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## Looking beyond Obama to 'The Golden Age'

Obama has so far disappointed many supporters, but he has awakened a global desire for real change.

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The majority of Obama's campaign promises remain unkept, and many are now looking to new sources for change  
[GALLO/GETTY]

A few short weeks ago, President Obama was on top of the world - or so it seemed.

He first pushed back against the growing wave of domestic silliness by releasing his long-form birth certificate, turning Donald Trump - his temporary leading GOP challenger at the time - into a laughing stock. Then he announced the killing of bin Laden, the number one man behind the 9/11 attacks.

It was, some suggested, a major turning point. American confidence was back.

**The US could finally chart a new course, away**

from the Bush-era "long war" quagmire, as many had hoped would happen when Obama was first elected. There was new space for relationships to be re-defined.

Who knows? **The Arab Spring might even be fully embraced by the US.** At the very least, resources could be refocused on reviving the economy at home. Five weeks later, all that is gone.

Abroad, Obama's grand foreign policy address was a complete dud, a painful reminder of **how deeply he has disappointed the world** since his promising Cairo address two years ago. **Talk of an early withdrawal from Afghanistan has faded,** and **Obama's domestic agenda is similarly mired in the left-over detritus of failed Republican ideas from the past 30 years** - ideas he could have forcefully rejected at one time, but instead has chosen to meekly adapt himself to.

At home, a recent Iowa poll found that **Republicans there still don't think Obama is a natural-born citizen, legally entitled to be president.** Little else has changed either - except that **Obama's real leading challenger, Mitt Romney, is now leading him 49-46 in the latest *Washington Post* poll of registered voters, which found a failing economy at the root of Obama's political problems.**

The recent jobs report - a modest 54,000 jobs gained in May, down from several hundred thousand in each of the previous three months - has suddenly gained elite attention, but **signs of a double-dip recession in housing** have been registering for months now in the Case-Shiller housing index.

And well before that, **prominent economists like Paul Krugman and Berkeley's Brad DeLong were repeatedly warning that there was not even an economic model behind the austerity politics** that have taken hold under Obama's lack of leadership.

Playing on the GOP's budget-cutting terrain, **there is no credible policy path that could lead to a revived economy** by November 2012. Only incredible blind luck could help Obama out. **Even Fed Chair Ben Bernanke, a Republican, has**

**warned that budget-cutting will reduce employment in the near term**, not create jobs.

### **The gap between image and reality**

As a further indication of **how utterly powerless Obama has become by his own passivity**, on June 6, Peter Diamond, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, withdrew his nomination to the Federal Reserve Board following 14 months of Republican stonewalling.

The White House pretended to have fought for Diamond's nomination. "We strongly supported it," said White House press secretary Jay Carney. But no one seriously believes them. Many other top posts don't even have a nominee.

**Where other Democratic presidents, from Woodrow Wilson to Bill Clinton, would have railed repeatedly against such knee-jerk obstructionism, putting the Republicans on the defensive, Obama has barely raised a whisper. His overall passivity in the face of economic distress is more reminiscent of Grover Cleveland - the 19th century "business Democrat" - than of any 20th century Democratic president.**

Indeed, one might well argue that all the normal frameworks for discussing Obama and US politics generally are far too short-sighted and narrow-minded to make sense of what's going on.

If we want a proper basis for comparison, we should be looking at grand macro-historical comparisons to **how other empires have fallen apart, growing increasingly top-heavy, sclerotic, and closed off to new ideas, new insights and new blood** that could put them back in touch with their original sources of vitality.

Arnold Toynbee, the British historian who first launched such comparative studies, argued that declining empires can regenerate themselves, if they are lucky. In the late 1960s, while teaching in Florida, Toynbee even expressed the hope that the hippie/anti-war counterculture movement he saw blossoming around him could be a sign of just such a regeneration.

More recently, Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine*, argued on *Democracy Now!* in late 2009 that **Obama had been the first candidate to run a "lifestyle" presidential campaign, similar to the corporate advertising**

campaigns that seek to associate consumer products with the look and feel of social change movements associated with that regeneration.

"He really is a super brand on line with many of the companies that I discuss in *No Logo* ... lifestyle brands that co-opted many of the, you know - the iconography of the transformative political movements like the civil rights movement, the women's movement," Klein said.

"The first time I saw the 'Yes, We Can' video that was produced by Will.i.am, my first thought was, you know, 'Wow. A politician has finally produced an ad as good as Nike that plays on our, sort of, faded memories of a more idealistic era, but, yet, doesn't quite say anything.'"

Of course, no one wanted to listen to a **perceptive critic like Klein** at the time.

But now that **the gap between image and reality** has opened to the size of the Great Rift, swallowing whole countries of disappointed youth abroad, while at home swallowing **tens of millions of unemployed, underemployed and those whose mortgages cost more than their homes are worth**, now that **Obama's poll numbers are starting to reflect that enormous gap**, perhaps now it's time to take seriously the need for a fundamental break with the past - a real break, not a fantasy one.

It's just starting to dawn on America's political class that Obama could lose the election in 2012 - and they could not possibly conceive of such a fundamental break. An Obama loss would only mean an ever-faster descent into darkness. But those who made and are still making the Arab Spring can conceive of such a break - indeed, it's all they can think of - as can those in Spain (and even in the US) who have drawn inspiration from them.

**There's a Sufi saying: "If there were no gold, there would be no counterfeit."**

**As Obama's counterfeit promises come up increasingly short, the search for gold intensifies around the world. The golden age is not in the past, as**

**conservatives since Herodotus have argued. The golden age is in us, awaiting self-discovery.**

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