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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Rebranding the U.S. With Obama

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The other day I had a conversation with a Beijing friend and I mentioned that Barack Obama was leading in the presidential race:

She: Obama? But he's the black man, isn't he?

Me: Yes, exactly.

She: But surely a black man couldn't become president of the United States?

Me: It looks as if he'll be elected.

She: But president? That's such an important job! In America, I thought blacks were janitors and laborers.

Me: No, blacks have all kinds of jobs.

She: What do white people think about that, about getting a black president? Are they upset? Are they angry?

Me: No, of course not! If Obama is elected, it'll be because white people voted for him.

[Long pause.]

She: Really? Unbelievable! What an amazing country!

We're beginning to get a sense of how Barack Obama's political success could change global perceptions of the United States, redefining the American "brand" to be less about Guantánamo and more about equality. This change in perceptions would help rebuild American political capital in the way that the Marshall Plan did in the 1950s or that John Kennedy's presidency did in the early 1960s.

In his endorsement of Mr. Obama, Colin Powell noted that "the new president is going to have to fix the reputation that we've left with the rest of the world." That's not because we crave admiration, but because cooperation is essential to address 21st-century challenges; you can't fire cruise missiles at the global financial crisis.

In his endorsement, Mr. Powell added that an Obama election "will also not only electrify our country, I think it'll electrify the world." You can already see that. A 22-nation survey by the BBC found that voters abroad preferred Mr. Obama to Mr. McCain in every single country — by four to one over all. Nearly half of those in the BBC poll said that the election of Mr. Obama, an African-American, would "fundamentally

change” their perceptions of the United States.

Europe is particularly intoxicated by the possibility of restoring amity with America in an Obama presidency. As *The Economist* put it: “Across the Continent, Bush hatred has been replaced by Obama-mania.”

Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, which conducted the BBC poll, said that at a recent international conference he attended in Malaysia, many Muslims voiced astonishment at Mr. Obama’s rise because it was so much at odds with their assumptions about the United States. Remember that the one thing countless millions of people around the world “know” about the United States is that it is controlled by a cabal of white bankers and Jews who use police with fire hoses to repress blacks. To them, Mr. Obama’s rise triggers severe cognitive dissonance.

“It’s an anomaly, so contrary to their expectation that it makes them receptive to a new paradigm for the U.S.,” Mr. Kull said.

Europeans like to mock the vapidness of American politics, but they also acknowledge that it would be difficult to imagine a brown or black person leading France or Germany.

As for Africa, Mr. Obama’s Kenyan father was of the Luo tribe, a minority that has long suffered brutal discrimination in both Kenya and in Uganda (where it is known as the Acholi). The bitter joke in East Africa is that a Luo has more of a chance of becoming president in the United States than in Kenya.

Yet before we get too far with the self-congratulations, it’s worth remembering something else.

In the western industrialized world, full of university graduates and marinated in principles of egalitarianism, the idea of electing a member of a racial minority to the highest office seems an astonishing breakthrough. But Jamaica’s 95 percent black population elected a white man as its prime minister in 1980, and kept him in office throughout that decade.

Likewise, the African nation of Mauritius has elected a white prime minister of French origin. And don’t forget that India is overwhelmingly Hindu but now has a Sikh prime minister and a white Christian as president of its ruling party, and until last year it had a Muslim in the largely ceremonial position of president.

Look, Mr. Obama’s skin color is a bad reason to vote for him or against him. Substance should always trump symbolism.

Yet if this election goes as the polls suggest, we may find a path to restore America’s global influence — and thus to achieve some of our international objectives — in part because the world is concluding that Americans can, after all, see beyond a person’s epidermis. My hunch is that that is right, and that we’re every bit as open-minded about racial minorities as Jamaicans already were a quarter-century ago.

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