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Et Tu, Lefty? Allies Critical Of President

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Waffling on Health Care Riles His Loyal Pundits

By Howard Kurtz
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It is as inevitable in Washington as sweltering summers and steamy sex scandals.

A president is going to be smacked around from the moment he takes office and the uplifting rhetoric of campaign rallies meets the gritty reality of governing.

But the criticism of Barack Obama has turned strikingly personal as some of his liberal media allies have gone wobbly on him. After playing a cheerleading role during the campaign, some are bluntly questioning whether he's up to the job.

If Obama is losing Paul Krugman, can the rest of the left be far behind?

"I'm concerned as to whether, in trying to reach out to the middle, he is selling out his base," says Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page. "I find myself saying, 'Where's that well-oiled Obama machine we saw last year?' . . . Maybe he's being a little too cool at this point."

David Corn, a blogger for Politics Daily, says that despite a reservoir of support for the president, some of his policies "have caused concern, if not outright anger, among certain liberal commentators and bloggers. It's been a more conventional White House than many people expected or desired. . . . He's made compromises that have some people concerned about his adherence to principle."

Perhaps that's why a recent Frank Rich [column](#) in the New York Times was headlined, "Is Obama Punking Us?"

Rich says by phone that there is "a kind of impatience" with Obama as his initiatives stall, but that the 24-hour news cycle is producing a rush to judgment just seven months into the administration.

"The big mistake made in looking at him during the campaign was that he was a wuss or an academic or professorial and couldn't rise to the occasion, and he did," Rich says. "It's too early to talk about whether he's strong enough. He's got to be pretty damn strong to have won the campaign. . . . Of course he's not the messiah. He never was going to be the messiah."

But the sense of letdown is palpable. Krugman wrote recently that "Mr. Obama was never going to get everything his supporters wanted. But there's a point at which realism shades over into weakness, and progressives increasingly feel that the administration is on the wrong side of that line."

Arianna Huffington has lamented Obama's "lack of leadership," asking: "How could someone with a renowned ability to inspire, communicate complex ideas, and connect with voters find himself in this position?" Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen has [noted](#) "his distinct coolness, an above-the-fray mien that does not communicate empathy." The Post's Eugene Robinson, writing about the White House seeming to retreat from a public health insurance option, [wrote](#): "We didn't elect Obama to be an expedient president. We elected him to be a great one."

Robinson says now: "I'd be lying if I didn't say there was a feeling, an excitement that attended the advent of the Obama presidency, and I'm the first to say it infected me." But, he says, "I wanted to remind readers -- and if he reads the column, to remind him -- of what he said and what people voted for. . . . Any president, coming in at any time, in any context, is going to make decisions I might not like."

The White House is well aware of the diminishing enthusiasm. "I don't think anyone anticipated that we would have broad consensus on everything we did, even from our friends," deputy press secretary Bill Burton says. "People have meaningful differences with our policies. The president doesn't view his approval ratings as something to be put up on a shelf and admired."

Burton suggests a certain journalistic impatience, saying: "Do I think it's too early to say that our friends will abandon us? I certainly do."

It was liberal commentators, of course, who formed the leading edge of the most favorable coverage that any White House contender has drawn in a generation. Having swooned as they did, some were probably more susceptible to having their hearts broken.

As [Lee Siegel](#) writes in the Daily Beast, "Maybe all of us who think that making universal health care the law of the land is the most important issue of our lifetimes would not be feeling so angry and bitter if we took a step back and looked at the true cause of our rage: the liberals who raised such impossible expectations of Obama in the first place."

Obama's essential appeal in 2008 was his vow to move beyond red and blue partisanship. But that has disappointed some of the liberal pundits who thought he shared their goals. Unlike the late Ted Kennedy, who was beloved by the left, Obama had to be taken on faith.

It's easy to forget, in light of Obama's global celebrity, that five years ago he was a state senator in Illinois. Given his short tenure as a national figure, Obama finds himself having to prove, at least to the opinion-mongers, what he's really made of. "Is He Weak?" asked a recent Jim Hoagland [column](#), on foreign policy, in The Post. One theme running through the chatter on the left is that Obama compromises too much, especially, in this view, with Republicans who have little interest in working with him.

To be sure, the liberals aren't neglecting their usual targets. In a recent Time [column](#), Joe Klein called the GOP a "party of nihilists," adding that "the Republicans are curling themselves into a tight, white, extremist bubble."

But brickbats from your own side can inflict a greater toll. The conservative media turned on George W. Bush when he named [Harriet Miers](#) to the Supreme Court, helping to doom her nomination. By the

end of Bush's second term, some commentators on the right were bemoaning the president's huge increase in spending. And the lack of enthusiasm that conservative pundits displayed toward John McCain hampered him in the fall election.

The president's liberal critics tend to cluster around particular issues. Some see health reform as making or breaking Obama's first term. Others are disappointed at the pace of withdrawal from Iraq, the escalation in Afghanistan and the delay in closing Guantanamo Bay. Still others argue that Obama should be leading the charge to investigate terrorism-related abuses during the Bush administration.

For reporters and columnists alike, campaigns are an adrenaline rush and governing, in truth, is a slog. Obama's election may have spawned talk of a "post-racial" society, but that faded somewhere between the "birther" flap and the Skip Gates arrest. With his poll numbers dipping, he is increasingly depicted as a struggling salesman, unable to close the deal.

Even sympathetic commentators face an inherent tension when dealing with their side. The day after Robinson won a Pulitzer Prize in April, Obama called to congratulate him, saying his columns were "thoughtful and fair." Except, the president added, for that morning's piece on how he should have been tougher on Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, which was "complete nonsense." The two had a spirited 10-minute discussion before Obama signed off by saying Robinson's family must be proud of him.

"This is not new for me," Robinson said of the mixed reaction.

In today's hyperpartisan atmosphere, liberal pundits are likely to remain in Obama's corner. But for those who once felt a thrill up their leg, the sensation may be wearing off.

Kurtz also works for CNN as a contributor and host of its weekly media program, "Reliable Sources."

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