

# Barack Obama's "Stress Test" after 100 Days in Office

How Should We Assess the Change Administration: What The World Thinks?

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, April 26, 2009

26 April 2009

How would you do on a "stress test? " Even as the soundness of banks is supposedly measured—with many expected to show signs of insolvency—the whole stress idea demands a broader focus.

How many of the as many as 20 million Americans out of work could pass a stress test, in flying colors? How many among the millions of families facing foreclosure? Or students defaulting on student loans? What about the reported 31 million maxed out on their credit cards, or the many million more bombarded with "debt consolidation" commercials on their cable TV channels at 3 AM when so many anxious people watch because anxiety keeps them from sleeping?

And now, what about the real threat of a deadly swine flu pandemic? That's something new to get stressed about.

Ours has become a stressed nation as we assess the impact of the first 100 days of the Obama era. The President is coping with his own stress test. He is already at war, not only in Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan but also with the high expectations he himself raised. Another front in that war: an increasingly vicious and contentious right-wing media that is turning its viewers into troops for an uprising against his "tyranny.

I just returned from the Eurasian Media Forum in Kazakhstan where I challenged Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele on the bitter partisan rhetoric regurgitated daily on Fox News and that he has reinforced and not distanced his party from. Steele compared GOP attacks on Obama to what he considered far more extreme condemnations of President Bush "by the left." He compared himself to Barack Obama as the second most important black male in the country and suggested that the elections in 2010 will go against the Democrats because he believes their policies will fail.

## **He is cocky and clever—but is he right?**

It is certainly true that the bailout plans initiated by his predecessor—and which he supported as a Democratic candidate has continued but has yet to "fix" anything. You can argue that the "glimmers" of prosperity he identified to stir confidence are an illusion and that the depression that many are already experiencing can and will get worse.

Obama is a pragmatist talking left one day and moving right the next. This is called "pragmatism." He has already compromised some of his reforms and every welcome

initiative like the disclosure of those Bush torture memos. He kowtowed to the CIA and has now killed the idea of a Truth Commission less anyone compare these United States to despotic days in Chile, Argentina or South Africa. Unfortunately this shuffle is hard for many of his most passionate backers to take and does not build trust and confidence.

Back at the international forum, Obama was still regarded with a sense of hope and relief by a word weary of the Bush order. Yet, on issue after issue, there was uncertainty on where he stands. Will he press Israel to push forward with some peace deal?. Will he free himself from the grip of the Lobby, and take new initiatives or will we see more of the same equivocating that has ignored Israeli settlements and occupation? It may be significant that Secretary of State Clinton is proposing to recognize the reality of Hamas' popularity among Palestinians, I was struck to hear China's brilliant Victor Gao insist that justice for Palestine including Gazans is more important for America's prestige in the world than what happens in Afghanistan.

Will he ever withdraw from Iraq? Former Bush Ambassador Zalmay Khalizad says he is still trying to be "helpful" in Iraq and Afghanistan where he served, and, where as he told me, was shot out frequently ("I lost several helicopters") During his tenure, he was preoccupied with defending the Green Zone against frequent shelling by the Iraqi resistance." An Iraqi Kurdish leader there told me Obama is moving slowly and "responsibly." That "responsibly" is seen as an excuse by anti-war activists who believe Obama is delaying to please the military. (It reminds me of cold warriors who justified warring on Vietnam for fear of being accused of losing Vietnam like their predecessors were lambasted for losing China.)

A recent report in the Financial Times that surveyed the global downturn had one upbeat piece—a report on how well arms contractors are doing.

The Russians at the Conference welcomed Obama's rapprochement with their President and like his proposal for a phase out of nuclear weapons but so far see backtracking on backing human rights there and in China. There is still a lot of anger at America there, going back to "the fall of communism" which included the deliberate pillage of many of Russia's resources by American companies on a destroy and conquer mission. (Today, one Russian analyst on the panel with me, Professor Igor Panarin predicts the US will break up in 6 parts.)

Journalists are by nature skeptics and cynical but many there were so relieved that the US pushed "the reset" button in a phrase used by ex-Congressman Harold Ford Jr. from Tennessee, now head of the centrist Democratic Leadership Conference. Ford backs Barack but is also stressed by all the economic uncertainty. The DLC has a crisis too because it has consistently stressed free market pro-corporate policies only to find they contributed to the current calamity.

Later this week, you will hear endless punditry in attempts to offer a "report card" on the first 100 days, even though they all know it is too soon to make a real judgment. A lot of this blather will be partisan and all knowing and most of it will be wrong. There will be little reference to the bureaucratic and political delays he faces in staffing up Government agencies including the Treasury despite the fact that we are in a major crisis.

As the man at the top, Obama needs a team in place to make things happen and many of its members are not there yet. (Unfortunately, he can't use a phrase employed by an innovative journalist on a panel on the media. The acronym is JFDI—"just fucking do it.") So

while everything internally is moving in slomo speed, everyone on the outside expects hyper-speed solutions.

The media can be unforgiving and quick to judge but the public seems more aware of how deep the challenge is. So far, the President's approval rating is up. My colleague DXM tells me that for the first time in the years he has been watching, Barack replaced Britney as the most searched after name on the Internet. Mr. Obama, however, finished second. The number one name on this hit parade is another Obama, the one named Michelle.

*News Dissector **Danny Schechter** is making a film on the financial crisis based in his book plunder ([Http://www.newsdissector.com/Plunder](http://www.newsdissector.com/Plunder)) He blogs for [www.Mediachannel.org](http://www.Mediachannel.org) Comments to [Dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:Dissector@mediachannel.org)*

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