Chapter 5

2012: “Our Journey Is Not Complete”

On January 7, 2009, 13 days before taking office, President-elect Barack Obama had visited the Oval Office as a guest of outgoing-president George W. Bush along with three former presidents Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Jimmy Carter. The purpose of the get together was for the thirty-ninth, forty-first, forty-second, and forty-third presidents to offer their collective advice to the soon-to-be forty-fourth. The following day, Indianapolis Star cartoonist Gary Varvel had the five-some stood in front of the president’s desk posing for the cameras, just as the pictures in the media had shown during the previous 24 hours. Of the five, President-elect Obama had by far the biggest, broadest smile. A thought balloon emanating from the heads of the other four bore the words: “Four years will wipe that smile off his face!” And it certainly did.

Back in 2008, Obama had been elected on a platform of “hope and change,” “change we can believe in,” along with a “yes we can” optimism. Now four weary years later President Obama was seeking reelection against the background of a still spluttering economy, deeply unpopular (with some) health care legislation, and an unfortunately long list of broken promises. “I never said this journey would be easy,” stated the president as he accepted the nomination of his party for a second term at the Democratic national convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. “Change takes time,” the first lady had reminded the same audience two day earlier. At the end of his third and final TV debate with Governor Mitt Romney, the president had admitted that “we’ve been through tough times.” But he promised that, if entrusted with a second term, “I promise you I will always listen to your voices.”

Despite so many economic and political indicators being against him, faced with a Republican challenger of questionable strength and ability, the president was reelected, though with a reduced share of the popular vote and
of the Electoral College vote. But in the 2012 campaign, the president had seemed strangely mute on what he would do if reelected to a second term. The main thrust of his appeal to the voters had been a slightly awkward: “I need a second term so that I can listen more, learn some, and do better.” By the time of his second inaugural address on January 21, 2013, the president had managed to find a more poetic way of putting it: “Our journey is not complete.”\(^2\) Indeed it was not, but how had it started and progressed through his first term?

### The Stage Is Set

The journey began with great optimism and much promise. After his win in the Iowa caucuses, Obama had talked of an America “less divided and more united” and of a time “when we finally beat back the politics of fear and cynicism and end the politics where we tear each other down.” When this Promised Land was reached, claimed Senator Obama, “you’ll be able to look back with pride and say that this was the moment when it all began.”\(^3\) He was no less exhilarating at the end of the primaries, on the day when he finally secured the nomination.

We will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and jobs for the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured a nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth.\(^4\)

In his first inaugural address, the new president set out his vision of a post-partisan Washington. “On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.”\(^5\) Needless to say, therefore, expectations were high and it was almost inevitable that many who had voted for America’s first black president soon came to feel that promise exceeded performance.

But the first two years did see some notable successes. In terms of legislation there were two pieces of low-hanging fruit that Obama could pluck from the congressional tree: the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which had been stalled by a Senate filibuster in 2008, and the reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which President George W. Bush had vetoed in 2007. Both were passed in the first two weeks of the Obama presidency. Then came the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), an economic stimulus package, which became