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**Obama and the perils of leadership**  
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It was October, 1937, and President Roosevelt was trying to convince Americans to focus on the frightening events in Europe and Asia, to understand that the United States could not wall itself off from the world and to recognize that the march of totalitarianism abroad was a mounting threat at home.

The nation, however, was not ready to hear it. After Roosevelt made his case in a high-profile speech in Chicago, a hotbed of isolationism, the public reacted harshly. Americans were far more concerned about the economy's return to recession, and most believed the nation's top foreign policy goal should be to avoid war.

"It's a terrible thing," FDR reflected a few days later, "to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead and find no one there."

The anecdote comes to mind in an admittedly different context in today's Washington – that is, in the midst of President Obama's continuing push for health reform – but one that nevertheless raises both perennial questions of political leadership as well as the particular challenges with which Obama must grapple.

Leadership, of course, does not operate in a vacuum. It is, as FDR and other presidents have learned, the flip side of what you might call "followership." When it comes to unpopular causes, a president must not just pontificate but try to change minds, to convince a skeptical public to see things in a different light.

Then, with or without the public behind him, a president must decide. It is what makes the job so lonely, yet so compelling.

Nor do Americans necessarily empathize with a president's plight, for they seem to have a love-hate relationship with "leadership." Conceptually, they seek the attribute in their elected officials. But, when a president bucks public opinion, they often chastise him for obstinacy rather than praise him for courage.

President George W. Bush sought to build a case for victory in Iraq but, when support sank, he ignored public opinion and sent more troops to Baghdad. He left office highly unpopular for lots of good reasons, but history may treat him more kindly on Iraq (especially if that nation continues making progress).

Bush's father never got to serve two terms, his re-election sunk by, among other things, his decision to break his promise and support tax increases for the greater good of federal deficit cutting. Nor did Jimmy Carter, who had lots of valuable insights to offer in his infamous

“malaise” speech but lacked a public willing to hear them as well as the skills to change public opinion over time.

Now, it is Obama who faces the test of leadership, the clash between what he believes the nation needs and what it may not want.

The president is pushing a big, Washington-directed health care plan at a time when Americans are deeply skeptical about their government’s ability to deliver. He is pushing a plan that most Americans seem to oppose (though their opposition tends to soften when voters know more about what’s really in it).

He is pushing health care at a time when the public is focused more intensely on the economy and jobs. He is pushing the Democrat-run Congress to act at a time when many Democrats are worried about the electoral consequences this November. He wants to get the issue off the public agenda quickly, but he needs the help of a Congress that was designed to operate slowly and, on that score, usually does not disappoint.

To be sure, Obama’s drive for comprehensive health reform is rooted in more than high-mindedness. Historically speaking, success could catapult him into the front ranks of Democratic presidents, marking him as the one who extended the New Deal and Great Society when so many before him had failed. Failure, on the other hand, would embolden his opponents and threaten the rest of his agenda.

But, let’s take Obama at his word.

Let’s assume he believes that the nation desperately needs comprehensive reform – that piecemeal approaches to the growing problems of cost and coverage will not work, and that only by controlling health care costs over the long run can the nation regain control over its spiraling budget deficit. And let’s assume, of course, that the plan he is pushing is the one he believes will best achieve his goals.

Well, then he really has no choice. He must ignore the political risks before him and urge his party mates in Congress to do the same. He must push lawmakers to enact his plan or something close to it.

That’s leadership, however much the folks back home may not see it that way.