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Why the Greg Craig debacle matters

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November 19, 2009 11:58 AM EST

President Barack Obama is returning from his trek to Asia Thursday to a capital that is a considerably more dangerous place for him than when he departed.

While he was abroad, there was a palpable sense at home of something gone wrong. A critical mass of influential people who once held big hopes for his presidency began to wonder whether they had misjudged the man. Most significant, these doubters now find themselves with a new reluctance to defend Obama at a phase of his presidency when he needs defenders more urgently than ever.

This is the price Obama has paid with his complicity and most likely his active participation, in the shabbiest episode of his presidency: The firing by leaks of White House counsel Gregory Craig, a well-respected Washington veteran and influential early supporter of Obama.

The people who are most aghast by the handling of the Craig departure can't be dismissed by the White House as Republican partisans, or still-embittered Hillary Clinton supporters. They are not naïve activists who don't understand that the exercise of power can be a rough business and that trade-offs and personal disappointments are inevitable. Instead, they are people, either in politics or close observers, who once held an unromantically high opinion of Obama. They were important to his rise, and are likely more important to the success or failure of his presidency than Obama or his distressingly insular and small-minded West Wing team appreciate.

The Craig embarrassment gives these people a new reason – not the first or only reason – to conclude that he wasn't the person of integrity and even classiness they had thought, and, more fundamentally, that his ability to move people and actually lead a fractured and troubled country (the reason many preferred him over Hillary Clinton) is not what had been promised in the campaign.

This may seem like a lot to hang on a Washington personnel move. After all, intramural back-stabbing or making people fall guys when things go wrong (think Bill Clinton's Defense Secretary Les Aspin after the disaster in Somalia) are not new to Washingtonians.

But Craig's ouster did not occur in a vacuum. It served as a focal point to concerns that have been building for months that Obama wasn't pressing for all that might be possible within the existing political constraints (all that one could ask of a president); that his presidential voice hadn't fulfilled the hopes raised by his campaign voice (which had also taken him a while to find); that he hadn't created a movement, as he had raised expectations that he would; that would be there to back him up and help him fulfill his promises.

That is why it is worth pondering how the Craig story, unfolded in detail – its consequences likely will echo far longer than anything Obama said or did in Asia.

Briefly, here's what happened, some of it told for the first time: Craig, who had known the Clintons since they were all at Yale Law School together, had served as a senior adviser to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, but in 1998 gave up that job to help defend Bill Clinton against impeachment. Yet in 2008, he supported Obama for the nomination – not so much a turning against Hillary Clinton as being impressed early, as were some other prominent Washingtonians, by the then-state senator but would-be U.S. Senate candidate at a fundraiser held by Vernon Jordan, seeing Obama as the first potentially inspiring Democratic figure since Robert Kennedy. In the course of the campaign, Craig wrote a highly publicized memo questioning some of Hillary Clinton's claims of foreign policy experience, such as coming under enemy fire in Tuzla, Bosnia. During the campaign, Craig coached Obama for the debates (playing McCain), and praised him highly. Craig's imprimatur helped the neophyte Obama in certain influential circles.

He hoped to get a high foreign policy position in an Obama administration, but when Clinton was named secretary of state, this of course became untenable. The Clintons are an unforgiving lot. So, Obama and Craig agreed that Craig would take the job of White House counsel for a year, and then they'd discuss what he'd do next. Thus, Craig was handed a very tricky portfolio.

During the transition, about mid-December, Craig presented to a group of the president's newly named national security advisers meeting in Washington – including Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, national security adviser General James Jones, and others – three proposed executive orders: One ordered the shutting down of Guantanamo in a year. (The others banned torture and closed down the C.I.A.'s "black sites"; and addressed future detainee policy.) The one-year target for closing Guantanamo resulted from consultations with human rights and detainee rights groups, who argued that Guantanamo could be shut down in three months, and with Pentagon officials, who had no united position but argued that it would take from a year to 18 months.

At the meeting, only the newly named Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, beamed in from Arizona, questioned whether a year was realistic. When Gates, as he later confirmed publicly, said that though it was an "ambitious" deadline, he supported it because setting it was the only way to get things, especially the bureaucracy, moving toward that end, and that it could be extended if it couldn't be met, that was it.

Obama's new national security team signed off on the executive order to close Guantanamo in a year. This was passed along to the president as well as his top aides; Craig was never in a meeting with the political side of the White House on the Guantanamo matter – and the president-elect and then president raised no objection before, when, or after he signed off on it.

Unsurprisingly, the deadline became hard to meet, for various legal and political reasons – including the congressional outburst of NIMBYISM (similar to its earlier outbursts on Dubai Ports and even Terri Schiavo – short-term, irrational, and politically motivated fits that erupt from the Congress from time to time). If Craig failed to foresee this (as some later charged), he had a lot of company.

