

Is Obama cool wearing thin?

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A telling moment during the 2008 campaign was when the financial bailout was being debated. Senator John McCain gambled on passion and action, threatening to cancel a debate, while Barack Obama held back and was too cool for school. The nation, in the midst of crisis (remember that?) chose calm over fury. A year into his Administration, we're bored with that cool, and everyone is screaming for Obama to show some heat.

It's as if everyone wants him to be President Howard Beale now, shouting like the deranged anchor from *Network*, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

Progressives want him to yell about the public option and climate change, conservatives want him to yell at terrorists and the Iranians. Everyone wants him to yell at the bankers.

Of course, this year has had more than its share of Howard Beales, from the healthcare town hall shouters to congressional ranter Joe Wilson, not to mention all the Glenn Becks and Keith Olbermanns ringing in our ears daily.

But "no drama Obama" prides himself on his legendary Spock-like detachment. If he burns inside, he will not show it. If he shed a tear it'd probably lead to a complete breakdown. Compare that to his Vice President, Joe Biden, who wears his emotions on his sleeve and often seems on the verge of crying for joy or hugging you, or both.

By contrast, Obama is a tamer of emotions, President Buddha counseling patience. There is no urgency in his voice, no fire in his eyes. Is he too tame? We hungered for the inspiration or excitement of a Franklin or Teddy Roosevelt, but got a lukewarm Calvin Coolidge instead.

Our world moves too fast for patience. We live in a sitcom America, where an economic plan promising a robust green economy years down the line, is not going to cut it with voters used to a solution in 30 minutes (18 if you DVR it).

Jobs, Mr. President, Jobs. 10% is one digit too many for patience and calm. The terrorists are coming, setting off their underwear. Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq continue to thumb their nose at the president's notions of calm dialogue. And still, the president comes before the cameras, tieless, giving off the air that this is all cutting into his golf game.

Much of the criticism is unfair. Bush waited more days before speaking publicly about the shoe bomber, and nary a complaint. Is underwear somehow more urgent than shoes? Is calm not better, after years of colored alerts and fear as a political weapon?

Maybe so, but as JFK famously said, "Life is unfair."

Of course the president was on top of the terrorist situation. Putting on a tie, being more formal and stern, and coming home from his vacation would not have made the country any more secure. But a president, if anything, is the Great Reassurer. His role is, like it or not, is as much psychological as it is about governing.

A more important issue for Obama, politically, is how he handles a more real, daily concern: jobs. 10% of the nation is out of work, and millions more are underemployed or have just given up. Meanwhile, Obama is seemingly obsessed with a healthcare reform they don't understand. He's in serious danger of becoming another President George H.W. Bush.

Remember the 1992 recession, when the patrician, calm Bush just couldn't seem to get excited about the suffering of Americans? The aloofness tag killed Bush I, and it could doom Obama.

Republicans are winning what's called the frame game, pinning a tag on someone that sticks regardless of truth. Obama and the Democrats, their tag now says, care more about creating some new government healthcare bureaucratic monstrosity than about getting people real jobs. They fiddle while America's jobs burn. It doesn't matter if it's true or not, because it's being believed.

The healthcare plan is necessary, almost done, and will be seen in time as historic. But if Obama doesn't show some authentic, deep-down, empathetic, Bill Clinton-like emotion, especially about jobs, he too will be history sooner rather than later.

Intellectually I'm convinced Obama gives a damn, even if he doesn't show it so easily. Americans want to see it from his heart, not his brain. Has he convinced you?