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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Spock at the Bridge

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Wow. What a phone call that must have been.

“Hey, 43, it’s 44. How’s retirement? You’re biking around the new neighborhood? Buying a nightlight for the bathroom? Can’t be too careful. I hear you’re working your way through a book Dick Cheney gave you on your Kindle. So Vice is still assigning your reading? Sounds like a full plate. No wonder there was no time to watch my address to Congress.

“It must be a relief to tune out — altogether. Still, you might have noticed we’re sort of busy in Washington. That’s why I’m calling, actually. I’m ending your stupid war.”

Mission Relinquished.

The contrasting images were pretty astounding: W. and Laura back in Texas, puttering around the new hood, borrowing chairs from the Secret Service next door to have a big dinner party, oblivious to the shrieks of pain, anger, shock and fear around the country, while Barack Obama engaged in a Sisyphean struggle to push the huge boulder of grief left behind by Bush up the hill.

What can the disavowed dauphin possibly be thinking as Professor Obama strides up to the blackboard to erase everything W. stood for, while giving us crisp lectures about how we must get more educated, more equitable, more realistic, more responsible and more reasonable?

Mr. Obama may not be able to exit Iraq expeditiously; as Tom Ricks, the respected military correspondent and author of “The Gamble,” points out, this is the sixth plan he has covered that attempts to get U.S. forces out of Iraq.

But on Friday, the new president did exit from the inane and pernicious W. era of cartoon villains, simplistic linear thinking, and black-and-white cowboy bluster.

“We will not let the pursuit of the perfect stand in the way of achievable goals,” Mr. Obama said, surrounded by Marines in the gym at Camp Lejeune.

W.’s strategy was inspired by his insecurity. He has acknowledged that he went to war based on body language, without a full-throated debate or analysis; there was just a vibe coming from the general direction of the Pentagon and the vice president’s office that it was a good thing to do. His only real goal was to prove he was tough.

The confident and unsentimental Mr. Obama, by contrast, has redefined the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan around endgames.

“Until we have a clear strategy, we’re not going to have a clear exit strategy,” he told Jim Lehrer on Friday about Afghanistan, noting that he had ordered a “head-to-toe, soup-to-nuts” review of the mission there, so America could get out quickly without risking that the country once more becomes a staging area for terrorist attacks against us.

Mr. Obama called W. on Friday to give him a heads-up about the repudiation on Iraq. Robert Gibbs said the call was not at all contentious. But in the Lehrer interview, the president compared America to a big tanker that needed to “start moving in a better trajectory so that five years, 10 years down the road you can say, you know what, because of good decisions now our kids are safer, more secure, more prosperous, more unified than they were before.” This analogy turns W. into the Exxon Valdez.

Mr. Ricks predicted that W.’s snake-bit war may yet swallow up Mr. Obama, that America will be in Iraq for many years to come, and that in the end, we will be the losers. What emerges will be an Iraq that “is not a democracy, not an American ally, and run by a strongman, probably tougher, smarter and more adept than Saddam Hussein” and who is, ironically, “an even worse guy,” Ricks told Keith Olbermann.

The new commander in chief has the nerves of a riverboat gambler and, on the humongous budget and stimulus package, he and Rahmbo Emanuel are liberally applying the Rahm doctrine: Take advantage of a crisis to grab an opportunity.

Even the Republican John Thune seemed impressed at the administration’s brazenness, telling The Times’s Carl Hulse, “They’re really swinging for the fences.”

It is a moment of so many giant, cascading perils, with so many mind-boggling numbers and cautionary codicils, that it makes your brain hurt. No one, including the new president himself, can possibly know if his risky bets will pay off.

“This is a human enterprise,” he told Lehrer. “It’s not going to be flawless.”

Speaking of the Enterprise, Mr. Obama has a bit of Mr. Spock in him (and not just the funny ears). He has a Vulcan-like logic and detachment. Any mere mortal who had to tell liberals that our obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan are far from over and tell Republicans that he has a \$3.6 trillion budget would probably have tears running down his face.

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