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OPINION

President Obama at One Year

A good start, but much more to do

BY MARC H. MORIAL

After one year in office, America's first Blackberry President has found that in the age of tweeting, texting and daily polling, there is no shortage of those eager to judge his performance based on fragments of information that may not always be accurate. We will resist the urge to join the fray. No grades from me for Mr. Obama. But that does not mean we have no opinion on his first year as President.

Any assessment of President Obama's first year must take into account the big mess he inherited on day one - two wars, a great and growing recession, the imminent collapse of our financial system and auto industry, a dysfunctional Jus-



Justice Department, an unsustainable health care system and job losses that were being measured in the hundreds of thousands each month.

Clearly, our ship of state was spinning dangerously out of control. And clearly, President Obama has kept it from sinking.

Our financial system is on the rebound. The auto industry was saved. The Justice Department, under Attorney General Eric Holder, is now focused more on protecting citizen rights than political privilege.

And while solutions to rising unemployment continue to elude us, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, during 2009, monthly job losses moderated substantially. They shrank from an average of

691,000 a month in the first quarter to an average loss of 69,000 a month in the fourth quarter.

So, I suggest we slow down and not judge the President based on one year of emergency course corrections. In my view, he should be judged at the end of his first term by the famous question Ronald Reagan posed during his 1980 campaign: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" One thing is clear: We won't be better off if we don't all roll up our sleeves and remember that "government of the people," means we all have work to do.

We won't be better off if the minority party in Congress continues to vote strictly down party lines in opposition to everything the President wants to do - from passing a stimulus plan to health care reform. We won't be better off if we don't take decisive steps to reduce rising unemployment which now stands

at 10 percent overall and 16.2 percent for African Americans.

We won't be better off unless we heed the words of New York Times columnist Bob Herbert who recently wrote, "Without a dramatic new intervention by the federal government the poverty rate for African American children could eventually approach a heart-stopping 50 percent...already a third of black children are living in poverty."

One year ago, the election of America's first black president was a symbol of this country's evolving racial maturity. But symbolism is not substance. While we applaud the President for moving the country from the brink of disaster, we have a lot more work to do before he and all of us can claim that we are better off than the day he took office.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

A Stronger Community Foundation

Vote protects the most vulnerable

BY CHARLES SHEKETOFF

When voters passed Measures 66 and 67 last week, it was good for Oregon, good for our economy and good for working and unemployed Oregonians. Oregonians have taken an important step toward an economy that works for everyone.

Our "yes" vote says that Oregonians will stand up and protect the foundations of our community -- our

schools, our health and human services, our public safety system. Our "yes" vote says that when an economic storm arrives, we will stand together and protect the most vulnerable among us. Oregon voters showed the country how to put a state on a sound fiscal path to recovery.

Oregonians rightly rejected a well-heeled corporate campaign of fear and deception. While many Oregon

businesses are good community citizens, others apparently wanted to shirk their responsibility to pay their fair share for the vital public services upon which their success depends. Hopefully corporate Oregon learned important lessons: Don't lie to voters. Don't be greedy. Support the common good.

As important as Measures 66 and 67 are for the well-being of our state, they are only one of several reforms necessary for creating a fiscally sound tax system based on ability to pay.

The Legislature should take the "yes" vote as permission to curb the fiscally irresponsible kicker that primarily benefits the most well-to-do, so that Oregon can better save for rainy days.

Let's hope corporate Oregon was sincere when it said it supports kicker reform and building up the Oregon Rainy Day Fund. If corporate Oregon wants to restore its credibility, now it must back up its campaign rhetoric with money and use its lobbying muscle in support of kicker reform.

Oregon still needs corporate tax disclosure to figure out how to best

reform the corporate tax system. We need to celebrate those corporations that responsibly pay taxes and we need to shed light on the loophole lobby and corporate freeloaders who shift the tax burden onto households. Corporate tax disclosure will create the climate change Oregon needs to accomplish long-overdue, long-lasting reform.

Oregon still needs to address the problem that low-income Oregonians are asked to contribute more to state and local taxes, as a share of their income, than any other income group. The problem will worsen when the new gas tax kicks in, so the legislature needs to act to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to help working families with children make ends meet.

And Oregon still needs to close tax loopholes and put an end to unnecessary tax subsidies that rob Oregonians of funding for the public structures that benefit all Oregonians, not just the privileged few.

Charles Sheketoff is executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

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The Portland Observer Established 1970
USPS 959-680

4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PUBLISHER: Charles H. Washington

EDITOR: Michael Leighton

DISTRIBUTION MANAGER: Mark Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

WEB EDITOR: Jake Thomas

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Portland Observer,
PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208

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