Steven Weinberg

The presidency of Barack Obama began to fail on January 6, 2009, a fortnight before the president was inaugurated. Only on that day, the first day of a new Congress, the rules of the Senate could have been changed by a simple majority vote. That was the last opportunity to revise the rule that requires sixty votes to limit a filibuster. Of course, no president-elect or president has authority to change the Senate rules, but this president-elect had ample means to exert pressure on senators. For instance, he could have confronted Harry Reid of Nevada, the Senate majority leader, with the prospect of administration support for the nuclear waste disposal facility at Yucca Mountain, whose worst drawback was its unpopularity in Nevada. Alas, Barack Obama proved himself to be no Lyndon Johnson.

Even though Democrats would have a majority in both houses of Congress for the next
two years, the Republican ability to filibuster in the Senate meant that bipartisan
compromise would be needed to pass any legislation or approve any appointments. This
sort of compromise may have been congenial to President Obama anyway, but after
January 6 it was unavoidable. So we have a health care plan based on costly private
insurance, without even a public option. We have state and local governments forced to
lay off teachers and police and other employees, thus creating the largest part of current
unemployment. We have regulatory agencies in the executive branch that remain the
captives of the industries they are supposed to regulate. We have a continued decline in
the position of organized labor. We have not made up for the lack of effective consumer
demand with a large program of needed public spending. We are retreating in our support
for scientific research. We have increasing income inequality. And so on.

Even faced with the necessity of compromise, President Obama could have declared a
truly liberal economic program, and when it was defeated or weakened by Congress he
could have gone to the nation in 2010 and 2012 as Harry Truman did in 1948, to call for a
Congress that would pass his program. Not having done so, it is not surprising that he
now faces widespread apathy among his former supporters.

In foreign affairs, it is difficult for anyone outside the administration to tell what can be
done or how to do it, but at least one can judge the actual achievements of the Obama
administration. They have been disappointing. Iran, a country run by murderous theocrats,
has passed one milestone after another in its development of nuclear weapons. Our
influence in Iraq has decayed to the point that Iran is allowed to supply weapons to the
Assad government in Syria by flights over Iraq. We have wasted lives and resources in
Afghanistan, a nation famous for resisting improvement. No progress has been made
toward international limitations on greenhouse gases. We seem to have given up on the
idea of sharply reducing Russian and American nuclear arsenals, thus continuing the small
but nonnegligible risk to human civilization that has been with us year after year.

I am sure that a Romney administration would do much worse than an Obama
administration in domestic affairs—not only the economy, but also immigration, women’s
rights, and judicial appointments—and on arms control, and I have no confidence that
Romney would do better in the Middle East. Therefore if I lived in a swing state like Ohio
or Florida, I would doubtless swallow my disappointment and vote for Obama. In any
case, I would not allow disappointment with Obama to keep me from voting for truly
liberal candidates for Congress, such as Elizabeth Warren.

As it happens, I live in a strongly Republican state where, because of the wonderful
workings of the electoral college, my vote for president can have no effect. So I will allow
myself the luxury of expressing my disappointment with Barack Obama, by voting for all Democratic candidates, except that I will not vote for either candidate for president.

Garry Wills

Here is the Romney strategy: since you don’t like what you’ve got, vote for what you haven’t got. Whatever it is you haven’t got, it is better than what you’ve got. That was supposed to be enough to secure election after what we’ve got—Obama’s apparent economic failure. But the Romney campaign is taking what-you-haven’t-got-ism to new heights of what-you-mustn’t-know-ism. It supposes that revealing any details of what you haven’t got will just distract from the fact that you haven’t got it. Vote for Whatever instead.

So we are supposed to vote for a big Mystery Box full of things we haven’t got. Ann Romney, asked about abortion, said she could not address that since it would just be a distraction from the promised great economy (what we haven’t got). Asked about her husband’s tax returns, she said two years are all we are going to get (leaving all other years among the things we haven’t got). Romney himself, asked what loopholes he would eliminate to fund his great new plans, said telling us that would cheat Congress of the wonderful surprise of working with him on the problem.

His views on voter-identification drives to reduce the electorate? A distraction. On requiring ultrasound exams for pregnant women seeking abortions; on “legitimate rape”? Just distractions, all of them. So, for that matter, is whatever he did at Bain Capital, or as governor of Massachusetts. The main thing we are supposed to advert to or be reminded of in his past is that he “saved the Olympics.”

