

washingtonpost.com

He Could Care Less About Obama's Story

Advertisement

By Reza Aslan

Sunday, December 30, 2007; B03

Every time I hear about how Sen. Barack Obama is going to "re-brand" America's image in the Middle East, I can't help but think about Jimmy Carter's toast.

When the idealistic Democrat came to Iran in 1977 to ring in the new year with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the country's much-despised despot, throngs of young, hopeful Iranians lined the streets to welcome the new American president. After eight years of the Nixon and Ford administrations' blind support for the shah's brutal regime, Iranians thrilled to Carter's promise to re-brand America's image abroad by focusing on human rights. That call even let many moderate, middle-class Iranians dare to hope that they might ward off the popular revolution everyone knew was coming. But at that historic New Year's dinner, Carter surprised everyone. In a shocking display of ignorance about the precarious political situation in Iran, he toasted the shah for transforming the country into "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world." With those words, Carter unwittingly lit the match of revolution.

It's just this sort of blunder -- naive, well-meaning, amateurish, convinced that everyone understands the goodness of U.S. intentions -- that worries me again these days. That's because a curious and dangerous consensus seems to be forming among the chattering classes, on both the left and the right, that what the United States needs in these troubling times is not knowledge and experience but a "fresh face" with an "intuitive sense of the world," and that the mere act of electing Obama will put us on the path to winning the so-called war on terror.

The argument usually goes something like this: Imagine that a young Muslim boy in, say, Egypt, is watching television when suddenly he sees this black man -- the grandson of a Kenyan Muslim, no less! -- who spent a small part of his childhood in Indonesia, taking the oath of office as president of the United States. Suddenly, the boy realizes that the United States is not the demonic, anti-Islamic place he's always been told it was. Meanwhile, all around the Muslim world, other young would-be jihadists have a similar epiphany. "Maybe Osama bin Laden is wrong," they think. "Maybe America is not so bad after all."

Mind you, it is not anything this new president says or does that changes their minds. As the conservative pundit Andrew Sullivan describes this imaginary scene in his recent paean to Obama in the *Atlantic Monthly*, it is Obama's face -- just his face -- that "proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can."

Or, in the words of the French foreign policy analyst Dominique Moisi, "The very moment he appears on the world's television screens, victorious and smiling, America's image and soft power would experience something like a Copernican revolution."

As someone who once was that young Muslim boy everyone seems to be imagining (albeit in Iran rather than Egypt), I'll let you in on a secret: He could not care less who the president of the United States is. He is totally unconcerned with whatever barriers a black (or female, for that matter) president would be breaking. He couldn't name three U.S. presidents if he tried. He cares only about one thing: what the United States will do.

That boy is angry at the United States not because its presidents have all been white. He is angry because of Washington's unconditional support for Israel; because the United States has more than 150,000 troops in Iraq; because the United States gives the dictator of his country some \$2 billion a year

in aid, the vast majority of which goes toward supporting a police state. He is angry at the United States because he thinks it has hegemony over almost every aspect of his world.

Now, more than one commentator has noted that on all of these issues, the next president will have very little room to maneuver. But that is exactly the point.

The next president will have to try to build a successful, economically viable Palestinian state while protecting the safety and sovereignty of Israel. He or she will have to slowly and responsibly withdraw forces from Iraq without allowing the country to implode. He or she will have to bring Iraq's neighbors, Syria and Iran, to the negotiating table while simultaneously reining in Iran's nuclear ambitions, keeping Syria out of Lebanon, reassuring Washington's Sunni Arab allies that they have not been abandoned, coaxing Russia into becoming part of the solution (rather than part of the problem) in the region, saving an independent and democratic Afghanistan from the resurgent Taliban, preparing for an inevitable succession of leadership in Saudi Arabia, persuading China to play a more constructive role in the Middle East and keeping a nuclear-armed Pakistan from self-destructing in the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

That is how the post-Bush "war on terror" must be handled. Not by "re-branding" the mess George W. Bush has made, but by actually fixing it.

In their glowing endorsement of Obama, the editors of the Boston Globe noted that "the first American president of the 21st century has not appreciated the intricate realities of our age. The next president must."

True enough. But such "intricate realities" are not best dealt with through "an intuitive grasp of global politics" -- Obama's chief asset, according to the Globe -- but through an intimate knowledge of those realities and of the nuanced responses necessary to address them.

Obama may possess all the intuition of a fortuneteller. But as chair of a Senate subcommittee on Europe, he has never made an official trip to Western Europe (except a one-day stopover in London in August 2005) or held a single policy hearing. He's never faced off with foreign leaders and has no idea what a delicate sparring match diplomacy in the Middle East can be. And at a time in which the United States has gone from sole superpower to global pariah in a mere seven years, *these things matter*.

The main issue in U.S. foreign policy that the next president will face is repairing our image in the world. But in foreign policy, unlike advertising, image is created through action, not branding. Which is why one cannot help but sense a touch of shirking (not to mention a lack of short-term memory) in all this talk about "intuitive experience" and "re-branding images," particularly when it comes from those who began the "New American Century" as ardent supporters of Bush's wars and his self-advertised "gut" instincts.

It is as though, rather than accepting blame for the mess and taking responsibility for cleaning it up, they would prefer to slap a new coat of paint on the problem and declare it fixed.

It was "intuition" that made the mess in the first place. It will take more than intuition to clean it up. After all, we are not launching a new product. We are electing a president.

Reza Aslan is an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside and the author of "No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Meet Barack Obama](#)

Join us! Register online to attend Obama for President campaign events
[BarackObama.com](#)

[Barak Obama: Yes or No?](#)

30-Second Poll. Do You Like Barak Obama?
[www.indpolls.com/barak-obama](#)

[Barack Obama Polls](#)

How is Obama Doing in the Polls? Updated 2008 Presidential Polls.
[www.usaelectionpolls.com](#)