

The Honeymooners

by James Taranto

BARACK OBAMA RAN FOR PRESIDENT promising to win back the respect of “the world,” which George W. Bush has alienated. So the big question is this: how long after Obama’s inauguration will it take before “the world” begins to sour on him—begins to suspect that he is one of us, not one of them?

The answer is minus 16 days.

On Sunday, January 4, the website of London’s *Guardian* published a column by Simon Tisdall faulting Obama for failing to side with Hamas in its war against Israel:

Obama has remained wholly silent during the Gaza crisis. His aides say he is following established protocol that the US has only one president at a time....

But evidence is mounting that Obama is already losing ground among key Arab and Muslim audiences that cannot understand why, given his promise of change, he has not spoken out. Arab commentators and editorialists say there is growing disappointment at Obama’s detachment—and that his failure to distance himself from George Bush’s strongly pro-Israeli stance is encouraging the belief that he either shares Bush’s bias or simply does not care.

The Al-Jazeera satellite television station recently broadcast footage of Obama on holiday in Hawaii, wearing shorts and playing golf, juxtaposed with scenes of bloodshed and mayhem in Gaza. Its report criticising “the deafening silence from the Obama team” suggested Obama is losing a battle of perceptions among Muslims that he may not realise has even begun.

Back home, however, the press was still pro-Obama—and giddily so. Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* got into the mood in his January 14 column:

This 47-year-old man of mixed race, whose very name—O-Ba-Ma—has the three-syllable universality of a child’s lullaby, has always had something of the providential about him, a global figure who looks more like the guy at the local bodega than the guys on dollar bills. That’s the magic.

Two days earlier, Mike Lupica of New York’s *Daily News* spoke ruth to power:

He does not get sworn in as the 44th President for another eight days, but it is as if Barack Obama, the only one who can get us out of this mess, is running the country already. Because they have already started in on him.

It is still business as usual in Washington at a time when our economy, a direct result of business as usual, feels like the real terrorist threat these days.

Obama is a new beginning at a time we need a new beginning as much as we have in nearly 80 years. We finally have a President we want to believe in, a President who again feels like the smartest guy in the room.

Yet, before the game even begins, he sees what he will be up against...

So sweet was Obama’s honeymoon that on January 4, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Carol

Marin observed that journalists were “deferential, eager to please, prepared to keep a careful distance”:

The Obama news conferences tell that story, making one yearn for the return of the always-irritating Sam Donaldson to awaken the slumbering press to the notion that decorum isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The press corps, most of us, don't even bother raising our hands any more to ask questions because Obama always has before him a list of correspondents who've been advised they will be called upon that day.

Imagine the howls of outrage if George W. Bush had tried that. And the contrasts between the press's attitudes toward Obama and his predecessor extended to matters of substance—including areas in which Obama was moving away from his own campaign promises and toward Bush's positions.

On January 12, the Associated Press reported that “Obama is preparing to issue an executive order his first week in office—and perhaps his first day—to close the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay”—just as he had promised. But the AP saved the actual news for the second paragraph:

It's unlikely the detention facility at the Navy base in Cuba will be closed anytime soon. In an interview last weekend, Obama said it would be “a challenge” to close it even within the first 100 days of his administration.

By the end of that week, the *Washington Post* was reporting that Obama had said in an interview that “he will consider it a failure if he has not closed the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, by the end of his first term in office.” Obama's promises to close Guantanamo may end up meaning as much as Bush's. At least the *New York Times* anticipated this. It published an article noting that a “review of the government's public files underscores the challenges of fulfilling that promise”—on November 3. The day before Obama's election, that is, the *Times* discovered that Guantanamo was filled with terrorists.

Similarly, in a January 11 interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, Obama backed away from his position that intelligence agencies interrogating terrorists should be bound by the Army Field Manual. “We shouldn't be making judgments on the basis

of incomplete information or campaign rhetoric,” Obama told Stephanopoulos. Pressed for specifics, Obama would say only that he believes waterboarding is “torture.” Three days later, a National Public Radio commentator opined, “The moral issues related to torture are not a slam-dunk.” Now he tells us!

On domestic policy, too, both Obama and the press showed themselves to be far more flexible than during the campaign and the Bush years. The funniest example was a *New York Times* editorial calling for a tax increase but sympathizing with Obama's evident decision not to push for one just yet:

We also acknowledge that a tax increase on the rich, though feasible, could backfire in these tense times. Because it is hard to explain and easy to demagogue, it could foster a confusing debate that might impair confidence just when confidence needs to be revived.

