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Exit Obama, Enter Irene: A Dispatch From Martha's Vineyard

A tale of two storms: this weekend's hurricane, and the turmoil in Washington



(The Obamas return to Washington, D.C., on Friday, after cutting their Martha's Vineyard vacation short because of Hurricane Irene.) (AP Images)

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Chilmark, MA--The Coast Guard cutter that was moored calmly off our beach on Martha's Vineyard is gone. So is the man it was protecting, our quiet neighbor, the president of the United States. He left two days ago, after a tranquil week of fair skies and moderate winds and a largely private family vacation.

Today, we confront a new visitor who is brusquely making her presence known. As hurricane Irene storms into New England, the sea is already a foaming white fury; the wind is whistling through the eaves; the rain is slanting like descending spears: the barrier beach separating the pond and the ocean has disappeared under crashing waves; and tall trees are bowing down to the gods of nature. And the worst is yet to come, with winds on the East side of the storm, where we are, intensifying throughout the day.

As they have for the past three years, the Obamas stayed at Blue Heron Farm that is about half a mile down South Road from our house, where we have summered for more than three decades. And, even more than in the past, the president was as unobtrusive as is possible despite scores of Secret Service agents and a multi-car cavalcade whenever he ventured from home. A trip to a bookstore, several dinners out with Michele, a few quiet parties with old friends, golf not with the glitterati but primarily with White House buddies—and lots of family downtime. Of course in a era of high unemployment and economic distemper, keeping a low profile makes political sense. But it seems obvious that the president also needed personal shelter from the storms of Washington and the world.

But this morning there is no need for storm metaphors. There is just the storm. And the power of the sea, the force of the wind, the steady roar from both—the wildness of our usually placid land and seascape—makes us feel humble. We are not people but just things in Irene's path. We have no control over what will happen—only weak hope that the damage will be slight. We are reminded, again, of the power and beauty and brutality of implacable forces of nature. We gape in awe at the fury. But we also know that, in twelve hours, it will be over as Irene spends her force travelling in a northward arc through Maine and the Canadian Maritimes. We can, in the end, ride out the storm.

Yet, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, the hurricanes of policy and politics that beset the President, and Washington, and capitals around the globe—and all of us citizens in the way of such storms—will continue unabated. Today, the fury of public policy dysfunction seems beyond anyone's control. The colliding ideological forces produce fierce political wind and rain that seems without end. The damage from division and discord in our stormy political culture will be far greater than from power outages, even for millions, along the Eastern seaboard.

Leaders are supposed to have some impact on the course of human events. Yet the political storms in Washington seem so severe—the potential damage so great—that we ask ourselves, can anyone lead in this time of broken politics and policy polarization? And can we, mere citizens, ride out this storm?

So, the ferocity of Irene makes us wonder whether Barack Obama might prefer the hurricane in Chilmark, with its dramatic fury but its brief staying power, to the hurricanes that await him in Washington, which will go on tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow, through a contentious, reconvened Congressional session this fall and the sound-byte warfare of next year's election.