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The New York Times

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Can the Dude Abide?

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

Barack Obama became president by brilliantly telling his own story. To stay president, he will need to show he can understand our story.

At first it was exciting that Obama was the sort of brainy, cultivated Democrat who would be at home in a “West Wing” episode.

But now he acts like he really thinks he’s on “West Wing,” gliding through an imaginary, amber-lit set where his righteous self-regard is bound to be rewarded by the end of the hour.

Hey, dude, you’re a politician. Act like one.

As the head of the Democratic Party, the president should have supported the Democratic candidate for governor in Rhode Island, the one the Democratic Governors Association had already lavished more than \$1 million in TV ads on. If Obama was going to refuse to endorse Frank Caprio out of respect for Lincoln Chafee, the former Republican who endorsed him for president and is now running as an independent, the president should have at least stayed out of Providence.

Reductio ad absurdum: After two years of taking his base for granted, the former Pied Piper of America’s youth had to spar with Jon Stewart to try to get the attention of young people who once idolized him.

Obama still has the killer smile, but he’s more often sniffy than funny. When Stewart called White House legislation “timid,” Obama got defensive and offered a less-than-thrilling new mantra: “Yes, we can but ...”

“We have done things that people don’t even know about,” said Obama, who left his Great Communicator mantle back in Grant Park on election night.

In 2008, the message was him. The promise was him. And that's why 2010 is a referendum on him.

With his coalition and governing majority shattering around him, President Obama will have to summon political skills — starting Wednesday — that he has not yet shown he has.

His arrogance led him to assume: If I build it, they will understand. He can't get the gratitude he feels he deserves for his achievements if no one knows what he achieved and why those achievements are so vital.

Once it seemed impressive that he was so comfortable in his own skin. Now that comfort comes across as an unwillingness to be wrong.

We want the best people to govern us, but many voters are so turned off by Obama's superior air that they're rushing into the arms of disturbingly inferior pols.

Obama admitted to The Times's Peter Baker: "There is probably a perverse pride in my administration — and I take responsibility for this; this was blowing from the top — that we were going to do the right thing, even if short term it was unpopular."

But who defines what's "right"?

With the exception of Obama, most Americans seemed to agree that the "right" thing to do until the economy recovered was to focus on jobs instead of getting the Congress mired for months in making over health insurance and energy policy. And the "right" thing to do was to come down harder on the big banks for spending on bonuses instead of lending to small businesses that don't get bailouts.

Many of us thought the "right" thing to do was to ratify the civil rights of gay Americans in marriage and the military. (A new Pentagon study shows that most U.S. troops and their families don't care if gays are allowed to serve openly.)

In an interview with progressive bloggers, the president was asked why he was lagging behind Republicans like Ted Olson on gay marriage.

Noting that he has a lot of friends and staffers in committed gay relationships, Obama conceded only that his attitude was evolving. "I think it's pretty clear where the trend lines are going," the president said.

Trend lines? Really inspiring, dude.

One top aide told me that the president — who perversely tried to marginalize a once-captivated press corps — was beginning to realize that he had not used his charm as effectively as he could have.

His inner circle believed too much in the power of the Aura and in protecting the Brand. They didn't think they needed to sell anything or fight back when the crazies started sliming them. They didn't care that the average citizen needed an M.B.A. to understand the financial plan and a Ph.D. to fathom what the health care plan would mean.

Because Obama stayed above it all on health care and delegated to Max Baucus, he missed the moment in August of 2009 when Sarah Palin and the Tea Party got oxygen with their loopy rants on death panels. It never occurred to the Icon that such wildness and gullibility would trump lofty rationality.

As the president tries to ride the Tea Party tiger, let's hope for this change: that he puts some audacity in his audacity.