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Obama Blames America

Demonizing Harry Truman may not play well with voters.

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

The president of the United States has completed another outing abroad in his now standard form: as the un-Bush. At one stop after another -- the latest in Latin America, where Hugo Chávez expressed wishes to be his friend -- Barack Obama fulfilled his campaign vows to show the nations of the world that a new American leadership stood ready to atone for the transgressions of the old.

All went as expected in these travels, not counting certain unforeseen results of that triumphal European tour. The images of that trip, in which Mr. Obama dazzled ecstatic Europeans with citations of the offenses against international goodwill and humanity committed by the nation he leads, are now firmly imprinted on the minds of Americans. That this is so, and that it is not good news for him, is truth of a kind not quite fathomable to this president and his men.

Now, on the heels of those travels, comes his release of the guidelines known as "torture memos" -- a decision designed to emphasize, again, the superior ethical and moral leadership the world can expect from this administration as compared with that of presidencies past. This exercise in comparisons is one of which Mr. Obama may well never tire.

The memos' publication had its consequences, most of them intentional. First, declaring his intention to have a forward-looking administration, the president had, to his credit, announced that there would be no trials of CIA personnel involved in the interrogations of terrorists.

Then came the memos. With his decision to release them, Mr. Obama guaranteed an instant explosion of outrage of a kind that could never have happened otherwise, notwithstanding his claim that most of the contents were already public. The results of the president's decision were predictable. Each day now brings, in the usual media quarters, fevered exhortations calling for the trials and punishment of Bush administration officials.

This decision may also have unintended consequences, none more interesting perhaps than the effects of the nonstop repetition of the president's rationale for this act. We could begin to see the possibilities clearly on Sunday, when White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel appeared on ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," where he confronted questions about the memo decision.

Turning aside the quest for answers to knotty questions -- including several on the point that most of what we now know about al Qaeda had been gleaned precisely from these enhanced interrogations -- Mr. Emanuel indicated that the Obama administration was guided by higher concerns. He proceeded patiently, to explain. By revealing the memos, with their detailed information on those interrogation techniques (now banned), we had elevated our moral status in the eyes of the world. More important, we had improved our standing in the eyes of potential terrorists. This would undermine al Qaeda, Mr. Emanuel explained, because those interrogations of ours helped to enlist terrorists to their cause. All of which was why the publication of the memos -- news of which would presumably touch the hearts of

militants around the world -- would make America safer.

There is always danger in repeating propositions like this often, among them the likelihood that their irrationality will begin to make itself clear to anyone hearing it over time.

Any number of people listening to Mr. Emanuel -- those acquainted with terror's recent history, at any rate -- would have recalled, instantly, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the attack on the USS Cole, and the rest of the unending chain of terror assaults mounted against Americans long before anyone had ever heard of enhanced interrogation techniques.

In his appearance before employees of the CIA Monday -- part inspirational, part pep rally -- Mr. Obama held forth on the need to improve our image in the world, and on how in adhering to this great nation's principles of justice and right we could only be made safer. He was here to assure the employees of the CIA of his support, to explain, again, the release of those memos. And to describe, as he did, with some eloquence, how great and exceptional a democracy we were.

That no such estimation of the United States managed to infiltrate the content or tone of the president's remarks during his European tour -- nary a hint -- we know, and it is not surprising. He had gone to Europe not as the voice of his nation, but as a missionary with a message of atonement for its errors. Which were, as he perceived them -- arrogance, dismissiveness, Guantanamo, deficiencies in its attitudes toward the Muslim world, and the presidency of Harry Truman and his decision to drop the atomic bomb, which ended World War II.

No sitting American president had ever delivered indictments of this kind while abroad, or for that matter at home, or been so ostentatiously modest about the character and accomplishment of the nation he led. He was mediator, an agent of change, a judge, apportioning blame -- and he was above the battle.

None of this display during Mr. Obama's recent travels could have come as a surprise to legions of his supporters, nor would many of them be daunted by their new president's preoccupation with our moral failures. Five decades of teaching in colleges and universities across the land, portraying the U.S. as a power mainly responsible for injustice and evil, whose military might was ever a danger to the world -- a nation built on the fruits of greed, rapacity and racism -- have had their effect. The products of this education find nothing strange in a president quick to focus on the theme of American moral failure. He may not share many of their views, but there is, nonetheless, much that they find familiar about him.

The same can't be said for the large numbers of Americans who caught up with the details of the president's apology tour. Presidents have been transformed by office, and Mr. Obama may yet be one of them. But on the evidence so far, he has, as few presidents before him, much to transform. Or, at least, to understand.

Since that bridge too far to Europe, ordinary Americans, including some who voted for Mr. Obama, have shown evidence of a quiet but durable resentment over the list of grievances against the United States that the president brought to the world's attention while overseas. There are certain things that can't be taken back. There are images that are hard to forget. Anger of this kind has an enduring power that could, in the end, haunt this presidency.

Ms. Rabinowitz is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board.

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