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OPINION

Throwing our past under the bus

BY RICH LOWRY

The calendar says President Barack Obama took office in 2009, although that's only a technicality. In his own mind, Obama ascended in Year Zero, a time of ritualistic cleansing in preparation for the relaunching of an America free from its past sins.

Has an American president ever appeared less vested in his nation's history than Barack Obama? He shrugged off a rancid attack on the United States by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega at the Summit of the Americas, including a rant on the Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, by saying he'd only been 3 months old at the time. Nothing to do with *me*.

It's Obama's own personal *novus ordo seclorum*. Or as an Obama official put it, "His expectation is that these debates of the past can remain that, debates of the past."

Obama's theory is that "if we are practicing what we preach and if we occasionally confess to having strayed from our values and our ideals, that strengthens our hand." This is an old strand in America foreign policy, associated with what the historian Walter Russell Mead calls "the Jeffersonian tradition." It is characterized, Mead writes, by the belief that the U.S. can best serve "the cause of universal democracy by setting an example rather than imposing a model," and by

a diplomacy of "speak softly, and carry the smallest possible stick."

But Obama has been speaking softly to the point of national self-abasement. It's as if we elected not so much a president as a University of Chicago law professor who — holding his country at a critical distance — analyzes its strengths and weakness in a boffo traveling lecture series. In Obama's serial apologies — for America's arrogance, for its mistreatment of the Indians, for Hiroshima and so on — can be detected muted versions of the multiculturalist orthodoxies of academe and of the themes of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Obama hopes that throwing America's past under the bus will win him diplomatic chits abroad, as we "break free" from "stale debates and old ideologies." What he doesn't realize is that for enemies like Iran and Venezuela, the debates aren't stale and the ideologies aren't old. For these players, Obama's rhetorical concessions are not ways to move beyond the debates but to make advances within them.

Obama seems to take active pleasure in saying that there are no senior or junior partners on the international stage. The danger is that foreign governments will actually believe him. Obama may think he's being magnanimous and admirably humble about his own country, but adversaries could be

"His expectation is that these debates of the past can remain that, debates of the past."

forgiven for detecting weakness.

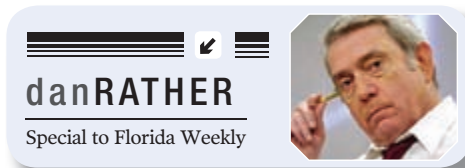
The nightmare scenario is that, while soaking up all the applause, Obama has had a Kennedy-Khrushchev moment. The young, well-intentioned American president got pushed around by the Soviet premier in summit meetings in Vienna. After taking Kennedy's measure and finding him lacking, Khrushchev embarked on a campaign of international assertion that eventually led to the Cuban missile crisis. This is the risk in Obama's showy pliability and detachment from his country circa 1776-2008.

No president can be an island unto himself. It's not Year Zero. History is still in full flower, for better or worse. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review* and co-author of the new spy thriller "Banquo's Ghosts."

GUEST OPINION

More bad news than good in South Asia



This week brought good news and bad news for President Barack Obama's strategic focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan — but mostly bad news.

First, though, the good. The president and his foreign-policy team have shown they understand the gravity of the situation in western Pakistan, where Taliban insurgents recently took control of an area just 60 miles from the capital of Islamabad. More importantly, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari seems to have heeded Washington's calls for forceful action, as Pakistan's military this week pounded Taliban positions in and around the contested Swat Valley.

That's the good news. The bad news relates mostly to the inherent difficulties of fighting a war of insurgency in a distant part of the world, where the United States is viewed with suspicion at best. At the same time that President Zardari and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan were meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama in Washington, a U.S. air raid that had inflicted heavy civilian casualties in Afghanistan was mak-

ing headlines around the world.

Put yourself, for the moment, in the shoes of a Pakistani or Afghan civilian, wondering with whom to side. You hear about the dead civilians in Afghanistan, you see news of the Pakistani government's counteroffensive in Swat and the tens of thousands of innocent refugees now fleeing that region for their lives — and then you see the pictures of your president, be it Karzai or Zardari, sitting at a table in Washington with the U.S. president. If this were you, you might be forgiven for thinking that your leaders were doing the bidding of a foreign power, with death and misery as the results.

This is what the U.S. is up against: Islamic insurgents who vow our destruction, who strike and then hide among civilians. Because the U.S. does not — not yet, anyway — have the ground forces to meet Taliban attacks, our military has had to rely on airstrikes, which lead to civilian casualties. Which lead, in turn, to greater sympathy for the Taliban.

Meanwhile, there is the irony that Karzai and Zardari, who run the risk at home of being seen as U.S. puppets, are not leaders whom those in Washington consider reliable or capable guardians of U.S. interests. But these are the allies we've got, in the fight that Obama has deemed central to defeating Islamic terror-

ism. The stakes of that fight are driven higher by the fact that Pakistan, where the U.S. has little to no direct influence on the ground, possesses nuclear weapons.

The war against the Taliban will not be won, however victory is defined, by military means alone. President Obama, if he realizes this — and he seems to — will need to convince Congress and the American people of this, too. You need civilian support to defeat an insurgency, and to gain civilian support you need a government that can deliver basic services without shaking down the populace for constant bribes. Doing this takes money and time, and the U.S. will need to spend both if the Taliban are to be defeated.

You also need to assure the safety of civilians who may want to help you, and you need to avoid killing them in battles against the insurgents. These two objectives take boots on the ground, and the U.S. will need a lot of them, too, to defeat the Taliban.

This is not the time when Americans want to hear about the need for another major overseas commitment in treasure and treasured servicemen and -women. But absent such a commitment, and a commitment for the long haul, the prospects grow for more weeks where the bad news in South Asia surpasses the good. ■