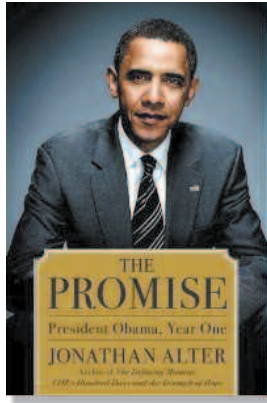


How Promising is Obama?

By M.H. Fryburg

Because things are so uncertain these days, you really need to know, and understand, what's happening in American politics. That's why you must read Jonathan Alter's new book, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*.

Alter, a *Newsweek* columnist and MSNBC/NBC News political pundit, elucidates, explains, and entertains in his history of President Obama's first year. It's an ambitious undertaking: How do you write about history that happened just last year?



The Promise succeeds because Alter understands politics and writes compellingly. Alter has known Barack Obama since long before he mesmerized the 2004 Democratic National Convention with his keynote address: Alter's late mother was active in Chicago politics and mentored Obama after he moved there to become a community organizer in the 80's.

Here are some of Alter's observations that will make you want to read his book:

- "[Obama] usually resisted any temptation to prove he was the smartest guy in the room, a crippling shortcoming in other politicians."
- "The reason presidents failed [Obama] believed, was patently obvious: they lost touch. That explained why...he made sure to read...ten letters from average Americans each day."
- "[Obama] loathed ...the 'talking points' of modern politics, the predictable one-liners. [But]... sound bites ... frame the president's message and imprint it in the public consciousness."

You will notice that the quotes, above, are all about how Obama thinks and manages his administration, rather than about policy. That's because Obama inherited a huge pile of complex and interrelated problems: the economy was in a free-fall; the housing boom had turned to bust; GM, Chrysler, and state governments, were broke and desperate; unemployment was really bad and getting worse; and America was fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

That's why understanding how Obama thinks, and how he manages, is so important. As Alter explains, Obama's accomplishments, so far, have been extraordinary: he, and Congressional Democrats, passed a stimulus bill that "kept a recession from becoming a depression," passed health care reform that could really work, and passed financial regulatory reform to protect consumers.

The Obamans' political problem, however, is that the new laws they passed are complicat-

ed and many "Average Joes" and "Average Janes" won't feel affected by those new laws for years to come. An economy that didn't crater is like a dog that didn't bark: it impresses no one, except those, like Alter, who understand how close the recession came to becoming a depression.

Which brings us to the obvious question: What should Obama do next?

For starters, Obama needs to convince the majority of Americans who have health insurance that Obama-care won't raise their premiums. According to Vinny DeMarco, who runs the Baltimore-based non-profit Health Care for All (www.healthcareforall.com), Obama-care will "make health insurance more affordable by reducing the 'hidden health care tax' that those with insurance pay for treating the uninsured, which increases health insurance premiums by about \$1,000 per year."

DeMarco explains that, by requiring health insurers to pay for certain preventive care, Obama-care will help prevent illnesses (like diabetes), or catch them early, when they're easier and cheaper to treat. Obama-care could thus increase for-profit health insurers' profits.

Another group that benefits hugely from Obama-care, and doesn't know it, are 18–26 year olds, who voted overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008 (and are likely to skip voting in the November elections): Obama-care allows children up to age 26 to stay on their parents' health insurance. According to DeMarco, who persuaded Maryland to raise its tobacco tax and use the proceeds to expand health care for the uninsured, 18–26 year olds, as a group, tend to be uninsured, because fewer entry-level jobs offer health insurance, and individual policies are too expensive.

"Those in Congress who voted for President Obama's health care reform law will benefit" in this year's elections, according to DeMarco, who is now campaigning to persuade Marylanders to support a "dime a drink" hike in the alcohol tax, and use the proceeds to expand state programs that provide health care for the uninsured.

Alter, after effusively praising Obama-care in *The Promise*, now thinks that Obama-care doesn't help the Democrats in the mid-term elections (see Q&A with Alter, below).

What's missing from *The Promise* is more about Obama, the man. Alter wrote a political history, not a personal one. Alter should have included a short Obama biography -- so we could better understand the President's motivations -- and he should have written more about what he thinks Obama should have done differently, yesterday, and what he should do going forward.

Alter addressed these points in his cover story in the September 6th issue of *Newsweek*, writing that Obama is "still too professorial to boil down the choice for voters to its essence:

rebuild America or more tax cuts for the wealthy." Alter explained that Obama's biggest problem is "the political story he's failing to tell—the story of a government committed to rescuing the American middle class."

Alter should include his *Newsweek* analysis in the next edition of *The Promise*. He should also tell us more about Michelle: is the First Lady more like a discreet Nancy Reagan, or more like Lady Bird Johnson? Michelle is so fascinating – smart, poised, eloquent, athletic, a doting mother who is exceptionally close with her own mother, and so very, very tall – and yet we learn so little about her from Alter (except that she kept her cool when the French president's wife bragged about sex in the Elysee Palace).

We shall see how the Obama presidency turns out. In the meantime, you must read Jon Alter's new book, and his column in *Newsweek*.

Here is the Q&A from an email interview with Jon Alter:

What is President Obama's greatest political weakness, and how could he best ameliorate that weakness?

Obama's greatest weakness is that he has not forged a strong connection to the American middle class. He can reestablish it with a strong "Rebuild America" campaign.

Some have said that Obama needs acting lessons, especially for speaking extemporaneously. What do you think?

No, acting lessons aren't necessary. If he seems to be acting too much, he loses his great asset—his authenticity.

How will "Obama-care" – the "Affordable Care Act" health care reform bill that Obama signed into law – change health insurance for Americans who already have private health insurance or Medicare?

It gives them the security of knowing their health insurance company can't screw them without consequences.

How should Congressional Democrats who voted for Obama-care run on that issue, this year?

They should ignore health care. It's a good thing but not a winner politically.

What results do you predict for this year's elections?

Democrats will hold the Senate and possibly lose the House.

How does the Obama family like living in the White House?

I'm told the Obama family is happy and well adjusted to the White House.

How have things changed at Newsweek since Sidney Harman bought the magazine last month?

Dr. Harman hasn't formally taken over yet so things at *Newsweek* are in flux.

How do you choose the items for the "Conventional Wisdom" section in Newsweek?

For the CW we kind of sniff the news to decide on whom we are going to cover.

If you had a personalized ["vanity"] license plate, what would it say?

Nothing comes readily to mind.