity, Cheney should understand the more he talks, the more he helps Obama politically. If I were him, I would shut up for awhile!

1:19 [Comment From Melinda]

I know Obama is focused on the economy. But what about health care? And climate change? Any early indications on where he might (or should) go next?

1:20 Darrell West:

Health care will be a big push for the White House. They already signed S-CHIP legislation for children's health and passed \$18 billion in stimulus money for health information technology. The next challenge will be comprehensive reform. Look for movement on this front sooner rather than later.

1:20 [Comment From Tabitha]

Is there a perfect balance of domestic policy and foreign affairs for Obama - or any president?

1:21 Darrell West:

Right now, Americans are focused on the domestic economy. Even press reporting of the Iraq War has fallen off, according to a new study from the Pew Research Center's Project on Excellence in Journalism. But Obama still needs to pay attention to foreign policy because any crisis can create enormous problems for a president.

1:22 [Comment From Guest]

Do you think the Obama Administration will become more vocal about their desired result for the Iranian elections, or will they tread more carefully in an effort not to appear overbearing a la the Bush Administration? Perhaps vague comments about the importance of freedom of speech and human rights will be more likely?

1:23 Darrell West:

Obama should tread carefully in his public statements on Iran. If we want to empower moderates within that country, we should not be vocal. The last endorsement any of those moderates need is from the United States.

1:23 [Comment From Sally]

A follow up question on FDR. How would you compare his communications skills to Obama? Or to Reagan? All three seem to have similar styles of persuasion, and reaching across the aisle. Would you agree?

1:23 Fred Barbash - Moderator:

OK, folks, looks like we have time for just a few more questions.

1:25 Darrell West:

All three of these individuals (FDR, Reagan, and Obama) had extraordinary communications skills, which is what made each of them highly effective presidents. Each also faced very challenging policy circumstances. The first two had notable successes. The jury is still out on President Obama.

1:25 [Comment From Laura]

What do you think of the job that Vice President Biden is doing? He said he would play a central role in Obama's presidency, do you think that he is?

1:26 Darrell West:

Vice President Biden has been doing exactly what the President wants. He is leading the middle class taskforce, meeting with key constituents, and generally keeping his name out of the press. Keep it up, Joe!

1:26 [Comment From Guest]

Do you think Obama's promise to strengthen the American middle class will be achieved anytime soon?

1:27 Darrell West:

This is a laudable long-term goal, but there can be no progress on it as long as we are in recession. Unless we can create new jobs, the middle class is not going to fare very well.

1:28 Fred Barbash-Moderator:

Darrell: Thanks so much. And to all the participants, thank you for joining us.

1:29 Fred Barbash - Moderator:

Please join us next week for a chat with Elizabeth Ferris on the Humanitarian Crises in Iraq and Darfur. You can check it out here:

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/0325_humanitarian_crises_chat.aspx