Even Romney’s strong first debate was simply a harder emphasis on what you’ve got (falsely, a doubling of the deficit) and what-you-mustn’t-know-ism (what deductions will be eliminated and how this will reduce the deficit)—which Romney got away with because the president inexplicably let him limit the discussion to those terms. All the things Romney treated as “distractions”—women’s rights, gay rights, citizenship for undocumented immigrants, the 47 percent of moochers—Obama treated as if they were indeed distractions. But they are not, and that should become clear by the election.

When Romney gave the right wing its preference for his running mate, there was an expectation that Ryan would pop out like a jack-in-the-box, filling the air with numbers like confetti. He was the party’s great thinker; he would make the campaign serious and nerdy; he would blind with pure intellect his Elmer Fudd vice-presidential rival. He would turn his Ayn Rand death ray on him and Biden would evaporate. But as soon as Ryan was asked
for his great specific plans, he was told that he could not violate his master’s secrecy campaign, and Jack was stuffed back into the box.

We have seen this kind of mystery election before. In the elections of 2010, we were told that the Tea Party candidates arriving on the scene would eliminate the deficit and shrink the government, somehow. Other issues were set aside. Abortion, gay rights, religion in politics—those were all part of the old religious right, now supplanted by the deficit purists. But in a great bait and switch, the first thing the new people in Congress, the state houses, and state legislatures did was introduce a flood of bills to limit, stigmatize, or eliminate abortions, and the flood has not abated—944 provisions on abortion or contraception were still being introduced into state legislatures during the first three months of 2012.

The mass of voters did not choose that. There was no way it could. No one knew what was in the 2010 version of the Mystery Box. In the same way, if we vote for “the economy only” Republicans, the old causes will again race to the top of their agenda—challenges to women’s rights, gay rights, global warming, religious education, and Supreme Court nominees. All of a sudden, other things will not be distractions from the bad economy.

At times Romney did get specific, but it was a specificity about the non-existent. He will not apologize for America—as if that were occurring. He will not cut work requirements from welfare—and neither has anyone else. He will not take God’s name off our coins—lifting a burden of fear from the beleaguered “Keep God on Our Coins” movement.

On the other hand, he was very specific about one thing. He was quite specific in saying that Paul Ryan—and any others being considered for the vice-presidency—should deliver to him ten full years of tax records. Romney was too smart to let anyone standing for that office tell him it was none of his business. No one could use mysteries on the Mystery Box candidate. But we are not supposed to be as smart as Romney when it comes to taking risks about important offices. What was required to become a candidate for the vice-presidency is off limits for becoming the president. That is still in the Mystery Box, and it has to stay there.

Romney, it is clear, never thought that this election would be, or should be, about him. It was all supposed to be about what is wrong with America—namely, Obama. It has been cast not as a choice campaign but a referendum campaign, a retrospective verdict on Obama. It is, more properly, a revulsion campaign. Romney would ride the diffuse and partly disguised distrust of Obama. The campaign of no full disclosure at the top would profit from a no-full-confession policy at the bottom of its appeal.
Romney could explicitly voice only one aspect of this revulsion, Obama’s economic performance. But under the vague general feelings about Obama—reports to pollsters that he is not quite one of us, perhaps not a citizen, not a Christian—there were radioactive centers too hot for a candidate to handle directly. He could, nonetheless, profit from their broader toxic waves, an unconfessed (sometimes, perhaps, unconscious) force. It was rightly said that a historic boundary had been crossed when a black man was elected president. That breakthrough partly escaped but did not cancel a long sad record of historic American racism. A proof that many were not willing to live with this new level of tolerance is that twice as many conservative Republicans (34 percent) now say that Obama is Muslim as the number who said it when he was elected (16 percent). The number of Republicans in general who say it is 30 percent.

That is not because more evidence has emerged in the last three years, or because the evidence has been more carefully considered. It is because a number of people are digging in their heels even more firmly against where the nation is going. As I say, there is no open racism in the Romney campaign. But it has to be fiercely concentrated on other things (like the economy) to turn its eyes from what sizzles below the surface, and sometimes not very far below.

Dinesh D’Souza’s book *Obama’s America* became number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and the film based on it has played in over a thousand theaters, yet its chapter on Obama’s mother revives one of the oldest racist stereotypes, that a white woman must be a slut if she has sex with a black man. A “documentary” with that same theme has been mailed to thousands of voters in key states, screened by Tea Party groups and by Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum Council. Guess which man the audience for these, and for hundreds of obscurer tracts, will vote for?

