

Citizenship duties



AP/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

President Barack Obama pauses while speaking during his visit to a UPS shipping facility in Landover, Md., Friday.

(updated below [Sun.]

"Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision he makes and should just support that, you know, and be faithful in what happens."

--[Britney Spears, September 3, 2003](#), answering this question: "A lot of entertainers have come out against the

war in Iraq. Have you?"

"So what should I think about [the war in Libya]? If it had been my call, I wouldn't have gone into Libya. But the reason I voted for Obama in 2008 is because I trust his judgment. And not in any merely abstract way, either: **I mean that if he and I were in a room and disagreed about some issue on which I had any doubt at all, I'd literally trust his judgment over my own.** I think he's smarter than me, better informed, better able to understand the consequences of his actions, and more farsighted."

--[Kevin Drum, Friday, in *Mother Jones*](#)

I don't dispute that trust plays some proper role in deciding for whom one will vote. Part of the reason I advocated for Obama's election over John McCain's is because I believed -- and still believe -- that Obama was much smarter, more thoughtful, more intellectually open, and

more knowledgeable than McCain. That Obama is very intelligent is not reasonably disputable, at least not in my view.

But there are other vital attributes that determine the quality of decision-making besides intellect: courage is one; an ability to form (and a willingness to defend) moral and ethical convictions is another; genuine empathy for others is still another. An amoral, cowardly, unprincipled genius is likely to make worse decisions than a stalwart, principled, moral person of average intelligence. That said, whatever factors one assesses, it's certainly legitimate -- when it comes to elections -- to form comparative preferences for politicians based on the trust one has in their decision-making ability.

But that's in a different universe than deciding that -- once they're in power -- you're going to relinquish your own critical faculties and judgment to them as a superior being, which is exactly what Drum (and Spears) announced they were doing. That form of submission is a definitively religious act, not a political one ([Proverbs 3:5](#): "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and **lean not unto thine own understanding**"). Venerating a superior being and blindly following its will is a natural human impulse, as it frees one of the heavy burden of decision-making and moral and intellectual judgment, and it also creates a feeling of safety and protection (hence the cross-cultural and sustained strength of religion, as well as the potent appeal of both political authoritarianism and personality cults).

But "thinking" that way is an absolute abdication of the duties of citizenship, which compel holding leaders accountable and making informed judgment about their actions (it's a particularly bizarre mindset for someone who seeks out a platform and comments on politics for a living). It's also dangerous, as it creates a climate of

unchecked leaders who bask in uncritical adoration. I honestly don't understand why someone who thinks like Drum -- whose commentary I've usually found worthwhile -- would even bother writing about politics; why not just turn over his blog to the White House to disseminate Obama's inherently superior commentary? And what basis does Drum have for demanding that Obama inform him or the nation of the rationale for his decisions, such as going to war in Libya; since Drum is going to trust Obama's decisions as intrinsically more worthwhile, wouldn't such presidential discussions be a superfluous act?

It's truly difficult to overstate just how antithetical this uncritical trust is to what the Founders assumed -- and hoped -- would be the cornerstone of the republic. Jefferson wrote in 1798: "**in questions of power, then, let no more be heard of confidence in man**, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution." Adams, in 1772, put it this way: "**The only maxim of a free government ought to be to trust no man living with power to endanger the public liberty.**" Four years later, his wife Abigail memorably echoed the same sentiment in a letter to him: "remember, all men would be tyrants if they could."

Even the most magnanimous leaders -- perhaps especially them, given their belief in their own Goodness -- are likely to veer into serious error, corruption and worse if they are liberated from a critical citizenry. Mindlessly cheering for a politician -- or placing trust in their decision-making -- is understandable a couple of months before an election when you've decided their re-election is important. But it's wildly inappropriate any other time. And subordinating your own critical faculties to a leader's is, at all times, warped, self-destructive and dangerous.

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See also: [John Hinderaker, 2005](#) ("It must be very strange to be President Bush. A man of extraordinary vision and brilliance approaching to genius, he can't get anyone to notice. He is like a great painter or musician who is ahead of his time, and who unveils one masterpiece after another to a reception that, when not bored, is hostile") v. [Jonathan Chait, 2010](#) ("President Obama is so much smarter and a better communicator than members of Congress in either party. The contrast, side by side, is almost ridiculous. . . . Most the time [sic], this is like watching LeBron James play basketball with a bunch of kids who got cut from the 7th grade basketball team. He's treating them really nice, letting his teammates take shots and allowing the other team to try to score. Nice try on that layup, Timmy, you almost got it on. But after a couple minutes I want him to just grab the ball and dunk on these clowns already").

