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OBAMA'S WOES

Kenneth Lasson

What's wrong with Barack Obama? It depends on who's asking and how. If you support the President, you're likely to emphasize his positive qualities - his oratorical eloquence, self-confidence, amiability under pressure - and chalk up the negatives to conservative or Republican naysayers who find fault with everything he says or does. Even seasoned political pundits understand that all leaders must operate along fault lines they didn't create, and that circumstances can seldom if ever be controlled.

Certainly Obama inherited a host of problems not of his making: two nasty wars, a comatose economy, a grossly inflated national debt and a paralytically polarized electorate. To argue that virtually anyone else would have managed those problems better - as Mitt Romney and all other Republican candidates said during last week's "debate" - is glib, self-serving and (though politically expedient) impossible to prove.

But one facet of the President's tenure to date has shown him to be demonstrably inept. His foreign policy, particularly his handling of the Middle East muddle and America's relationship with Israel, bespeaks a weak and wavering tentativeness that we neither expect nor admire in the putative leader of the free world.

To be sure, Obama has gotten some things right - his pursuit and killing of Osama bin Laden, for example, and his explicit though muted recognition that Israel cannot be expected to negotiate with an entity (Hamas) that openly declares its refusal to recognize the Jewish State's right to exist - but he has clearly failed to articulate a firm and forthright American position, unequivocally stating what's in our best interests. Nor has he paid more than mild lip service to revolutionary movements in Iran, Egypt and elsewhere.

The President's defenders remain starry-eyed and unrealistic about his broken promises, and largely overlook his refusal to countenance growing Muslim fundamentalism - not to mention his repeatedly failed overtures to jumpstart a peace process with recalcitrant Palestinians who concede nothing and demand everything.

Even liberal-leaning academics (like yours truly) realize that a strong and straightforward voice is needed to address the realities of openly anti-Semitic rejectionists (read Hamas/ Hezbollah/ Muslim Brotherhood).

Passing references will not do.

The message must be clear: To receive any consideration at the negotiating table, the Palestinians must offer something in return. Notable proponents of this are Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and, of course, Israel's own Binyamin Netanyahu, whose recent no-nonsense speech to a joint session of Congress was widely and warmly received.

Except for some hard-core J-Street types and cultural apologists from both Left and Right, Obama's Jewish support is quickly diminishing.

For most of the past century Jews voted overwhelmingly Democratic - but things changed when an incumbent president let Israel down. In 1976, Jimmy Carter received 71 percent of the Jewish vote, but 45 percent in 1980 when perceived as not friendly to Israel. When George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State Jim Baker publicly rebuked Israel, their Jewish support dropped to 11 percent. By contrast, in his re-election, George W. Bush, considered a friend of Israel, went from 19 percent to 24 percent.

In 2008, Mr. Obama campaigned as a strong backer of Israel. Today, many American Jews feel they were misled; and if the President loses a significant amount of Jewish votes, strongly concentrated as it is in key states, it could prove to be politically fatal.

Word has it Obama wanted to attend Shimon Peres' increasingly important annual Israeli Presidential Conference this week in Jerusalem.

The conference continues the tradition of welcoming extraordinary individuals from the world over. But were he to visit Israel now, Obama would not receive a warm reception; the majority of Israelis have developed a visceral distaste for his perceived icily negative attitude toward their country.

(It is perversely ironic that many Palestinians feel Obama has thrown them under the bus.) The President's utter failure even to respond to Israel's formal request to permit Jonathan J. Pollard to attend his father's funeral earlier this week is at best callous and puzzling, and certainly adds to the evidence that he is a weak and ineffective world leader.

The Middle East is in turmoil. So is Obama's strategy towards it.

Kenneth Lasson, a law professor at the University of Baltimore, contributes monthly.

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