Romney, of course, does not cultivate these voters. He does not have to. He does not denounce them, either. He needs them. He cannot disown a third of his party—and those are only the hard-core Obama revulsionists. Who knows how far the penumbra of softcore revulsionism has spread among the less candid or more cautious harborers of it? The strategy of no full disclosure at the top of the campaign silently meshes with the party of no full confession below. Under all the other hidden things, the Mystery Box is hiding a lethal level of radioactive racism.

**Jeffrey Sachs**

The US federal government is the world’s largest enterprise, with $3.7 trillion in outlays, $2.5 trillion in revenues, and 2.1 million civilian workers. It is also the most complex, operating in every sector of the world’s largest economy, in every country of the world,
and in every possible setting: markets, technology development, social programs, basic science, and much, much more.

A behemoth of this size requires goals, plans, strategies, and budgets that look forward for years, even decades. This is especially true in our era, when unprecedented shifts in technology, demography, the world economy, and the physical environment require deep structural changes in our economic and social life. Old skills and sectors are obsolete. The energy, health, and education systems require large-scale overhauls. And yet we operate almost blindly, month by month, fiscal cliff by fiscal cliff, without any clear pathway ahead.

Imagine running the largest global Fortune 500 company, Royal Dutch Shell (at around one fifth the federal government revenues), without plans, strategies, and budgets. Some companies may try it but they don’t last long. The federal government has the advantage of the Federal Reserve’s printing press (which has been covering much of the deficit as the Federal Reserve buys up Treasury bills and bonds) as well as a constitutional monopoly on power. Still, these should be no excuse for running the government like a bumper-car derby, pushed and pulled by the random collisions of competing interests and factions.

The game of politics has almost completely overshadowed the hard work of governing. Most of the time of President Obama and his congressional counterparts is taken up by campaigning and fund-raising, posturing and messaging, negotiating and horse-trading on short-term transactions, and occasionally debating real issues of importance, such as government’s responsibility for supporting the poor and elderly. Yet none of this political activity substitutes for public management, which means the arduous task of defining goals, and then planning, strategizing, and budgeting toward them.

We’ve gotten so used to the breakdown of actual governing that the public is not aware of what’s gone. The prevailing interpretation is that our government is broken because of political gridlock. There is some truth to that, of course. Yet one of the main reasons that it’s gridlocked is that running the government is now viewed as nothing more than an extension of electoral politics, which in turn amounts to little more than a clash of competing interest groups that finance the politicians and try to keep their teams in power. If the government were approached differently, as a complex venture requiring serious
planning, budgeting, and strategy, the process itself of governing would actually rescue the
government from the current political trap that keeps it so dysfunctional.

Some government agencies still work brilliantly. NASA has had two recent triumphs this
year: the publication of important research findings from the mission to Mercury, and
more recently the remarkable exploration of Mars. NASA’s observation satellites have
become indispensable in deciphering potentially devastating human-induced changes in the
earth’s climate. And the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have recently scored another
triumph with the significant advance in deciphering of the noncoding sites of the human
genome. This is government at its finest: noncommercial activities with likely benefits of
inestimable value.

Yet NASA and the NIH are not the norm. The government is mostly led by appointees or
elected officials with little technical knowledge, less management experience, and an
expected job duration of a few years at most, often culminating in a lobbying position on
K Street after leaving government. The alternation of power between the two political
parties does almost nothing to compel better managerial performance.

As our problems have gotten more complex in a more global, technological, and
environmentally unstable era, the two parties have adopted increasingly naive ideological
positions to justify their chronic managerial failures. The Republicans’ answer, of course,
is that no management is needed: the market will do it. Their increasingly absurd elixir of
tax cuts and deregulation is supposed to solve any problem: poverty, pollution,
unemployment, health care, climate change, and even national security. Fortunately, it
looks like the public is not buying this nonsense.

Sadly, President Obama and the congressional Democrats have had their own mythology
that the economic problems will generally sort themselves out without long-term plans and
with short-term patches such as a bit more demand stimulus. Democrats rightly believe in
government, but they give little evidence that they believe in public management. The
stimulus legislation in 2009 was a $900 billion hodgepodge thrown together in a few
weeks, on the mistaken and panicked grounds that even a few months of delay for
planning would have meant a great depression. And even if fear itself could justify the
rushed first stimulus package, little can justify the continuing resort to short-run measures
—temporary tax cuts, temporary spending programs, repeated quantitative easing—that
have done almost nothing to restructure the economy. Keynesian stimulus policies have
become the substitute for strategy, planning, and implementation.

