

Follow Me: The Charisma Mandate

By Kate Zernike

TAKING office in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt confronted a country in crisis. Four in 10 working-age Americans were jobless. Banks were collapsing. There were long lines outside tellers' windows as people rushed to withdraw their savings.

On March 4, Roosevelt gave his now famous inaugural address, promising that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Within days he had secured legislation guaranteeing the banks, and on March 12, he took to the radio for the first of his fireside chats. "When the people find out that they can get their money — that they can get it when they want it — the phantom of fear will soon be laid," he soothed an anxious nation. "I can assure you, it is safer to keep your money in a re-opened bank than under your mattress."

When banks re-opened the next morning, the lines were gone, as Robert A. Caro recounted in the first volume of his biography of Lyndon Johnson, "The Path to Power." People put money back in, so much that on the first day after the chat, deposits outweighed withdrawals by \$10 million.

It was the legislation, but mostly, Mr. Caro writes: "Their confidence was restored by his confidence. When he smiled on the crisis, it seemed to vanish."

Would we call this a cult of personality?

Today that term is all around Barack Obama — perhaps because there seems so little other way to explain how a first-term senator has managed to dazzle his way to front-runner in the race for the presidency, how he walks on water for so many supporters, and how the mere suggestion that he is, say, mortal, risks vehement objection, or at least exposing the skeptic as deeply uncool.

It's far too soon to know what role Mr. Obama will play in history, let alone whether he can be compared to F.D.R., or, as he is most commonly, to John F. Kennedy. But it is perhaps time to look more closely at this label that attaches to him, and how it has been applied in the past.

The "cult of personality" is used in the pejorative. But recast as a different name — call it charisma — and, as Roosevelt and other examples show, it can be a critical element of politics and its practical cousin, governance. It just can't be the only element.

"Today, attacks on the cult of personality seem really to mean attacks on the ability to make speeches that inspire," Mr. Caro said in an interview. "But you only have to look at crucial moments in the history of our time to see how crucial it was to have a leader who could inspire, who could rally a nation to a standard, who could infuse a country with confidence, to remind people of the justice of a cause."

Still, Mr. Caro adds a caveat: "That doesn't always translate into a great presidency."

So what does it look like?

Charisma, as defined by the early sociologist Max Weber, was one of three "ideal types" of authority — the others were legal, as in a bureaucracy, and traditional, as in a tribe — and rested upon a kind of magical power and hero worship. That definition was, of course, unsuitable for modern times, as one of Weber's many interpreters, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., wrote in "The

Politics of Hope.” Its use became metaphorical, as Mr. Schlesinger wrote, “a chic synonym for heroic, or for demagogic, or even just for ‘popular.’ ”

But it was also a coolness that Norman Mailer captured in Kennedy — for whom Mr. Schlesinger became a kind of official hero-worshiper — writing about the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles. Mr. Mailer described how Kennedy’s convertible, then his suntan and his teeth, emerged before a camera-filled crowd in Pershing Square, “the prince and the beggars of glamour staring at one another across a city street.”

There was, Mr. Mailer wrote: “an elusive detachment to everything he did. One did not have the feeling of a man present in the room with all his weight and all his mind. Johnson gave you all of himself, he was a political animal, he breathed like an animal, sweated like one, you knew his mind was entirely absorbed with the compendium of political fact and maneuver; Kennedy seemed at times like a young professor whose manner was adequate for the classroom but whose mind was off in some intricacy of the Ph.D. thesis he was writing.”

By any definition, the charismatic leader emerges at a time of crisis or national yearning, and perhaps a vacuum in that nation’s institutions. Mr. Schlesinger wrote in 1960 of a “new mood in politics,” with people feeling “that the mood which has dominated the nation for a decade is beginning to seem thin and irrelevant.” There was, he wrote, “a mounting dissatisfaction with the official priorities, a deepening concern with our character and objectives as a nation.”

That might well describe the climate Obama supporters feel now.

Alan Wolfe, the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Political Life at Boston College, says Mr. Obama is simply — understandably — making an emotional appeal to those yearnings. “Politics is about policy, but it’s also about giving people some kind of sense of participating in a common venture with their fellow citizens,” Mr. Wolfe said.

