

Given his administration's policy fumbles this year, President Obama may be happy that 2013 is nearly over.

*This year has not been a good one for President Barack Obama and his administration. **James D. Boys** takes a look at 2013's policy fumbles, which look even worse in light of the promise brought by his re-election barely one year ago. He writes that the difficulties with the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, the lack of direction on Syria and foreign policy in general, as well as lost battles on gun control and the government's shutdown are all likely to harm Obama's political legacy. Elections and continuing Congressional gridlock in 2014 may see the President move even further into lame duck territory.*



So the good news for the President of the United States is that there are only ever 365 days in a year. This is as good as the news has been for Obama in a very long time. At least he can shortly put the year behind him and try to begin afresh in 2014. Of course, 2013 started out so very differently.

Last Christmas, Obama was sitting pretty, having been returned for a second term in office and confident, no doubt, in his ability to forge ahead with an aggressive legislative agenda with which to cement his political legacy. So much so that he took the unusual step of working policy into his [second inaugural address](#). Usually such announcements would wait until the State of the Union, but there was no holding back Obama last January, pumped up perhaps by the presence of Beyonce, who stole the show with her rendition of the [Star Spangled Banner](#). Yet her performance symbolised what was to become a pattern for the Obama presidency; no sooner had the world finished marvelling at the beautiful presentation, it learnt that it was all hollow: The words had been faked and the [song had been mimed](#). Beyonce, it appears, had not had time to rehearse, so she faked it. How apt.

In the months that followed, the president lost battles on [gun control](#), despite the Sandy Hook massacre, immigration reform stalled in the House of Representatives, he failed to prevent sweeping spending cuts from being enacted in March, his vice president was required to prevent the nation plunging off a fiscal cliff of its own making, and calm tensions in the South China Sea, the federal government [closed for 17 days](#), his administration was rocked by revelations from Edward Snowden and his foreign policy [left for dead in Syria](#), where he has been outclassed by Vladimir Putin. To end the year, his



Credit: The White House

signature health care policy has become a running joke, with millions unable to register, millions more not wishing to register, and many wondering if they were [deliberately lied to](#) ahead of the 2012 election by a president who insisted that 'if they liked their health care provider, they could keep it.' [Period](#).

It is difficult to conclude which of these incidents has been the most damaging. Domestically, Obama has struggled to get buy-in to his signature policy initiative, the [Affordable Healthcare Act](#). Designed to ensure that all Americans have access to health care, it was specially initiated to aid the poorest in American society. But then the

Healthcare.gov web site on which Americans were meant to enrol failed to work and no one appears to have been held accountable. More problematic is a question all too infrequently asked: If the system is designed to aid the poorest Americans, how will they get access to a computer in the first place?

While one computer system was refusing to work, several others appeared to be working overtime, as [IRS agents were accused of targeting conservative groups](#) and the [National Security Agency](#) was revealed to have been doing things with computers that may account for no one being in a hurry to enter personal information into the health care web site if and when it is ever fully operational. The revelations of Edward Snowden have caused irreparable harm to Obama's international standing as the Anti-Bush and revealed the propensity for continuity, rather than change, between administrations, no matter how well intended the candidate may be.

Internationally, Obama appeared to have failed to understand the key lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Don't put your opponent in a corner) and inadvertently painted himself into a corner with his infamous 'red-line' remark on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, which he and his administration spent much of 2013 attempting to [wriggle out of](#). Once evidence emerged of a deadly chemical weapons attack in the summer, the wriggling became so intense that the Commander in Chief had to use the fact that the British would not participate as a rationale for US inaction. With only 9% US public support for intervention in Syria, [Obama was saved further humiliation](#) by the most unlikely duo: Ed Miliband and Vladimir Putin.

On issue after issue, the administration has punted, fumbled and repeatedly dropped the ball. Many have highlighted the 'obstructionist' nature of the Republican controlled House of Representative. But guess what? The US political system was not established to make life easy, least of all for the president, whoever he is. It was designed to frustrate. So when, in September, Obama lamented that '[One faction of one party in one house of Congress in one branch of government doesn't get to shut down the entire government,](#)' he was missing the point. That is exactly what the constitution allows for, in order to prevent any element of the US government, be it the Senate, the House or the president, from being able to push through legislation that has failed to gain a consensus. As a former teacher of constitutional law, it is quite unforgivable for Obama to have thought otherwise.

As 2013 draws to an end and the First Family attempt to gain some rest and recuperation in Hawaii, Obama may believe that 2014 can't get any worse. However, this is not a given. [2014 is an election year](#) and one in which the healthcare roll out will need to be completed. If he thought that dealing with congress in an off year was tough, he may find it easy going compared to the coming months. Oh, and lest anyone had forgotten, once those elections in November are complete, all eyes turn to the presidential election of 2016 and Obama's journey to lame duck territory will be complete.

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