

# Barack be good

**T**imes have changed. In 1996, President Bill Clinton, under siege from the right, declared that “the era of big government is over.”

But President-elect Barack Obama, riding a wave of revulsion over what conservatism has wrought, has said that he wants to “make government cool again.”

Before Obama can make government cool, however, he has to make it good. Indeed, he has to be a goo-goo.

Goo-goo, in case you're wondering, is a century-old term for “good government” types, reformers opposed to corruption and patronage. Franklin Roosevelt was a goo-goo extraordinaire. He simultaneously made government much bigger and much cleaner. Obama needs to do the same thing.

Needless to say, the Bush administration offers a spectacular example of non-goo-gooism. But the Bushies didn't have to worry about governing well and honestly. Even when they failed on the job (as they so often did), they could claim that very failure as vindication of their anti-government ideology, a demonstration that the public sector can't do anything right.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, will find itself in a position very much like that facing the New Deal in the 1930s.

Like the New Deal, the incoming administration must greatly expand the role of government to rescue an ailing economy. But also like the New Deal, the Obama team faces political opponents who will seize on any signs of corruption or abuse — or invent them, if necessary — in an attempt to discredit the administration's program.

FDR managed to navigate these treacherous political waters safely, greatly improving government's reputation even as he vastly expanded it. As a study recently published by the National Bureau of Economic Research puts it, “Before 1932, the administration of public relief was widely regarded as politically corrupt,” and the New Deal's huge relief programs “offered an opportunity for corruption unique in the nation's history.” Yet “by 1940,

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charges of corruption and political manipulation had diminished considerably.”

How did FDR manage to make big government so clean?

A large part of the answer is that oversight was built into New Deal programs from the beginning. The Works Progress Administration, in particular, had a powerful, independent “division of progress investigation” devoted to investigating complaints of fraud. This division was so diligent that in 1940, when a congressional subcommittee investigated the WPA, it couldn't find a single serious irregularity that the division had missed.

FDR also made sure that Congress didn't stuff stimulus legislation with pork: There were no earmarks in the legislation that provided funding for the WPA and other emergency measures.

Last but not least, FDR built an emotional bond with working Americans,

which helped carry his administration through the inevitable setbacks and failures that beset its attempts to fix the economy.

So what are the lessons for the Obama team?

First, the administration of the economic recovery plan has to be squeaky clean. Purely economic considerations might suggest cutting a few corners in the interest of getting stimulus moving quickly, but the politics of the situation dictates great care in how money is spent. And enforcement is crucial: Inspectors general have to be strong and independent, and whistle-blowers have to be rewarded, not punished as they were in the Bush years.

Second, the plan has to be really, truly pork-free. Vice President-elect Joseph Biden recently promised that the plan “will not become a Christmas tree”; the new administration needs to deliver on that promise.

Finally, the Obama administration and Democrats in general need to do everything they can to build an FDR-like bond with the public. Never mind Obama's current high standing in the polls based on public hopes that he'll succeed. He needs a solid base of support that will remain even when things aren't going well.

And I have to say that Democrats are off to a bad start on that front. The attempted coronation of Caroline Kennedy as senator plays right into 40 years of conservative propaganda denouncing “liberal elites.” And surely I wasn't the only person who winced at reports about the luxurious beach house the Obamas have rented, not because there's anything wrong with the first family-elect having a nice vacation, but because symbolism matters,

and these weren't the images we should be seeing when millions of Americans are terrified about their finances.

O.K., these are early days. But that's precisely the point. Fixing the economy is going to take time, and the Obama team needs to be thinking now, when hopes are high, about how to accumulate and preserve enough political capital to see the job through.

