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**From:** sbwhoep [redacted]  
**Sent:** Thursday, December 9, 2010 1:22 PM  
**Subject:** excerpts

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<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/dec/23/bitter-new-washington/>  
 The New York Review of Books

## In the Bitter New Washington

December 23, 2010

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Of course Obama should have gotten out of Washington more and listened to people, not just talked at them; and, as Walter Mondale said recently, he should have gotten rid of "those idiot boards"—the TelePrompters on which the great orator has been strangely dependent and which divide him from his audiences. Last year, a friend of mine was invited to a Hanukkah party that the Obamas gave for prominent Jews (a group with whom there had been tensions), and after the Obamas descended the grand stairway, they stood in the foyer briefly, the President made a few remarks and shook a few hands, and back up the stairs they went. No mingling.

In their first two years, the Obamas have seemed a bit tone-deaf: there were too many vacations while people were hurting, especially Michelle's extravagant trip to Spain. (I'm as interested in Michelle's clothes as the next woman but at the same time think she and her staff are too focused on her looking smashing, which she does. Her wardrobe seems quite extensive for these troubled times.)

Barack Obama's personality has been much mulled over in the past two years, but it seems inescapable that his high self-esteem often slides over the thin line to arrogance, which trickles down (with some exceptions) to much of his staff, some of whom are downright rude to all but a chosen few. Obama has seemed uninterested in anyone but his immediate group, and three of the four members of his immediate circle—Jarrett, Robert Gibbs, David Axelrod—had had no experience in governing. The fourth, Rahm Emanuel, expressed himself with such flippancy, arrogance, and overuse of the F-word that he offended not just members of Congress but also would-be allies of the President.

Vice President Joe Biden, who is liked on Capitol Hill, was virtually shut out of the dealings with people in Congress in the first two years—"I can handle them," Obama told Biden—but Biden is now expected to be given a larger role as part of the White House's new determination to "reach out." (A few months ago highly placed members of the staff also swore they would "reach out," but that seemed to last for just a few days.) One of the oddest aspects of Obama's persona is that someone who seems so confident has insisted thus far in having people around him with whom he is said to be "comfortable."

For example, Tom Donilon, his recently appointed national security adviser (a promotion from his role as deputy), is by all accounts a capable man but is no one's idea of a serious strategic thinker. The explanation I was given for Donilon's being given his new position was that "the President is comfortable with him." Just as Obama is described as pleased with himself, he has been treated with hero worship by much of his staff. After all, he had taken on the formidable Clintons, and, against the expectation of almost all the pundits and the experts, he had beaten them. Why should he listen to those who had doubted him? A common complaint about the Obama White House in the first two years has been that there were no "grown-ups" around, people who knew more about governing and who would tell Obama that he was wrong. When people tried to suggest someone who should be brought in, that person was rejected as "not one of ours." Joe Biden is said to argue with Obama on issues, such as Afghanistan, but not to get into the management of the White House....

Those who supported Obama in 2008 expected him to be able to move public opinion, to get people to follow him. The fact that the Obama White House has been so poor at "messaging" baffles even his strongest supporters. In fact, he had no overall message. As Winston Churchill put it, there was no theme to his pudding. When I asked a White House aide about this, he pointed to what had been billed as a "major speech on the economy," at Georgetown University in April 2009. But the speech was utterly forgettable—and forgotten. One ally attributes this problem to the inexperience of both Obama and his top staff. An ally says, "You can't leave a message if you don't have a strategy and you don't know where you're going." Another says, "They had something that worked in the campaign but didn't work in the White House."

Thus, Obama didn't see the need to explain what he was doing. His 2010 campaign themes seemed to wander all over the place: Stanley Greenberg, a pollster and former aide to Bill Clinton, said that Obama's oft-used theme, that we shouldn't go back to the Bush days, actually tested negatively, because people didn't believe that the country was making economic progress.

So Obama's biggest failure was not to be the leader that so many expected him to be. The jubilation that surrounded his swearing-in may have gone to his head, while the celebrants overlooked that there were plenty of people out there who were not overjoyed at the advent of a black president, or even a Democrat. Obama was, apparently in his own estimation, so smart and so adored that he seems to have felt no need to explain—and explain again—to the country what he was doing and to take the country along with him. This failure to put his programs across came up a few times in the 2010 campaign....

More than once, people in town hall meetings told him that they were behind him but were having great trouble trying to defend or explain his agenda. In a backyard gathering on October 21 he made the most awkward reply of those I heard: "Our attitude was that we just had to get the policies right and we didn't always think about making sure we got the advertising properly about what was going on." Advertising. (When I mentioned this to a Democratic senator who was generally supportive of Obama, this ordinarily polite man responded, "Bullocks! What policies?")

The risk-averse Obama had left it to Congress to write the big bills such as on the economic stimulus and health care (with strong participation by White House aides). But he kept up this line of defense all the way through to his pathetic press conference on the day after the election. In these comments, Obama gave away the devastating fact that he didn't really understand the role of the president as leader. A friend of the Obama administration said to me, "Their definition of governing is passing bills." Someone else relatively close to the White House explained that since Obama had been so criticized for being "arrogant" and "aloof," he had to eat large portions of humble pie. ("And I take responsibility for that," Obama said again and again.)