Philosophers call it “civil religion,” using the language of religion and elevation to talk about your country. A classic example is Ronald Reagan’s summoning of the “city on a hill.” That, Professor Wolfe said, was the parallel Mr. Obama was hinting at when he talked about Reagan as a transformative leader.

“A soft civil religion is something our country desperately needs at a time of deep partisanship,” Mr. Wolfe said. “He wants to go back to the Reagan years as a Democrat, with Democratic policies.”

But others see in this same language a more cynical cult of personality.

“What is troubling about the campaign is that it’s gone beyond hope and change to redemption,” said Sean Wilentz, a historian at Princeton (and a longtime friend of the Clintons). “It’s posing as a figure who is the one person who will redeem our politics. And what I fear is, that ends up promising more from politics than politics can deliver.”

From the day Mr. Obama announced his candidacy, he has billed it as a movement, and himself as the agent of generational change. He has mocked his rival, Hillary Rodham Clinton, for accusing him of raising “false hopes.” “We don’t need leaders who are telling us what we cannot do,” he said in New Hampshire. “We need a president who can tell us what we can do! What we can accomplish! Where we can take this country!”

Accounts of the campaign’s “Camp Obama” sessions, to train volunteers, have a revivalist flavor. Volunteers are urged to avoid talking about policy to potential voters, and instead tell of how they “came” to Mr. Obama.

“If you don’t talk about issues in great detail, if you do it in a way that is not the centerpiece of

your campaign, of your rhetoric, then you become a blank screen,” Mr. Wilentz said. “Everybody thinks you are the vehicle of their hopes.”

“To confuse this with Teddy Roosevelt or J.F.K. or F.D.R. is to make a fundamental historical error,” he said. “It’s confusing the offer of leadership with the offer of redemption. One offers specific programs, the other is hope and change. Certainly F.D.R. gave hope, but he was going to do it through these various programs.”

And even for all their admiration of F.D.R., historians are quick to point out that soon after he had swept nearly every state in being elected to a second term, he tried to upend the constitutional separation of powers with a proposal to allow him to pack the Supreme Court by appointing up to six new justices (Congress wouldn’t let him). He defied the two-term tradition, and, some say, might have come to view himself as president for life.

“There is a certain kind of hubris that sets in,” said Doris Kearns Goodwin, a biographer of presidents from Lincoln to Johnson. (She recalls finding a letter one fan wrote to Franklin Roosevelt, reading essentially, “I’ve lost the roof on my house, I’ve lost my job, my wife is mad at me and my dog died, but you are there, everything will be O.K.”)

Theodore Roosevelt made a similar leap in his return appearance in the campaign of 1912, Ms. Goodwin said, when, upset with the Supreme Court’s knocking down his progressive legislation, he proposed allowing people to override judicial decisions. He ignored pleas not to run from those who said the Progressive movement had to be bigger than his personality, and ended up splitting the Republican Party.

Whether and how charisma translates into legislative action is the critical question. It remained unclear when Kennedy died whether he would have been able to get through the civil rights legislation forced through by Johnson, who inherited Kennedy’s office but never his cool.

When Mrs. Clinton talked about how it took Johnson as well as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to achieve the rights legislation, Ms. Goodwin said, “she was absolutely right.” Johnson’s great mastery was to get the support of Southern Republicans. “It required his understanding of absolutely every single senator,” Ms. Goodwin said. “They were a team. Without Martin Luther King agitating the country and J.F.K. picking up the bill there would not have been that pressure on the Congress, and without L.B.J. there would not have been a bill.”

Still, Mr. Caro, now writing about Johnson and the Kennedys, said he has come to appreciate another aspect of how Johnson swayed Congress. While his legislative maneuvering was peerless, what really pushed the rights act was his appearance before Congress, demanding an end to prejudice using the language of the movement: “We shall overcome.”

Hearing that, Mr. Caro said, an aide to Dr. King turned and saw something he had never seen: the great civil rights leader was weeping. “The more and more I study it, the more you see the impact that speech had.”

Ideally, Ms. Goodwin said, you’d have the combination of experience and charisma, “if you could mush Clinton and Obama together as one person.”

When the Magic Fades

By David Brooks, Op-Ed Columnist

At first it seemed like a few random cases of lassitude among Mary Chapin Carpenter devotees in Berkeley, Cambridge and Chapel Hill. But then psychotherapists began to realize patients across the country were complaining of the same distress. They were experiencing the first hints of what's bound to be a national phenomenon: Obama Comedown Syndrome.