But even if he skips the income tax increase this year, Mr. Obama must press for increases in coming years.

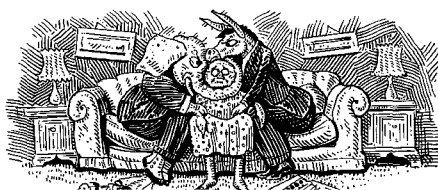
If the *Times* finds its own editorial position “hard to explain,” perhaps that is because it is wrong—or because the *Times* editorialists aren't very good at their jobs.

IN A JANUARY 7 INTERVIEW WITH CNBC, Obama gave another indication that the press's love for him may be unrequited. “I very rarely read good press,” the president-elect told host John Harwood. “I often read bad press, not because I agree with it, but because I want to get a sense of, are there areas where I'm falling short and I can do better?”

Yet during the transition at least, even conservative commentators were frequently favorable toward Obama—in part out of respect for the office, in part because he had moved away from many of his left-wing campaign promises, and in part because, ideology aside, the inauguration of the first black president was a milestone nearly everyone could celebrate.

So where does Obama go to read “bad press”? Let's just hope the president isn't getting all his news from the *Guardian*. ❁

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LaHood's Neighborhood

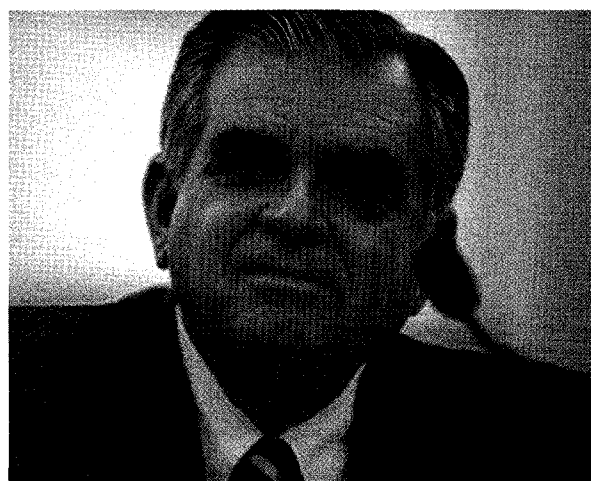
by John H. Fund

BARACK OBAMA MADE A CAMPAIGN PLEDGE to appoint Republicans to his cabinet in order to transcend old political divisions. In retaining Defense Secretary Bob Gates, a registered independent who has served GOP presidents, Mr. Obama picked a skilled technocrat.

His choice of retiring GOP Rep. Ray LaHood of Illinois to be transportation secretary is more intriguing and offers clues to the kind of Republican Obama likes on domestic issues—one who goes along with his taste for big government. As a congressman, LaHood was named “Porker of the Month” by Citizens Against Government Waste for the countless “earmarks” he stuffed into legislation. Teamsters president James Hoffa is a big booster of LaHood, issuing a statement when the latter was named by Obama that said it all: “As a moderate Republican, he has been a friend of the Teamsters Union on a number of important issues.”

As we’ve learned from the Blagojevich scandal, Illinois politics is a rich stew often seasoned with corruption. Traditional ideological differences aren’t nearly as important as raw political horse trading. While Republicans have held the governorship for 26 of the last 32 years, state spending has gone up 68 percent in inflation-adjusted terms during that period. Many of the state’s Republicans style themselves after Bob Michel, the minority leader of the U.S. House until 1994, who prided himself on “working” with the other party as much or more as his own. “Bob Michel was the personification of the sort of Republican that conservatives hoped had vanished after the 1994 takeover of Congress,” says David Keene, head of the American Conservative Union and an Illinois native. “Now I fear they are coming back.”

Ray LaHood has always been a Bob Michel Republican. Indeed, he was Mr. Michel’s chief of staff when he won his House seat upon his boss’s retirement in 1994. At first his voting record was relatively conservative—but by this year LaHood was voting



with the majority of his party only 78 percent of the time. After Denny Hastert, a fellow member from Illinois, became House Speaker in 1998, LaHood became his point man in the House. Although former House majority leader Tom DeLay is often blamed for encouraging GOP members to become addicted to pork-barrel earmarks, Hastert was fully supportive of the approach.

After all, such an approach had been part of Republican success in Illinois. For 40 years, William Cellini, a major Republican lobbyist and power-broker, has dominated Illinois road construction by cutting deals with both parties. The *Chicago Sun-Times* reports that after some Democrats were shocked to see Cellini sitting with Rod Blagojevich