The closing of Guantanamo is undoubtedly far further along than it would have been without the executive order. But along the way, Craig fell out of favor with the president's political aides and, apparently, the president himself. Whether he was simply being made the fall guy, or the tight circle of Chicagoans in the White House didn't care for this outsider, or he committed some unknown errors, suddenly, in August, leaks began to

surface that his job was in danger. Non-denial denials were issued from the White House. The leaks became a pattern, a systematic, anonymous, tipping off of reporters that Craig would soon be gone.

Craig was accused, anonymously of course, of a welter of charges: of being "too close to the human rights groups" (if so, what was wrong with that?), of not playing well with others, of being a bad manager, of being fixated on Guantanamo to the detriment of other issues. In the summer, Obama offered Craig another job, which Craig declined, and the two agreed that they would discuss the matter further later in the year. But the leaks continued, and Craig decided that his situation was untenable, and he had to leave.

To make sure he did, he was leaked his way out, up to the day before he planned to resign. What caused so many Obama supporters' stomachs to turn was that Obama could have stopped the leaking at any time; he or White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel could have arranged a dignified departure. (They're within their rights to get rid of someone if they're dissatisfied, for good reasons or not – but a preferred route would be to call that person in and ask what day would suit him or her to resign, and then just let that person do it. This happens a lot in administrations; even if people don't believe the resignation was voluntary, there's a soupcon of dignity left to that person.) Even some Hillary Clinton supporters, who still hold no brief for Craig, think he was treated shabbily.

And this opinion is not confined to "political junkies." Thomas Wilner, a distinguished Washington attorney who challenged Bush administration detainee policies, particularly on Guantanamo, and had worked with Craig on these issues, told me, "There's a lot of concern among a lot of lawyers in this town, especially those who were supporting Obama, that somebody this bright, this respected, this good, and with this integrity, was treated in such a way."

Yes, we knew, or should have, during the campaign that the supposed idealist Obama had a bit of the Chicago cut-throat in him, but there was little sign that he could be as brutal and heedless of loyalty as he was in the Craig affair. An unexpected climate of fear emanates from the Obama White House.

The incident underscored worries that several had held about the Obama White House for some time: that it was too tightly controlled and narrowly focused by the Chicago crowd; that it seemed from the outset to need an older, wiser head, someone with a bit more detachment.

The current crowd displays a certain impulsiveness and vindictiveness that do it no good – as in the silly war-let on Fox News that it is now trying to back out of. Even if Craig was making a hash of his job – and there's no independent evidence of this – it just wasn't smart to treat someone widely held in such high respect in this manner; once again, the impulsiveness backfired.

The replacing of Craig with Washington attorney Robert Bauer, Obama's own attorney for years as well as counsel for the Democratic National Committee and the Obama campaign, further narrowed the White House circle just when it needed broadening, lowered the stature of the office, and choosing the president's personal attorney for a position that calls for dispassionate judgment is hazardous. (Does anyone remember Alberto Gonzalez?)

The Obama's themselves hang tight with a small Chicago crowd. Yes, he talks to others, and yes, a president's time is very limited, but the Obama's themselves seem as closed-off and unto themselves as does his inner White House circle. (Is this a coincidence?)

What is all this wariness about?) When the Obama's go to someone's house for dinner, almost invariably it's to that of Valerie Jarrett, the old friend from Chicago who serves as a counselor and whom they see all day. Old Chicago friends fly in for weekends frequently. Old friends, who had helped launch him, helped them personally, have been left behind.

At the same time as the Craig imbroglio happened, many people who had defended Obama against charges that he wasn't what he'd been cracked up to be were now becoming concerned themselves: though it was a relief to have a president who thought through crucial decisions about sending the country's young to war, it was taking him awfully long to make up his mind about what to do about Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the decision-making was bafflingly leak-ridden (was this a deliberate airing of ideas or a loss of control over the process?); that the health care debate had in fact careened out of his control and it seemed less and less likely that, having used up almost a year of his presidency on it (his "deadlines" had become irrelevant, and so, in a way, had he), he would end up with a bill, if at all, that did enough net good.

Certain things are not his fault: the unprecedented truculence of the Republican Party, scared silly by right-wing ranters on cable television; the unholy economic and foreign-policy mess that he inherited; the fact that he never had, as so many liberal commentators asserted, the 60 (or 58 or 59) Senate votes that would enable him to get what he wanted from the Congress. It's not his fault that unemployment rates remain stubbornly high following a traumatic recession.

And it's always risky to project the long-term from the moment. Perhaps this will prove to have been a passing moment. Perhaps Obama will still salvage a health care bill that is a real step forward (though there will be a humongous fight over its definition); maybe he'll come up with a smart strategy – or the best of bad options – on Afghanistan and Pakistan; it's not impossible that he'll add real progress on climate change and regulatory reform to his list of achievements, and that he'll start to get the deficit under control.

Maybe there'll be enough examples of grace that will make people forget this period of pettiness. He's been lucky before; maybe he'll get lucky again. Meanwhile, serious people who had a lot of hope about him and who defended him are more worried than ever, and in this if anything over-communicative society the White House can't write them off as "a bunch of Washington insiders." So meanwhile, there's a palpable mood change in Washington that could signify that Barack Obama is in deeper trouble than he was even a week ago.

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