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Obama's Team of Idolizers

By ROGER COHEN

NEW YORK — When Barack Obama was on the presidential campaign trail the first time, he used the title of Doris Kearns Goodwin's Lincoln biography, "Team of Rivals," to describe the entourage he would seek at the White House, a combative group from across the political spectrum who would challenge his every idea.

(He also compared himself to Abraham Lincoln in announcing his candidacy at the Illinois State capitol: "The life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible.")

Well, four years have passed and Obama has adroitly steered the bankrupted United States he inherited away from the precipice but has not provided a "different future" worthy of the hope invested in him; and that imagined team of rivals became a team, or rather a coterie, of idolizers.

There is only one star in the galaxy at this White House and his name is Barack Obama. Everyone in the Sun King's court has drunk the Kool-Aid.

The failure of hope, the absence of profound change, has much to do with the Republican obstructionism that has helped keep unemployment above 8 percent. But it is also related to Obama's refusal to entertain a real team of rivals, to place around him big characters with big ideas who would challenge his instinct for cautious politics and foreign policy. And so a transformative election failed to produce a transformative president.

In the end the trust of a cool man who had sublimated abandonment into a singular willfulness was limited. The sense of a controlling leader, unable to provide connective tissue to fire the economy, lies behind the fact that many Obama voters will cast their ballot in November with more grudging respect than enthusiasm.

Nixon, like Obama, was a loner, but he had Kissinger generating ideas. Carter had Brzezinski. Reagan had Shultz. The first Bush had Baker. Obama has Tom Donilon as national security adviser. Donilon is an affable pro who has been described as a one-client lawyer. It is clear who the client is.

Then there is Hillary Clinton, a superb secretary of state. But for various reasons (her future is very much ahead of her), she has generally acquiesced to the White House being the locus of major foreign-policy decisions (salvaging things where necessary, as in Pakistan.)

The Obama inner circle remains a group of tough political tacticians: David Axelrod, David Plouffe and Valerie Jarrett. The White House national security team does not boast a single name of strategic stature. Anyone outside Washington would be hard pressed to name one.

The policy upshot has been predictable: cerebral, cool, and with one big exception, cautious. Obama has corrected big mistakes — abandoning the unwinnable global war on terror and pulling out of Iraq. To his immense credit he took a big gamble on killing Osama Bin Laden. But elsewhere he has been cautious to a fault, eyeing the political calendar.

He held out a hand to Iran but promptly reverted to tired old carrots and sticks; his response to the great popular uprising of 2009 was slow. He took half-steps on Israel and Palestine — criticizing Israeli settlements, saying the pre-1967 lines were the basis for a two-state peace — only to offer zero follow-through. Nothing changed.

On Egypt, he toyed with preserving Mubarak ad interim before the tide became irreversible. On Syria, he has in essence dithered. On Afghanistan, domestic politics dictated the agenda, at a cost in American lives.

One citizen inspired to stand outside the Illinois State Capitol back in 2007 was John Kael Weston, then a State Department officer coming out of a harrowing assignment alongside U.S. Marines in Fallujah, Iraq, and headed for Afghanistan.

This month, troubled by events in Afghanistan, Weston wrote to the president: “When you ordered tens of thousands of troops into Afghanistan, I personally did not agree with your decision from my Helmand Province vantage point. I believe Afghanistan remains a marathon, not a sprint — and the short-term escalation sent our forces into non-strategic terrain and complicated our transition strategy. I knew, however, that our troops — especially our Marines — would fight hard in Helmand. And they did. You subsequently awarded the Marine Expeditionary Brigade the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC). It is well deserved. Their effort came at a cost. Ninety Marines were killed, including friends of mine, with many more wounded.

“Next month, Marines will gather at Camp Lejeune, N.C., to receive the PUC award. Secretary of the Navy Mabus is set to present it. While an honor, I know Marines hope you opt not to delegate the day’s special gathering to someone else. I feel the same way given ongoing Marine and troop sacrifice in Afghanistan.”

Weston added: “Please pardon my bluntness: I believe it is simply the right thing to do.”

Obama needed more people in the Situation Room saying, “Please pardon my bluntness.” Having sent the Marines in (and concluded a Camp Lejeune speech in 2009 with “Semper Paratus”) he should indeed present the award himself.

But the president’s semper wary political operatives, focused on votes, may well calculate otherwise.

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