What's the Matter with Obama?

By Mel Lavine

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People are asking, what's the matter with President Obama? Where's the fight? The passion? Or as Drew Westen, a professor of psychology at Emory University, put it in a lead Op/Ed piece in Sunday's New York Times, "What happened to Obama?" In sum, where's the beef?

On the day of Obama's inauguration, Westen writes, he had a sinking feeling. "People were scared and angry. The economy was spinning in reverse." Yet Obama failed to step up to the challenge and make the most of an historic moment. For instance, writes Westen, he should "have made clear that the problem wasn't tax-and-spend liberalism or the deficit." In fact, a deficit didn't exist "until George W. Bush gave nearly $2 trillion in tax breaks largely to the wealthiest Americans and squandered 1 trillion in two wars."

Obama also might have framed a "compelling" argument to counter the reactionary voices on

the right. He might have asserted that the fault in our economy is “not due to spending on things like the pensions on firefighters” but to a system that is dominated by people “who can afford to buy influence” and re-write the rules “so they can cut themselves progressively larger slices of the American pie while paying less of their fair share of it.”

But Obama made no such speech, says the professor, and an opportunity was lost. In the two and a half years since he has been too eager to compromise, and “takes both sides of every issue.” What’s more, “instead of indicting the people whose recklessness wrecked the economy, he put them in charge of it.”

As do many commentators in these hard times, he cites Franklin D. Roosevelt as an example of courageous leadership. “In similar circumstances,” Westen maintains, Roosevelt “offered Americans a promise to use the power of his office to make their lives better and to keep trying until he got it right.”

As anyone familiar with this column knows, I am an FDR fan, but I think the professor lost sight of the differences in biography. FDR was perhaps the most qualified person in history to be president. He was a state legislator, the assistant secretary of the navy during World War I, a vice presidential candidate in 1920, a governor of New York, the most populous state in the country, for two terms, half of that time during the Depression, before he was elected president. He was the scion of a distinguished American family, well-to-do, widely traveled and conversant with world leaders and leading American politicians before ever running for the White House.

By contrast Obama has one of the slimmest of resumes, an unremarkable state legislator in Illinois and a U.S. senator, with no notable legislation bearing his name. He was a law professor but without great distinction. He was a community organizer but he never ran a city, or a state, or a business. Yet his resume is broader than Lincoln's, our greatest president. Lincoln served a short time in the Illinois legislature and was elected to Congress but lasted only one term.

What is not computed in the professor's essay is the elephant in the room, the question of race. Judging by the din from the radical right, the bugaboo that has stalked American history since the first slave ship came ashore in the New World is alive and well. The first African American president in history has trials neither Lincoln nor Roosevelt could ever have contemplated.

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