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The Presidency, Chained to the World

By **MATT BAI**

PRESIDENT OBAMA tried to seize the moment last week, at the traditional start of the midterm election season, by laying out a series of new economic proposals. And yet, at least politically, there was something almost tangential about Mr. Obama's latest initiatives, which included \$50 billion for infrastructure projects and an extension of the **Bush tax cuts** for all but the wealthiest Americans. The country's economic trajectory heading into November is probably unchangeable at this point, which means that nothing the president does now is likely to alter the grim data confronting the electorate.

Such powerlessness in the face of economic free fall has emerged as a hallmark of the modern presidency. While Mr. Obama is facing a more acute economic crisis moment than his predecessors, characterized by a near depression, the truth is that every president going back to **Jimmy Carter**, at one point or another, has had to campaign or govern in an environment dominated by the same cyclical and stubborn factors — **recession**, unemployment, rising energy costs. And so perhaps Mr. Obama's presidency, as it reaches its midway point, is best understood not in isolation, but rather as part of a longer and still undefined political moment.

The farther we get from presidencies, after all, the more we tend to view them as belonging to periods rather than individuals, as sometimes overlapping clusters along the country's historical continuum. We've had pre-Civil War-era and Reconstruction-era presidents, Industrial-era presidents and Depression-era presidents. The last discernible era belonged unmistakably to the cold war and can be said to have encompassed every president from **Harry Truman** through **Ronald Reagan**, all of whom served under the shadow of Armageddon.

When historians look back 50 years from now, in what era will they place Mr. Obama's presidency, and what does it say about the challenges he faces?

Historians have different ways of looking at the question. But in interviews, several hit on the same basic theme, which is that Mr. Obama and his immediate predecessors have been forced to contend with the erosion of self-sufficiency. In other words, until the end of the Soviet Union, America's economic and national security were largely self-determined, thanks to its manufacturing might and its ability to negotiate treaties with other states. But the advent of truly global markets, along with threats from non-state forces like **Al Qaeda**, changed all that. Now we

live in an integrated world where American jobs rely on the economic policies of governments in Asia or Latin America, while our security is subject to the whims of a cleric living in a cave.

In “Futurecast,” his book about this new age, the economist [Robert J. Shapiro](#) notes that the percentage of the world’s combined gross domestic product that is traded across borders rose to just under 30 percent by 2005, from 18 percent in 1990.

The Stanford historian, [David M. Kennedy](#), points out that for most of the 20th century, foreign trade accounted for roughly 10 percent of America’s G.D.P. That number started rising in the 1970s and now hovers at above 25 percent of G.D.P.

Mr. Kennedy said he suspected that his future fellow historians would classify our most recent presidencies as encapsulating an “era of globalization” in which “the whole concept of sovereignty is less meaningful than it once was.”

[John Lewis Gaddis](#), the Yale historian and pre-eminent scholar of the cold war period, calls the last decade or so an “age of regression,” meaning that the popular notion of a “unipolar” world — one in which the United States was supposed to have no serious economic or military competitors — gave way to the realization that the best America could aspire to was a stable balance of power.

All of this has significant ramifications for Mr. Obama and our concept of the presidency generally. The presidents whose statues ring the National Mall are those who were deemed not just wise and just, but also masters of our national destiny. We celebrate them as decisive men who, by making the right choices, seemed to define and control the events of their times.

What the historians are suggesting, however, is that the modern president may simply not be able to exercise that same firm grasp — or at least not most of the time. With global interdependence comes a certain lack of control, a vulnerability to disparate influences beyond our territorial borders that are less obvious and less easily answered than the launch of a Soviet satellite. And those influences, perhaps, directly undermine our ideal of what a president should be.

We are susceptible to presidents who talk with the self-assuredness of a Western movie sheriff or who, like Mr. Obama, seem to project an aura of celebrity or historic greatness. But we are disappointed when they inevitably turn out to be a less than omnipotent or, like [George W. Bush](#), fall victim to their own romantic notions of American power.

“This is what will end up defining this era of the presidency — the diminished power, the diminished authority, the diminished capacity to shape events,” says [Robert Dallek](#), the presidential biographer. “It’s the presidency in eclipse.”

Of course, such pessimism about what Mr. Dallek calls the “ungovernable qualities” of the moment are often overstated in difficult times. For a period in the 1980s, it was fashionable to say that New

York City, too, had become “ungovernable”; no one says that anymore. Pronouncements of the nation’s fading dominance rang out regularly in the years before the nation won the cold war. It would be unfair to suggest that Mr. Obama or any other president is simply awash in historical currents, unable to navigate himself or the country through challenging times.

What probably is true, however, is that even a president’s successes, in an age where a debt crisis in Greece can lead to a sudden panic on Wall Street, are likely to seem more uneven and less resounding to voters than, say, the completion of the Continental Railroad or the surrender of Japan. If you’re the American president, you still have the opportunity to lead in a crisis and ultimately prevail. But you probably shouldn’t expect any marble monuments for your trouble.