President Obama’s latest poll numbers may be decent—a New York Times/CBS News poll found that he has higher approval ratings than the GOP, and that more Americans blame Congress, George W. Bush and Wall Street for our problems than they do him—but we hoped for better than decent from this president.

He was a new kind of candidate: a charismatic outsider, an unabashed optimist, a digitally savvy campaigner who embraced the power of social media. It’s time for him to be a new kind of president, too. What he’s doing now just isn’t working.

Sure, he’s doing many things that look new. His weekly addresses are on YouTube. The White House has a Facebook page and Flickr feed. The Obamas have taken the “people’s house” idea so seriously that one media critic wrote that this new era of presidential openness made him think he’d be “O.K. with the kimono closing a bit.” A more substantive, and admirable, example is his inviting Republican congressional leaders to the White House for a televised debate, and his promise (announced in its own newfangled way, in an interview during the Super Bowl pregame show) to host a televised bipartisan summit on health care later this month.

But with all due respect to Marshall McLuhan, the TV cameras and social networking tools are the media. They’re part of the message, but not its entirety. And it’s the message—the substance and the approach—that needs to change.

And so on President’s Day weekend, when many Americans are honoring Abraham Lincoln and George Washington by taking ski trips or hitting the sales (at least those lucky enough to still have the means to do so), I’m thinking about what the role of the 21st-century president should be. In this age of radical transparency, instantaneous communications and the amplifying effects of the Internet—an era in which no comment, gesture or yawn goes un-commented-on—no president could possibly lead like Washington or Lincoln.

George Washington presided over an economy small enough to call for a balanced budget and over a country that wasn’t a superpower so could afford to remain neutral in world conflicts—a luxury no president will ever have again. Also, he never had to worry about being elected or re-elected. A look at Abraham Lincoln’s presidency in USA Today last year reported, “He cracked down on the press, proclaimed a trade and military blockade of the Confederacy, spent without congressional authorization and summarily imprisoned thousands of suspected Confederate sympathizers.”

So it’s impossible to be a Washingtonian or Lincolnian president today, and we shouldn’t want one. But Obama’s saddled with extra challenges: lofty but hard-to-live-up-to promises of bipartisanship, an opposition set on defining itself as the party of “no,” the almighty filibuster and the nihilistic furor of the Tea Partiers.

It’s clear the old model isn’t working anymore. But what do we need from a president now: a
CEO or a general manager? A commander in chief or facilitator of the modern dialogue? Is it possible to be all of the above? We all know how well the nation’s first M.B.A. president worked out, but is there another approach that would be better?

These questions are especially important because Americans now are looking more closely and critically than ever at the public issues that affect them. There are signs of this everywhere: huge turnouts for town halls and Tea Parties, partisan vitriol all over the Web, a dark-horse candidate winning an election and throwing the Senate into a tailspin.

A new study from my company, Euro RSCG Worldwide, quantified how much more attention Americans are paying to serious matters such as the economy and health care. Our online “mood monitor” survey of 388 people across the country in early February found that 46.4 percent of respondents have grown more interested in news. Most of the others maintained their level of engagement; only a small fraction (6.7 percent of men and 10.9 percent of women) said they were less interested in news.

This trend is especially pronounced among men, 51 percent of whom are more interested now, compared with 41.7 percent of women. Subtracting the “less interesteds” from the “more interesteds,” the net margin of greater interest in news is 44.3 percent for men and 30.8 percent for women. This gender skew persists across the board—perhaps a reflection of women being so dismayed they tune out, or being so busy balancing work, family and budgets during a painful recession that they don’t have time to follow the news.

Here’s how the numbers played out:

Their own local politics: Net 29.4 percent of men and 16.7 percent of women are more interested. Local politics of other areas: Net 10.8 percent of men are more interested, and net 6.2 percent of women are less interested.

Own state: Net 47.9 percent of men and 30.2 percent of women are more interested.

Other states: Net 23.1 percent of men and 9.4 percent of women are more interested. Domestic politics in general: Net 42.3 percent of men and 24.5 percent of women are more interested.

The economy: Net 63.4 percent of men and 52.1 percent of women are more interested.

Business and corporations: Net 42.3 percent of men and 16 percent of women are more interested.

Health care: Net 67.6 percent of men and 61.5 percent of women are more interested.

While men are paying more attention to the news, women are getting more unhappy about it. Consistently higher percentages of women feel growing disapproval about various issues compared with 12 to 18 months ago, perhaps because they had higher hopes for things to be better.

Own local politics: Net 1.5 percent of men and 14.6 percent of women disapprove more.

Own state: Net 13.9 percent of men and 19.3 percent of women disapprove more.

Domestic politics in general: Net 16.9 percent of men and 26 percent of women disapprove more.

The economy and finance: Net 29.4 percent of men and 45.4 percent of women disapprove more.

Business and corporations: Net 31 percent of men and 40.6 percent of women disapprove more.

Taxes: Net 39.7 percent of men and 39.1 percent of women are pessimistic about taxation levels in the foreseeable future.

Cost of living: Net 22.7 percent of men and 45.8 percent of women are pessimistic.

The survey also asked respondents to state their views. Many want politicians to focus on doing a better job—or to be kicked out of office. As one put it: “Politicians have lost the will to represent the people who voted them in. They are only interested in their own power and interests. Most cannot be trusted. When political parties are too involved with their own politics, we the people and the USA suffer greatly.”

That means this fall’s elections will be ugly and loud, and we’re sure to see more upset victories.
The country was fractious and divided even during the boom times of 2007, and the misery since the crash has only soured the mood. But as messy as things are likely to get, they’re just prelude to the 2012 presidential election. Let’s hope Barack Obama charts the right new course in time.