I am an Obama supporter, and hope against hope that with an election victory in
November, he will finally recognize that the country cannot bear four more years of improvisation. His reelection would offer a narrow window in which Obama can lay out real and long-term options for the country, before those options are overwhelmed by the deepening economic, social, and environmental crises wracking the US and the world. Consider three pivotal issues that will likely determine our country’s well-being for decades to come: energy, health care, and skills.

The world faces an enormously important set of choices in energy policy. While the modern world economy has been built on fossil fuels, we now know that a continued reliance on and expansion of carbon-based energy will be environmentally devastating. As if this needed any further evidence, the twelve months from July 2011 to July 2012 were the warmest twelve months in US history; the drought in the Midwest has been the worst in decades; and the global frequency of extreme weather events has increased by an order of magnitude during the past quarter-century. It is a core task of the federal government to help devise a long-term path away from carbon, involving a range of highly complex choices over federal land use in our deserts, drylands, and coasts; new national electrical grids; a possible new generation of nuclear power; the deployment of carbon capture and sequestration; the mass conversion from internal combustion to electric vehicles; and more.

Obama did well to appoint a Nobel laureate science manager, Steven Chu, to run the Department of Energy. But the White House political advisers have done far more to keep Chu out of the press than to empower him to lead the development of a science-based national energy plan. Obama has completely conflated energy politics and energy policy, first by treating a monstrous, lobby-infected cap-and-trade bill as a real energy policy, and then reverting to piecemeal regulations once the cap-and-trade bill (predictably) collapsed.

The controversy over health care is only a bit different. Obama deserves high marks for his perseverance and political bravery in pushing the expansion of health coverage to the poor and uninsured and to the uninsurable with prior conditions. Yet we know the political price that the White House paid to win that expanded coverage: a near preservation of the status quo on America’s shockingly wasteful and corrupted for-profit health care system. Obama traded away real efficiency-enhancing reforms to guarantee that the private health insurers and big pharma would not fight the health care legislation. A stunning recent report of the Institute of Medicine is telling: the lack of a decent health care system leads to a staggering cost of $750 billion each year in waste and fraud, roughly 5 percent of the national income.

The education sector is a third matter where the lack of serious federal planning and
management is taking a frightful toll. In every policy speech, Obama rightly says that only by educating our kids well do we have a chance to maintain living standards, compete with low-wage countries, and combat chronically high unemployment of poorly educated workers. The challenge is to ensure that all children, rich and poor, have access to the high-quality education, training, and job skills they need in a highly competitive global labor market. As Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia have shown, there are highly effective programs for early childhood development, state-run quality day care and preschool, and skills programs such as apprenticeships and targeted training that make a vast difference. Yet the US is cutting rather than expanding such programs.

Effective governments in well-run countries (such as Sweden, Norway, and Singapore to name three) prepare white papers, make plans, set targets, prepare medium-term budgets, and create innovative new agencies to address novel problems like low-carbon energy, efficient health care, and lifelong education, and they do so with a strong sense of the power and positive contribution of private business, which creates jobs, fosters innovation, and pays taxes. In a large federal system like the US, the needed plans, budgets, and implementing agencies will inevitably require close cooperation of federal, state, and local government officials, as well as partnerships of the public and private sectors (to improve job training or to create new public infrastructure).

The year 1981 was a milestone on the retreat from governance. In his inaugural address, Ronald Reagan famously declared that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” In the first presidential debate, through all of the smoke, mirrors, and half-truths, Mitt Romney’s commitment to the Reagan philosophy held strong and clear. His basic message was: cut tax rates and get the Feds out of the way, on energy, health, education, and more. As for the rest of the debate—on whose budget plan would do what and when—Romney certainly obfuscated more than clarified, and he ditched or disguised earlier positions to run (thankfully, in one sense at least) toward the middle from the extreme right.

Yet there was little solace in any apparent moderation. The man who declared, “I like coal,” without explaining the dire risks of climate change, who spent much of the debate disparaging the federal role in early-stage renewable energy, and who called for rollbacks of even the current inadequate federal programs for health care and education is not remotely the candidate who can or would lead the work of serious federal governance that we urgently need.

Obama is a very smart, honest, and ambitious leader. I am thoroughly relieved that he will most likely have a second chance to get governance right. But success will require a very
different second term. America’s deepest problems are structural, not cyclical. We need to reinvigorate government for the twenty-first century, and to put away childish things, just as Obama once promised to do. Obama has faced childish opposition, it is true, but grown-up leadership that eschews gimmicks could recapture the support he needs to begin leading the nation away from its current morass.