



## Obama a victim as Americans struggle to accept a lesser role



**TOM SWITZER**

**The discontent in the US goes deeper than just an objection to policies.**

A week is a long time in politics, then a year is an eternity. Twelve months ago, Barack Obama's presidential inauguration completed a political realignment in the US. Democrats had huge majorities in both houses of Congress and liberals were dominant in Washington for the first time since Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" of the 1960s. Pundits proclaimed the end of conservatism and there was heady talk of a new dawn.

Today, however, the President and his party are in the political doldrums and voters are rebelling in states that Obama won comfortably only a year ago. The discontent runs so deep that a conservative won the Senate seat in a state with no Republican members of Congress and that had been represented by the Kennedy family for six decades. The prospects for Obama's legislative agenda — from health-care reform to an emissions trading scheme — look increasingly bleak. The vaunted liberal realignment has vanished within a year. It was not supposed to be this way.

White House apologists blame the Democratic candidate in Massachusetts, Martha Coakley, whose endless gaffes make Sarah Palin look almost presidential in comparison.

Meanwhile, her Republican opponent, Scott Brown, was the model candidate: smart, athletic, charismatic, handsome and a family man. But the

candidates, however weak or impressive, do not explain the tidal wave of discontent that has swept across one of America's most liberal states.

Conservatives have a different interpretation: the Republican Party's resounding victory is a rejection of what the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer describes as "the most radical [in American terms] ideological agenda since the New Deal" of the 1930s: namely, liberal Democratic legislation on health, education and climate change. America, after all, is a right-of-centre nation: polls show conservatives remain the largest ideological group, outnumbering liberals nearly two to one.

The Massachusetts result, along with Republican wins in governor races in Virginia and New Jersey in November, represent a backlash against big government.

But although Americans may be rejecting Obama's vast expansion of state power, neither are they embracing the Republican agenda. The party is leaderless and riven by factionalism. It has been suffering the kind of mental sclerosis that afflicted Democrats in the 1970s. With most conservatives identifying shock-jock Rush Limbaugh as their leader, it is clear that Republicans lack philosophical self-reflection.

A more intriguing explanation for Massachusetts exists: that the backlash against Washington has less to do with

Obama's ideological overreach and more to do with America's spiritual doldrums.

**4 Many things in recent decades have helped to shatter US confidence. 7**

As he commemorates his first year, Obama is understandably focused on reviving the US economy and rebuilding Haiti and Afghanistan.

But he has the even more difficult task of restoring the American people's faith in their future. In other words, the US is bogged down in a cultural crisis, and this stems from expectations about America's future that no president can meet. For generations, Americans have seen their nation as "a city upon a hill" (John Winthrop) and "the last best hope of Earth" (Abraham Lincoln) that would make the world "safe for democracy" (Woodrow Wilson).

The same vision is echoed in the idea of the American Century, which shaped the national consciousness after World War II, when the US enjoyed an almost absolute supremacy in world affairs. The collapse of Soviet communism and end of the Cold War reinforced the perception of American exceptionalism.

But many things in recent decades — the quagmires in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, Watergate and other political scandals, the mounting trade and budget deficits, the subprime mortgage crisis, the decline of US unipolarity and

**Age**  
**22-Jan-2010**  
**Page: 17**  
**General News**  
**By: Tom Switzer**  
**Region: Melbourne**  
**Circulation: 200800**  
**Type: Australian Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 343.88 sq.cms**  
**Frequency: MTWTFS-**



what Irving Kristol said were “clear signs of rot and decay germinating in American society” — have helped to shatter US confidence.

Suddenly, the dominant vision of Pax Americana faded without anything — even the war on terror — emerging to replace it.

The void means that Americans have oscillated between periods of clarity and purpose, and periods of intense doubt and uncertainty. Clearly, Americans in 2008 embraced Obama's optimistic vision of change and renewal. But in the year since, he has failed to meet the lofty expectations that the public, the media and he himself set.

In recent years, polls consistently show most Americans think their nation is heading down the wrong path. Hence the rapid mood swings

within the electorate, epitomised in Obama's fall from adulation to anger within a year.

Of course, America has undergone crises before, but it has never endured one quite like this. It is not just that the US military is stretched to breaking point. Nor is it just that the US is mired in double-digit unemployment and skyrocketing levels of debt. It is more to do with whether Americans will gracefully accept a lesser role in a multipolar world.

Notwithstanding the hopes of the Obama campaign in 2008, the President has been unable to quiet Americans' doubts about their future. That may not be his fault, but it helps explain the meaning of Massachusetts.

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