

A Fallen Hero, or the Once and Future King?

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"One of the things you realize fairly quickly in this job is that there is a character people see out there called Barack Obama. That's not you. Whether it is good or bad, it is not you. I learned that on the campaign." ~ President Obama

During adolescence and young adulthood, Barack Obama bravely stripped off layers of social convention in order to establish his real identity. Becoming his own man, he launched an inner-directed political career. How frustrating to discover, as he reached for the political zenith, that he had become a character in some psychodrama that he would prefer not to play!

Make no mistake. For all his role-distancing and existential dread, Barack Obama knows that success depends on becoming a central character in the publican play. Though the ancient Greeks and American Founding Fathers believed democracy rests on rational deliberation, nothing could be further from the truth.

Democracy does not engage the populace in a debating society but a stage. Political campaigns are epics splashed across a panorama that plays out in mythical, not historical time. Citizen-audiences come into contact, not with actual candidates but with symbolic representations. These semblances are projected by media outlets, supplied with material by political campaigns. The ambition of campaigns is to control the image. And the challenge of political performance is to become the protagonist in your own play. Politicians enact scripts that coil expectations, stoke anxious fears, and raise high hopes. And then, as these social texts are rolled out, they offer themselves as candidates for lead in the play.

While creating a powerful narrative requires a highly developed feeling for the times, the role for which candidates audition is pretty much standardized and set in advance. To be elected President, you must be a hero, or at least be seen as one. Heroes are extraordinary individuals with a touch of immortality about them. Taking great risks, they save people in dark times. Heroes transform and save. They lead people from darkness to light.

In 2008, the Democratic production team wrote a fresh and audacious script that seemed perfectly fitted to the spirit of the times, and Candidate Obama played the role of hero with flare, passion, and redeeming authenticity. Under the reign of evil Bush II, America had endured a dark era of duplicity, war, and corruption, and an arrogant refusal to address democratic domestic needs. Enter Barack Obama stage left. Casting himself in the image of Martin Luther King, the youthful hero promised fundamental change. He would create justice and reverse the rising tide of inequality. He would stop the oceans from rising and make the cities green.

But Obama-hero went after even bigger game. He promised not only to stop war and inequality but to mend the deep tears in America's social fabric. In the books and speeches Obama deployed to write himself into the American dream, he promised to end the corrosive social divisions produced by the 60s. Radical change agents, and the transformations they effected, had produced powerful backlash movements. Candidate Obama presented himself as the first post-60s national

politician, promising to stop the bitterness and end the great divide. We are not red states or blue states, but the united states (of America)! Obama-hero would renew order, restore harmony, and make good the promise of E Pluribus Unum.

Obama's "Performance of Politics 2008" was a brilliant success, but neither the narrative nor its protagonist survived the prose of Obama's "Performance of Power." In art, challenging twists and turns of plot are calibrated to reveal the hero's qualities. In life, heroes can be played the fool. Events spin out of control, presenting outsized challenges that can be difficult to overcome.

President Obama did many real things to prevent economic collapse, but he did not save us from our currently still grim condition. He doubled required gas mileage twenty years hence, but he did not make contemporary America green. He passed a health care reform, wondrous on paper, but it won't kick in for a while and the changes right now are small change. He took the nation out of one war, but started another and has only begun winding that down. China is still rising. Nothing seems to have dramatically changed.

More damaging to Obama-character has been his failure to play the long game. Ambitious heroes expose themselves to charges of hubris. By predicting political reconciliation, the Obama-character unwittingly gave Republicans control over his narrative. During the health care debate, they feinted and stalled. As Democrats ran out the clock, Tea Party characters of great vitality entered stage right. They dazzled conservative audiences with patriotic re-enactments of mythical dramas, creating energetic foot soldiers for 2010's Congressional campaigns. With Obama-character seemingly stuck at center stage, liberal audiences became angry and disenchanted. Independents felt let down; some withdrew, others turned to the right. The November 2010 electoral tsunami left Obama-character washed up on the electoral beach--a fallen hero indeed.

Faced with a spoiled identity, the only option for the President's reelection campaign was to rewrite the play. Instead of conquering hero, Obama played the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. Rather than promising to transform America, 2012 Obama-character pledges, if elected, that things won't get worse. You might not like it now, but just wait! I may not swing the hinge of history forward, but at least I'm facing the right direction. My opponent Mitt Romney is a man of the past; if he's elected, he'll push us back.

The long game has been abandoned. Social solidarity and political reconciliation are wisps of fading memory. Rather than promising to reason with recalcitrant Republicans, Obama Deux promises to destroy their faithless leader. This 2012 plot depends less on pumping up the protagonist than dumbing down the antagonist and blackening him with a polluting brush. Through summer and convention time, this asymmetrical warfare worked. Romney was painted as unscrupulous, elitist, extremist. He was not only against women, minorities, and the 47 percent, but democracy itself.

But as summer turned into autumn, and conventions gave way to debates, the brutal exigencies of social performance came back into play. You can write a script for your antagonist, but you can't make him play. Your team can plot a winning role for the protagonist, but there is no assurance he'll ably act it out.

For months, Romney-character had been giving gifts to the Obama production team, falling neatly into their traps. Meanwhile, Obama-character was being feisty and aggressive, connecting with audiences, seeming authentic, not a hero but a striver who well stood his ground. All this changed with the first debate. The Democratic plot turned inside out, protagonist and antagonist seeming to switch sides. Obama-character was suddenly deflated with cast down eyes, while Romney-character swelled and expanded with power. Before the eyes of 70 million Americans, in what seemed an unscripted moment, Mitt Romney gave the performance of his life. The Republican successfully auditioned for the role of President.

In the weeks that have followed, the Performance of Politics 2012 has been a much more even and deadly fight. Amidst Democrat moaning about lies and "Romnesia," the Republicans' lead character has remained robust, white teeth shining, hair glistening, voice charged, and gestures ramped up. President Obama has returned strongly to the stage. Yet, while he seems the same generally good guy, there is a suspicion the man playing that role might float away.

The old Greeks distinguished between Kairos and Chronos. Chronos is calendar time, orderly and linear. Kairos is the right time, the opportune moment, improvised for the occasion. In early October, Romney seized the day. Taking control of Kairos, he pushed Obama into mere calendar time. Obama-character has struggled to get back into mythos. Though damaged, his wound may not yet prove mortal. He may still rise, our once and future king.