As President Barack Obama endures tough congressional midterm elections, Americans’ volatile national mood and their yearning for leadership could redeem his presidency — or at least win him re-election. The three presidents he most models himself on — Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, and Ronald Reagan — were shellacked in midterm elections before winning re-election — although another president with whom he is compared, Jimmy Carter, lost. History is not destiny. But there are leadership lessons Obama can learn from his predecessors.

The United States has travelled a long way from the euphoria of election night 2008 to the crankiness of the 2010 midterm elections. Even President Barack Obama’s most ardent supporters agree that the turnaround in popular support he has experienced has been dramatic, unprecedented, unnerving The Yes We Can candidate of 2008 who seemingly could do no wrong is now seen by millions as the president who can do no right, leading a sobered No We Can’t citizenry, many of whom have lost jobs, lost hope for the future and lost faith in the man who seemed so promising as a leader just two years ago. 

Here is Barack Obama’s challenge. He is not only confronting two wars, one ongoing economic mess and countless other cultural, social, diplomatic, ideological and political crises. He is not only being measured against the presidents who preceded him, some of whom are encased in legend, setting stratospheric standards for any worthy successor. He is also competing against himself and the impossibly high hopes his election unleashed. 

It is still worth remembering Barack Obama’s shining moment in November 2008, even amid soaring unemployment, the Afghanistan quagmire, Tea Party demagoguery, anger over the deficits, anxiety about the new health care legislation, fear of renewed Islamist terrorism and Fox News shout-show host Glenn Beck’s attempt to hijack the civil rights legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King. The library of books published about Obama’s brilliant 2008 presidential campaign all serve to remind us just how unlikely his victory was. Back in spring 2004, before his sensational Democratic National Convention debut, few Americans had heard of this self-described skinny guy with a funny name. And his name was so strange that the first time in 2004 President George W. Bush saw a Democrat visiting the White House with an Obama button, Bush, genuinely confused, peered close and asked, “Osama?” Moreover, no African American had ever been elected president, and at the time, most people were quite sure that the Democratic nominee would be the first woman with a serious shot at becoming president of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton. 

The fact that Obama nevertheless won, and that his victory triggered a national orgy of high-fiving and fist-bumping, among rich and poor, Republicans and Democrats, Obamians and McCainiacs, blacks and whites, reminds us that national moods are variable and that Americans in particular are the ever-believing people, constantly searching for salvation, perpetually primed to rally around a great white or now black hope. Great American leaders have always understood this addiction to redemption. That, frankly, was part of Obama’s appeal and part of his plan. Obama surveyed the carnegage of the George W. Bush presidency. He could have concluded then, as many are concluding now, that Americans had lost their capacity to believe. Bush had become the presidential master of disaster, mired in Iraq, buffeted by Hurricane Katrina, mismanaging a teetering economy that ultimately cratered just weeks before election day.

**OBAMA AT MIDTERM: GRADING ON A PRESIDENTIAL CURVE**

Gil Troy
Yet Obama understood that Americans would respond to a message that they could do better, that their best days were not behind them, that America remained a land of promise. Obama successfully channelled Franklin D. Roosevelt’s promise in 1932, offering a New Deal to the American people. He eloquently evoked John F. Kennedy’s optimistic vision from the 1960s of a New Frontier. He echoed Jimmy Carter’s post-Vietnam and Watergate vows in 1976 of “I’ll never lie to you” and “Why not the best?” He updated and broadened Ronald Reagan’s appealing dream of a Morning in America, making it Democratic, liberal, multicultural. And, like Bill Clinton in 1992, he became the Man from Hope. In both the bruising primary campaign against Hillary Rodham Clinton and the general election campaign against John McCain, the man became the message, embodying Americans’ dreams. By simply electing Obama as the first African-American president, Americans could redeem themselves and their country, demonstrating their open-mindedness, optimism, and faith in the future.

As Obama navigates through what is looking like a tough congressional-midterm election season for Democrats, he should remember that both the volatility of the national mood and the credulity of the American public could redeem his presidency or at least secure him a second term. In fact, the three presidents he most models himself on — Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bill Clinton and, believe it or not, Ronald Reagan — were shellacked in midterm elections before achieving convincing re-election victories.

