

Barack Obama's irresponsible behaviour... Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 27 November 2014.

BARACK Obama's implicit attack on the Abbott government over climate change will do more long-term damage to the US-Australia alliance than is commonly thought. There is no need to rehearse the gratuitous nature of the speech, Obama's failure to tell his Australian hosts what he was going to say in advance — as the most elementary courtesy, much less alliance solidarity, would require — the bad manners of not acknowledging the Governor-General, and the determined effort to embarrass his hosts by referring so crudely to the Australian debate and using, and misusing, iconic elements in that debate.

All of that is more or less accepted by all serious analysts in Australia and the US. But it is worth looking at the long-term consequence of the speech, as well as locating it within the syndrome of dysfunction, introspection and isolation which is overtaking the Obama White House.

These factors are all too evident in the sacking of Chuck Hagel as Defence Secretary, the failure on Iran and unilateral presidential actions on illegal immigration.

Take each in turn before returning to the alliance question.

Obama has had a pretty bad relationship with each of his defence secretaries — Robert Gates, Leon Panetta and Hagel. Gates and Panetta make this clear in their respective memoirs. Gates accuses Obama of no commitment to winning wars where he is shedding US blood. Panetta accuses the President of confusion, vacillation, shirking necessary battles and irresponsibility with the defence budget.

Now Hagel has been sacked after sending a memo to National Security Adviser Susan Rice, pointing out Obama's declared strategy in Syria is nonsense and there is no hope of producing a credible Syrian force that can tackle Bashar al-Assad and Islamic State simultaneously. All three essentially accuse Obama of irresponsibility. The failure with Iran is even worse. Obama made too many concessions to the Iranians too early and did everything he could to stop congress putting them under real pressure. Now the endless talks have been extended for another seven months while Tehran is enriching uranium and moving closer to nuclear weapons capability.

On illegal immigrants, Obama has simply decided not to enforce US law. I have a lot of sympathy with the idea that there should be a pathway to regularisation for long-term illegal immigrants. But Obama made no serious effort to do this when his party controlled both houses of congress. By choosing not to enforce the law, Obama is really challenging the basis of democratic politics. Obama says he listened to the people who didn't vote at the recent congressional election, as though their not voting gives him a mandate to do what he likes. A future Republican president may decide not to enforce a tax law that he doesn't like.

Obama is essentially incapable of dealing with congress and uninterested in the machinery of American democracy. Instead, he loves what he got at the University of Queensland, an adoring crowd of undergraduates and high school students swooning to his lofty phrases and folksy personality. To these audiences the most simple certainties can be purveyed. They evoke that characteristic feeling of precocious youth: that we know every answer and all the answers are simple, if only the grown-ups would get out of the way.

Like Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, Obama is a postmodern politician: all about gesture, grandiloquence, lofty aspiration. The announcement is everything. Follow-through is nothing. Of course Obama is much better at it than were Rudd and Gillard. But Obama's meaningless platitudes about climate change — which he won't be in office to deliver and could never get past congress — are the functional equivalent of Gillard solving the boatpeople problem, just before an election, with the East Timor Solution. It turned out to be a phantasm with no corporeal existence, but got her through an election.

Obama's people actually believed for a while that the strength of his personality and oratory would be a magic force in foreign affairs. But fine oratory untethered from serious purpose is just hot air. It achieves nothing. And it can embitter a political process.

This is why Obama's historically unique attack on the Abbott government may have a long-term consequence for the alliance, for it reinforces every argument made against the alliance, whether from the traditional Left or the emerging pro-China lobby, or what you might call traditional Australian isolationists.

All these schools of anti-alliance thought have a certain thread in common. That thread is that the Americans don't take Australia seriously, never really consider our interests, are unreliable and never enter into a meaningful partnership with us. More than that, if our interests stray in the slightest from the incumbent American politician's interests, we will get no consideration.

On balance, and historically, these are poor arguments. Generally the US is a good and reliable ally. But all these mistaken arguments are given great credence by the careless, irresponsible, self-indulgent way Obama trampled on the interests of his host and ally, Abbott, just because Obama could get another moment's media adoration of the type he doesn't get at home any more.

Obama's full motivation for that speech, and the intricate manoeuvrings within his increasingly introspective and isolated White House, provide ample material for quite gothic speculation. But the bottom line is no matter how helpful the Australian Prime Minister was to the President, his interests counted for nothing in the President's mind next to the opportunity for one day's good publicity.

Obama's domestic priorities, above all the cult of his presidential personality, were infinitely more important to him than the interests of his closest ally in Asia. This unique incident will become a new and likely central exhibit in all future Australian debates about the alliance. See? The American President couldn't care less about you. Why bother helping him?

In reality, Australia will now behave as the grown-up in this relationship, continuing the strategic co-operation in the face of political provocation. But Obama has provided powerful new evidence for those who argue American presidents don't take us seriously and can't be relied on.