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## **Obama's Leadership Style African American Leadership**

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**BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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I do not understand those people who criticize the President for taking his time to get public policy right, when much of the misery that has come to visit their lives is a result of public policy, in both the domestic and international arenas, formulated by the previous administration, that was founded on distorted information, tunnel vision and hasty judgment that produced ill-conceived decisions.

In fact, Vice President Dick Chaney said that with respect to the time being taken to arrive at a policy for Afghanistan that President Obama was "dithering." But President George Bush's response to 9/11 was to trash careful deliberation and hastily to proceed to initiate a conventional war against Iraq, when it was not at all certain that this kind of war would lead to the destruction of Al Queda or the capture of Osama bin Laden. And despite Bush's failure to achieve his policy goals, he never rendered his decision to the kind of deliberative process Barack Obama is using.

As a former attorney, Obama's style is the lawyerly pursuit of decision-making with respect to Afghanistan, initiating an open deliberative process that includes all of the relevant voices. With patient accumulation of the evidence, he can hear the arguments selling pros and cons on various scenarios and then come to a conclusion that is enriched by insight, intelligence, and hard data from it all. He has asked for a study of

how some of the scenarios would be perceived by the people of Afghanistan, not just assume, as Chaney did, that America would be perceived as heroes, but including them in an assessment whether America could achieve its objectives.

Obama and Bush, however, have one thing in common with respect to war in the Middle East; they pursued these projects on an unquestionable premise. Bush had retribution for 9/11 as his goal; Obama has announced that the war in Afghanistan is "a war of necessity." In both cases, the existence of an unchallengeable premise could lead to disaster, so in Obama's case, the truth of the premise itself also needs to be part of the deliberations.

Part of the reason for taking time to deliberate is to respect the application of resources that are important to the style of objective reasoning. The Obama administration has sought to return to legitimizing science and thoughtful studies of unbiased institutions, not just narrow conservative ideology, as the source of its decision making.

But while deliberation in the context of diversity is positive, it is also frustrating because it often does not yield decisions as clear cut as those using ideology. This is illustrated by Obama's dance with the Public Option in the health care policy debate, where he first supported it to get his constituency behind the health care fight; then he abandoned it when his aim was to attract Republicans to his side; then he split the difference when polls showed a majority of the American people supported it. Here, he was using not just objective deliberation, but a strong dose of pragmatic politics. I can hear Rahm Emanuel shouting that while it's nice to lead from principle, Obama must keep his eyes on the larger objective of coming out of the health care debate with something – anything they can face elections with in 2010 and 2012.

Presidential leadership is complicated by the fact that any president must perform effectively in the three-legged stool of the Executive Branch, Congress and the public to get much done. In the Congress, President Obama can play a different game of leadership, giving the ball to the party leaders and supporting their calls when they are consistent with his political strategy. However, as the health care bills come out of both the House and Senate, there is a moment when he will have to exercise decisive leadership in the conference and then we will see whether pragmatic politics or principle will hold sway.

As leader of the Executive branch his style also permeates the agencies under his direction and it is likely to be here that one can get the clearest sense of his style of leadership. One of the lessons that we must learn from the past, is that for a nation as large as this one, with as many critical roles it has to play, leadership style is vital to the President's success and that of the nation.

The public likes him, but is lukewarm on his handling of some issues. Whether his deliberative style changes will depend upon the damage conservative Democrats and Republicans are able to do to his agenda.

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