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While every modern president since Franklin Roosevelt has compared himself and been compared to Franklin Roosevelt, the attempts to link Roosevelt and Obama have been particularly intense. During the transition, Obama publicized the fact that he was reading up on Roosevelt’s famous, transformative first hundred days. That tidbit boosted the sales of Jonathan Alter’s book on the subject, The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope. Alter returned the favour in his recent book, The Promise: President Obama, Year One, writing a more than 400-page valentine to the current chief executive, sprinkled with admiring comparisons between Obama and Roosevelt.

Beyond all this cozy Washington posturing, the comparison emphasizes the sobering economic conditions that greeted Roosevelt as well as Obama on their respective inauguration days, and the soaring ambitions both Democrats brought to the White House. Obama’s chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, said a crisis is a terrible thing to waste; indeed, Obama has governed by that motto. In pushing through a health care reform bill, along with dozens of other significant reforms, Obama has revealed his desire to be the most consequential president since Franklin Roosevelt.

Unlike Obama, Roosevelt was able to shape more of a mandate for change in his first term. Both Obama and Roosevelt were blessed to succeed unpopular and failed predecessors. But it has become clear that Obama basically won a GO-George election, a Get Out George W. Bush contest. His plumeting polls suggest that Americans are not looking for an updated New Deal. Many of Obama’s reforms have worried the public. Most dramatically, of course, Obama’s challenge remains the economy, stupid. For all his creativity, despite many legislative accomplishments, Obama is still saddled with a listing economy and devastatingly high unemployment figures.

Obama can only look back and envy Roosevelt’s experiences in the 1934 midterm elections, which Roosevelt and the Democrats cleverly turned into a referendum on Roosevelt and the New Deal. Rallying around their confident, creative new president, American voters gave him a mandate for change. Nine new Democratic senators were elected, giving Democrats 59 of the 100 senators, and nine new Democrats added to the already strong majority of 313 in the House of Representatives. By contrast, polls suggest, Obama and the Democrats in 2010 are working hard to hold onto the Senate and may not even secure a bare majority in the House.

Obama might learn by looking at the 1938 midterm elections, which shook up Roosevelt and the Democrats. After Roosevelt won reelection in 1936 by strong margins too, he — and his fellow liberals — overstepped. The New Republic called Roosevelt’s re-election victory the greatest revolution in our political history. The liberal political writer Max Lerner rhapsodized: “Mr. Roosevelt is now, as never before, a colossus straddling the American world.”

Believing his press clippings, feeling overconfident, Roosevelt tried packing the Supreme Court by adding one new justice for each justice over 70 years old, to a maximum of 15 (from the traditional 9). Americans saw this as an affront to the Constitution, and the proposal failed. Unbowed, Roosevelt then put his muscle behind a number of challenges to conservative Democrats, especially in the South, who had been fighting the New Deal. Again, Roosevelt failed. In addition, Americans struggled through a renewed economic crisis as the recession of 1937-38 wiped out many of the gains some had enjoyed thanks to the launching of the New Deal. On election day 1938, the Democrats lost seven seats in the Senate and a whopping 72 in the House.

Roosevelt learned from this debacle. He respected Americans’ constitutional conservatism and from then on usually fought party rivals with more
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Glenn Beck could help re-elect Barack Obama, making him appear the mature candidate once again. In 1996, the Republican Party gave Clinton and the Democrats the gift of Bob Dole, unintentionally smoothing the way for Clinton’s victory.

Obama may be banking on following the trail of a Republican president, Ronald Reagan. In his book The Audacity of Hope, Obama makes it clear that he watched Reagan carefully as president and admired his leadership abilities but not his ideology. During the primary campaign, Obama infuriated Hillary Rodham Clinton and her husband by praising Reagan as a transformational leader, while suggesting that Clinton’s little policy Band-Aids did not measure up. Like Obama, Reagan entered the White House during a time of economic crisis and initially watched the numbers tank. Reagan’s dramatic assault on Big Government first looked like a big flop. By late 1981 and early 1982, Democrats were criticizing the Reagan Recession and anticipating that Reagan and his revolution would be a one-term wonder.

