Obama has plenty of reasons to smile

Attention has been focused on who becomes our next president, but meanwhile the incumbent is on quite a roll.

Throughout his tour of Alaska, President Obama looked full of his old swagger. He took a photo of Denali — the former Mount McKinley — through a window of Air Force One and shared it via Instagram. He used melting glaciers as a backdrop to talk about climate change, posed with small children and large fish, and became the first sitting president to venture north of the Arctic Circle.

He seemed to smile throughout the trip, and why not? The nuclear agreement that Secretary of State John F. Kerry negotiated with Iran is now safe from congressional meddling. U.S. economic growth for the second quarter was a healthy 3.7 percent. Unemployment has fallen to 5.1 percent, according to figures released Friday. Saudi King Salman — portrayed by Obama’s critics as peeved with the president — dropped by the White House on Friday for a chat, reportedly renting an entire luxury hotel for his entourage. And this month, Chinese President Xi Jinping is scheduled to arrive for what promises to be the most important state visit of the year.

Obama gives the impression of having rediscovered the joy of being president. Maybe he really needed that Martha’s Vineyard vacation. Or maybe he is beginning to see some of his long-term policies finally bearing fruit — and his legacy being cemented.

Watching him now is a useful reminder that there is no such thing as the “twilight” of a presidency. Until the day his successor takes office, Obama will be the leading actor on the biggest and most important stage in the world.

It is useful to recall that George W. Bush practically had one foot out the door when the financial system threatened to collapse in 2008. It was Bush and his advisers who put together a massive $700 billion bank bailout and managed to sell it to Congress. Bush signed the rescue bill into law on Oct. 3 — barely a month before his successor would be chosen.

The banks were saved, but nothing could stop the economy from falling into its worst slump since the Great Depression. I believe historians will conclude that one of Obama’s greatest accomplishments was bringing the economy back to real growth and something close to full employment — more slowly than Americans may have wished, perhaps, but steadily.
the community of nations. The mullahs may decide to remain defiant and isolated, but at least they now have a choice.

Obama’s White House has often been clumsy at inside-the-Beltway politics, but the handling of the Iran deal has been adroit. The drip-drip-drip of announcements from Democratic senators who favor the agreement has created a sense of momentum and inevitability. Now Obama knows that if Congress passes a measure rejecting the deal, he can veto it without fear of being overridden. The question, in fact, is whether a resolution of disapproval can even make it through the Senate. If Obama convinces 41 senators to filibuster the measure, it dies.

All is not sweetness and light, of course. The Syrian civil war is a humanitarian disaster of enormous and tragic proportions, as evidenced by the heartbreaking refugee crisis in Europe. I don’t believe there is anything the United States could have done to prevent the war, but all nations bear a responsibility to help ease the suffering. The fact that some nations refuse to do their share does not absolve us from doing ours.

Domestically, the good economic numbers ignore the fact that middle-class incomes remain stagnant. Even without healthy wage growth, an economic recovery feels better than a slump — but only in relative terms. One doesn’t hear people breaking into “Happy Days Are Here Again.”

All in all, though, it looks like a good time to be President Obama. The Affordable Care Act, as he had hoped, is by now so well-established that no Republican successor could easily eliminate it. Industries are already making plans to accommodate new restrictions on carbon emissions. Oh, and despite what you hear from all the Republican candidates, the border with Mexico is more secure than ever before.

Obama’s legacy will have a few blemishes. But he has good reason to smile.

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