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The President's Apology Tour

Great leaders aren't defined by consensus.

By [KARL ROVE](#)

President Barack Obama has finished the second leg of his international confession tour. In less than 100 days, he has apologized on three continents for what he views as the sins of America and his predecessors.

Mr. Obama told the French (the French!) that America "has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive" toward Europe. In Prague, he said America has "a moral responsibility to act" on arms control because only the U.S. had "used a nuclear weapon." In London, he said that decisions about the world financial system were no longer made by "just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with a brandy" -- as if that were a bad thing. And in Latin America, he said the U.S. had not "pursued and sustained engagement with our neighbors" because we "failed to see that our own progress is tied directly to progress throughout the Americas."

By confessing our nation's sins, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said that Mr. Obama has "changed the image of America around the world" and made the U.S. "safer and stronger." As evidence, Mr. Gibbs pointed to the absence of protesters during the Summit of the Americas this past weekend.

That's now the test of success? Anti-American protesters are a remarkably unreliable indicator of a president's wisdom. Ronald Reagan drew hundreds of thousands of protesters by deploying Pershing and cruise missiles in Europe. Those missiles helped win the Cold War.

There is something ungracious in Mr. Obama criticizing his predecessors, including most recently John F. Kennedy. ("I'm grateful that President [Daniel] Ortega did not blame me for things that happened when I was three months old," Mr. Obama said after the Nicaraguan delivered a 52-minute anti-American tirade that touched on the Bay of Pigs.) Mr. Obama acts as if no past president -- except maybe Abraham Lincoln -- possesses his wisdom.

Mr. Obama was asked in Europe if he believes in American exceptionalism. He said he did -- in the same way that "the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks in Greek exceptionalism." That's another way of saying, "No."

Mr. Obama makes it seem as though there is moral equivalence between America and its adversaries and assumes that if he confesses America's sins, other nations will confess theirs and change. But he won no confessions (let alone change) from the leaders of Venezuela, Nicaragua or Russia. He apologized for America and our adversaries rejoiced. Fidel Castro isn't easing up on Cuban repression, but he is preparing to take advantage of Mr. Obama's policy shifts.

When a president desires personal popularity, he can lose focus on vital American interests. It's early, but with little to show for the confessions, David Axelrod of Team Obama was compelled to say this week that the president planted, cultivated and will harvest "very, very valuable" returns later. Like what?

Meanwhile, the desire for popularity has led Mr. Obama to embrace bad policies. Blaming America for the world financial crisis led him to give into European demands for crackdowns on tax havens and hedge funds. Neither had much to do with the credit crisis. Saying that America's relationship with Russia "has been allowed to drift" led the president to push for arms negotiations. But that draws attention away from America's real problems with Russia: its invasion of Georgia last summer, its bullying of Ukraine, its refusal to join in pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, and its threats of retaliation against the Poles, Balts and Czechs for standing with the U.S. on missile defense.

Mr. Obama is downplaying the threats we face. He takes comfort in thinking that Venezuela has a defense budget that "is probably 1/600th" of America's -- it's actually 1/215th -- but that hasn't kept Mr. Chávez from supporting narcoterrorists waging war on Colombia (a key U.S. ally) or giving petrodollars to anti-American regimes. Venezuela isn't likely to attack the U.S., but it is capable of harming American interests.

Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoir "Years of Renewal": "The great statesmen of the past saw themselves as heroes who took on the burden of their societies' painful journey from the familiar to the as yet unknown. The modern politician is less interested in being a hero than a superstar. Heroes walk alone; stars derive their status from approbation. Heroes are defined by inner values; stars by consensus. When a candidate's views are forged in focus groups and ratified by television anchorpersons, insecurity and superficiality become congenital."

A superstar, not a statesman, today leads our country. That may win short-term applause from foreign audiences, but do little for what should be the chief foreign policy preoccupation of any U.S. president: advancing America's long-term interests.

Mr. Rove is the former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush.

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