During the midterm elections of 1982, Republicans lost 26 seats in the House. The stench of failure hangs over the Reagan White House, the New York Times claimed at midterm. With unemployment high, national morale low and the administration seemingly adrift, Reaganism was looking suspiciously like Carterism with the focused, class-bound anguish of unemployment substituting for the broadly shared pain of inflation. Two Democrats, former vice-president Walter Mondale and Senator John Glenn, defeated Reagan in presidential trial heats. The Washington Post columnist David Broder and others declared Reaganism dead.

Ultimately, the resilience of the American economy resurrected Reagan’s presidency. The former actor’s timing was impeccable. Coming onstage during an economic crisis, he watched it get worse, only to see the boom begin by 1983, in time for his 1984 re-election campaign. Reagan then framed the cyclical upswing as Morning in America, the vindication of Reaganomics, and his revolution took off.

This time around, the American economy has lagged longer than many analysts expected. Still, even if it languishes for another year or year and a half, as long as it recovers in 2012 Obama will have bragging rights and a strong shot at re-election.

Of course, not all presidents who endured midterm losses have experienced a comeback. The Democrats under Jimmy Carter lost 3 Senate seats and 15 House seats during the 1978 midterm elections. Carter went on to lose the presidency to Ronald Reagan, amid high inflation, high interest rates and the great humiliation America endured during the prolonged Iranian hostage crisis. Like Obama, Carter had a meteoric rise from obscurity to the presidency. Like Obama, Carter was a golden boy who had always succeeded at everything he tried, until he entered the Oval Office. And like Obama, Carter was a thoughtful, bookish, earnest do-gooder who found it difficult to reassure Americans that America’s greatest days were still ahead.

Ironically, the great liberal lion Ted Kennedy helped trigger the Reagan Revolution by running against Carter for the Democratic nomination in 1980. In fact, in the last half-century, the only presidents who have lost re-election races entered after being bruised by a primary battle. George H. W. Bush in 1992 was weakened by Pat Buchanan. Carter was weakened by Kennedy in 1980. And Gerald Ford was weakened by Ronald Reagan. The single most important thing Obama needs to do to secure re-election is keep his party united behind him, as it is. The single most effective thing Republicans could do to weaken Obama would be to secretly support some left-wing Democratic dissident, a Ralph Nader, a Dennis Kucinich, who could somehow hurt Obama in a primary or two, thus puncturing his aura of invincibility while forcing Obama to swing left and lose the centre.

From the start of his administration, Barack Obama’s presidency has paralleled both Ronald Reagan’s and Jimmy Carter’s paths. Many Obama critics see him replicating Jimmy Carter’s ways, wooing America’s enemies, neglecting America’s allies, telegraphing weakness at home and abroad. Obama, on the other hand, wants to be the Democratic Reagan, pressing the reset button on the Reagan Revolution, making government effective, relevant and popular again.

History is not destiny. Barack Obama ultimately will follow his own path. But there is a reason why White House library shelves are crowded with presidential biographies. Presidents understand that there is much to be learned by studying their predecessors’ successes and failures. The record shows that historical forces make a huge difference, be it the state of the economy, the actions of rivals or the moves of foreign states. But each outside factor offers a president a leadership opportunity. Successful presidents are not lucky; but it does take great skill to turn dumb luck into lasting good fortune, as Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton frequently did.

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Obama is a highly intelligent and competent person, and his priorities shaped many of the important changes that have occurred, both in America, and in the wider world, during his Presidency. Unfortunately, as will be demonstrated here, he happens to be also extremely dishonest, and very skillfully so: heâ€™s the most skillful American politician since the time of Ronald Reagan, and perhaps the most deceptive person ever to occupy the White House. This is also the reason why many of Presidential candidate Obamaâ€™s campaign promises on the basis of which he had won first the Democratic nomination over Hillary Clinton and John Edwards in 2008, and then went on to beat Republican John McCain