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Regarding [yesterday's article](#) on Obama's executive power theory: Charlie Savage [today reports](#) that, contrary to the source for TPM's account, Hillary Clinton merely suggested that the Obama administration might ignore Congressional restraints on the war in Libya, rather than definitively vowing it would. That doesn't change the key points -- it's a semantic difference more than anything else -- but it's worth noting.

UPDATE: Drum [replies here](#), in essence by saying that I gave his post an "appallingly hostile reading" even while acknowledging, in light of

the fact that others understood it the same way as I did, that he wrote "hastily and maybe my intent wasn't as clear as it could have been" and that the sentence I cited "was phrased more strongly than it should have been." I honestly don't think there was more than one way to read the sentences of his I cited ("if [Obama] and I were in a room and disagreed about some issue on which I had any doubt at all, I'd literally trust his judgment over my own"), but in any event, Kevin says that this was the point he was trying to make:

I think pretty highly of Barack Obama's judgment. But what does it mean to say that? Just this: that I think highly of his judgment even when I disagree with him. How could it be otherwise, after all? If, when you say that you trust somebody's judgment, what you really mean is that you trust their judgment only to the extent that they agree with you, that's hardly any trust at all. Just the opposite, in fact.

To make this more concrete, I also think highly of Glenn Greenwald's judgment on issues of civil liberties and the national security state. This means that when he takes a different position than mine, it makes me stop and think. After all, we're on roughly the same wavelength on these subjects, and they're subjects that he's often thought about longer and more deeply than me. This doesn't mean that I've outsourced my brain to Glenn, but it does mean that he influences my judgment, and that's especially true on issues that I'm unsure of.

Ditto for Obama. Unlike Glenn, perhaps, I'm unsure about the wisdom of our Libya intervention, and the fact that I'm unsure makes me more open to giving Obama's judgment a fair

amount of weight in this matter. That's what it means to respect another person's judgment. On the other hand, as my post made clear, it doesn't mean that he's persuaded me. As I said twice, I think the Libya intervention was mistake. I wouldn't have done it. But partly because a president I respect disagrees, I'm open to the possibility that I'm wrong. His position has made me stop and think.

That, of course, is a much different point than the one Kevin originally (albeit unwittingly) expressed, and had that been the original point, not only would I have not objected, I would have agreed entirely (I mean in terms of the general point, not specifically applied to Obama). A vital part of critical thinking is to purposely expose yourself to opposing views that are formidable and worthy of respect; I wrote just a few days ago that I do that with Juan Cole's writings on Libya, and the reason I've read Kevin for years (and, as I wrote in this post, found it largely worthwhile) is because, though we have different intellectual and political dispositions in the context of agreement on numerous issues, his points with which I disagree often force me to think. It's absolutely true in general that any rational person would pause to examine their convictions if someone whose judgment they respect disagrees with them, and it's also wise -- I'd say necessary -- to seek out the input of people who know more than you do on any particular issue. But that is a fundamentally different exercise than substituting someone else's judgment for one's own, particularly a political leader's.

There's one other point I periodically make about how I engage in these discussions that's worth re-emphasizing here. When I criticize a specific idea, I usually do so not by examining it in the abstract, but by focusing on a particular person's expression of that idea. That's how one avoids fighting strawmen and ensuring accountability (I strongly

prefer "X wrote" instead of "some say"). But the focus for me is always on the idea, not its personal advocate. The point of this post was not that Kevin Drum is a mindless, subservient follower of the President's (the fact that I said I read him regularly and find it worthwhile should make clear that I don't think that). The point was that Kevin Drum expressed an idea that I found worthy of criticism, both because it was wrong and consequential (consequential because I encounter it frequently enough to make it worthy of examination). That style of engaging arguments ("X said Y and it's very wrong") can sometimes appear more personal than it is (especially for the person whose idea is being criticized), but it almost never is about the person; identifying a specific expression of an idea is, in my view, the only way to criticize the idea honestly and rigorously.>