The afflicted had already been through the phases of Obama-mania — fainting at rallies, weeping over their touch screens while watching Obama videos, spending hours making folk crafts featuring Michelle Obama's face. These patients had experienced intense surges of hope-amine, the brain chemical that fuels euphoric sensations of historic change and personal salvation.

But they found that as the weeks went on, they needed more and purer hope-injections just to preserve the rush. They wound up craving more hope than even the Hope Pope could provide, and they began experiencing brooding moments of suboptimal hopefulness. Anxious posts began to appear on the Yes We Can! Facebook pages. A sense of ennui began to creep through the nation's Ian McEwan-centered book clubs.

Up until now The Chosen One's speeches had seemed to them less like stretches of words and more like soul sensations that transcended time and space. But those in the grips of Obama Comedown Syndrome began to wonder if His stuff actually made sense. For example, His Hopeness tells rallies that we are the change we have been waiting for, but if we are the change we have been waiting for then why have we been waiting since we've been here all along?

Patients in the grip of O.C.S. rarely express doubts at first, but in a classic case of transference, many experience slivers of sympathy for Hillary Clinton. They see her campaign morosely traipsing from one depressed industrial area to another — The Sitting Shiva for America Tour. They see that her entire political strategy consists of waiting for primary states as boring as she is.

They feel for her. They feel guilty because the entire commentariat now treats her like Richard Nixon. Are liberal elites rationalizing their own betrayal of her? Is Hillary just another fading First Wife thrown away for the first available Trophy Messiah?

As the syndrome progresses, they begin to ask questions about The Presence himself:

Barack Obama vowed to abide by the public finance campaign-spending rules in the general election if his opponent did. But now he's waffling on his promise. Why does he need to check with his campaign staff members when deciding whether to keep his word?

Obama says he is practicing a new kind of politics, but why has his PAC sloshed \$698,000 to the campaigns of the superdelegates, according to the Center for Responsive Politics? Is giving Robert Byrd's campaign \$10,000 the kind of change we can believe in?

If he values independent thinking, why is his the most predictable liberal vote in the Senate? A People for the American Way computer program would cast the same votes for cheaper.

And should we be worried about Obama's mountainous self-confidence?

These doubts lead O.C.S. sufferers down the path to the question that is the Unholy of the Unholies for Obama-maniacs: How exactly would all this unity he talks about come to pass?

How is a 47-year-old novice going to unify highly polarized 70-something committee chairs? What will happen if the nation's 261,000 lobbyists don't see the light, even after the laying on of hands? Does The Changemaker have the guts to take on the special interests in his own party — the trial lawyers, the teachers' unions, the AARP?

The Gang of 14 created bipartisan unity on judges, but Obama sat it out. Kennedy and McCain created a bipartisan deal on immigration. Obama opted out of the parts that displeased the unions. Sixty-eight senators supported a bipartisan deal on FISA. Obama voted no. And if he were president now, how would the High Deacon of Unity heal the breach that split the House last week?

The victims of O.C.S. struggle against Obama-myopia, or the inability to see beyond Election Day. But here's the fascinating thing: They still like him. They know that most of his hope-mongering is vaporous. They know that he knows it's vaporous.

But the fact that they can share this dream still means something. After the magic fades and reality sets in, they still know something about his soul, and he knows something about theirs. They figure that any new president is going to face gigantic obstacles. At least this candidate seems likely to want to head in the right direction. Obama's hype comes from exaggerating his powers and his virtues, not faking them.

Those afflicted with O.C.S. are no longer as moved by his perorations. The fever passes. But some invisible connection seems to persist.

Instructors Note:

Using Weber's concepts in a fairly straightforward way, Zernike attempts an intelligent analysis of Obama's apparently "charismatic" attraction. Brooks, on the other hand, while not exactly claiming to provide a rejoinder, gives us a clever and somewhat cynical deconstruction of the "Obama phenomenon." He, too, is being true to Weber's formulation, because charisma inevitably is fleeting and ephemeral; in order to be sustained it must be transformed and routinized, either in a traditional or a rational-legal form.

And yet – does Brooks, in his last line, leave you wondering?