

### Where has all the goodwill gone?

By Holly Fechner

Barack Obama rocketed to the US presidency on the promise of 'change' and he assumed office with significant Democrat majorities in Congress.

His party won almost 60 per cent of the seats in the House of Representatives. With 58 seats in the Senate, the Democrats were just two votes shy of defeating Republican filibusters – a powerful procedural tool of the Senate minority party. The conditions were ripe for the President to champion major legislative changes.

The President's agenda was robust: revive the US economy, pass comprehensive healthcare legislation, raise the standing of the country around the world, pass legislation to reduce greenhouse gases and spur the growth of clean energy, and re-regulate financial institutions. He also promised to change how business is conducted in Washington by working across party lines and minimising the role of special interests and lobbyists in policymaking.

At the beginning of 2009, many economists thought the US was on the brink of an economic downturn that could rival the 1930s Great Depression. The economy had been in a tailspin under President George W Bush, but the full effects were not clear until just before Mr Obama was sworn in.

Each US president takes office with a significant amount of political capital to spend on high priority issues. Mr Obama was forced by circumstance to spend his capital on passing a large economic stimulus bill – the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – and additional legislation to stabilise financial institutions. These bills were passed with lightning speed, but the toll they took on the President's ability to move the remainder of his

lofty agenda was not clear until months later.

Major victories followed in quick succession in the first six months of the new administration: fair pay legislation to make it easier to sue employers, healthcare coverage for millions of children, a bill to allow the Food & Drug Administration to regulate tobacco, legislation creating enhanced penalties for hate crimes based on race, national origin and gender.

In April, Senator Arlen Specter switched parties, and in late June Al Franken was sworn in as senator from Minnesota, after a highly-contested election and recount, to give President Obama his 60th vote. The President's clear legislative priority was reforming the US healthcare system. He advocated a series of measures to lower healthcare costs and cover a significant portion of the 47 million Americans without healthcare coverage. Many Democratic members of Congress, including one of the President's strongest and most influential supporters, Senator Edward Kennedy, championed this goal.

#### Mood change

Congress responded by devoting months to hearings and debate on healthcare legislation. The House of Representatives narrowly passed a comprehensive bill last November and the Senate answered with the Christmas Eve passage of its own bill. Since then, the President and leaders of both bodies of Congress worked hard at reconciling the differences.

While Congress and the President were enmeshed in healthcare legislation, the mood of the country began to turn. Last November, the Democrats lost two critical governorship races in Virginia and New Jersey. With unemployment hovering above 10 per cent and budget deficits as far as the eye can see, the

American people were scared and angry about the economy. Polls show that the focus on healthcare and the lack of attention on jobs turned voters, particularly those independent voters not affiliated with a political party, against the Democrats.

And on 19 January – just as the President and Congress had resolved one of the stickiest issues delaying final passage of the healthcare bill – a special election was held in Massachusetts to fill the seat of Senator Kennedy, who died last August. In a stunning upset that reverberated across the country, Republican Scott Brown defeated Democrat Martha Coakley, thereby denying the latter's party the 60th Senate vote it needed to pass a final healthcare bill and send it to the President.

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#### In limbo

As a result, President Obama's legislative priority remains in limbo. He and key members of Congress say they will pare back the comprehensive bill and pass parts of it in piecemeal fashion, but it is too soon to know whether they will succeed.

The remainder of the President's domestic agenda has not fared much better. Although the House of Representatives narrowly passed cap-and-trade climate change legislation last June, the Senate is unlikely to vote on a bill before the 2010 election. Re-regulation of financial institutions is bogged down in committee and has not been voted on by either the House or Senate.

By historical standards, President Obama has a long list of accomplishments, but by the standards that he set for himself, he falls short after one year in office.

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