Job One

The most important challenge facing President-elect Barack Obama is to restore America’s standing in the eyes of the world. He must reinvent the United States as a country that listens, engages with others and has «a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.» To this end, the following prescription might help reverse the damage of the Bush years:

Stop acting and sounding as if yours is the only way of seeing the world («you’re either with us or against us»), which makes all disagreement illegitimate or «anti-American.» Don’t define «anti-Americanism» so broadly that you make every critic into an enemy. Recognize that foreigners approach global problems with a different set of assumptions and experiences -- and that they might have different priorities that Washington must learn to respect.

Demonstrate openness: Show that, despite internal preoccupations, the United States will never forget its responsibilities to the well-being of the world. Promote international solutions and multilateral institutions to implement them: Never again show the Bush administration’s disdain for the views of the rest of the world.

Revive America’s finest traditions. Stop repudiating the values for which the United States has long stood -- close down Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, abjure torture and rendition, prosecute Blackwater’s killings of civilians and vow that the United States will never conquer its enemies by behaving like them. Show the world that America will again be a land animated by hope, not impelled by fear.

-- Shashi Tharoor, former undersecretary general of the United Nations

***

President Bush leaves office with the United States bogged down in a huge, unstable and conflict-ridden area from east of Egypt to west of India. To avert involvement in wider violence there, Obama must rely more on what I call comprehensive regional diplomacy. That means:

1. A readiness to negotiate directly with Iran about its nuclear ambitions and both sides’ regional security concerns, without preconditions and without counterproductive threats of war (though we should keep the option of much more severe sanctions on the table).

2. A revised strategy for Afghanistan that would explore the possibility of local arrangements with various Taliban forces. If local Taliban leaders agree to expel al-Qaeda remnants, consider the possibility of a NATO drawdown in those regions.

3. An explicit U.S. diplomatic initiative defining the parameters of a fair Israeli-Palestinian peace, particularly: no «right of return,» a genuinely shared Jerusalem, an Israeli return to the 1967 lines with equitable territorial exchanges, and a demilitarized Palestinian state, perhaps with U.S. peacekeepers.

If comprehensive diplomacy proves productive, the United States will have helped to pacify an increasingly volatile region. If it fails, we will be roughly where we are now: in the midst of a mess.

-- Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter

***
Okay, the state of the economy has to be President-elect Obama’s top priority. But repairing fences with Russia should be his most pressing foreign task. I’m afraid the United States has a lot to answer for here. Russia’s August attack on Georgia was nasty, brutish and excessive, but Washington fell into a carefully prepared bear trap for which the West and NATO were totally unprepared. Bad relations with Moscow are not one-way traffic; they go back to the days of President Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, with all her in-built prejudices against Russia. We rubbed the fallen Russians’ noses in the dirt. These are proud people, and it is hardly surprising that a considerable majority of them, of all ages, now support a strongman, Vladimir Putin, in his nationalist defiance of the West. We disregard the Russians’ current mood at our peril. To advance NATO into Russia’s backyard in Ukraine and Georgia was a provocative folly — and, given NATO’s current weakness, a meaningless gesture. More foolish still was the ringing of Russia with antiballistic missile sites. The United States could begin by scrapping those costly and possibly ineffectual missile sites in exchange for meaningful concessions and a restoration of Russian goodwill. As in World War II, Russia should be our ally, not a potential foe.

— Alistair Horne, author, «A Savage War of Peace»

***

The highest priority for the Obama presidency must be securing nuclear weapons and materials to prevent them from falling into dangerous hands. The likelihood of nuclear terrorism might be low, but its impact would be devastating. Obama must make it a firm goal to secure all fissile materials before the end of his first term. If terrorists cannot gain access to weapons-grade material, they cannot build a nuclear device. Achieving this goal will require close cooperation and trade-offs with not only Russia but dozens of countries, but we can imagine no threat more dire.

The threat is bigger than terrorism: More nuclear-armed states means more risks to peace and stability. Obama will need to successfully conclude the six-party talks to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and start a direct dialogue with Iran. We can help by making deeper nuclear arms reductions, ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and fulfilling the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty — steps that would have a powerful, positive effect.

— Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, former co-chairmen, 9/11 Commission

President Obama’s top priority must be to keep America safe. But to do so, he must break a promise he made to his supporters. During the campaign, he pledged an immediate, phased withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, which he said would be completed by mid-2010. Although conditions in Iraq have improved dramatically over the past year — thanks largely to the surge in U.S. troops that he opposed — stability is still fragile. If our enemies perceive any weakness, they will take advantage to attack us not only in Iraq but elsewhere.

Candidate Obama said that we must pull out of Iraq in order to engage fully in what he has called «the central front» in the war on terror, Afghanistan. But a defeat in Iraq would make victory in Afghanistan far less likely. The new president will find out soon enough that the only thing worse than breaking a campaign promise is keeping one that would endanger American lives.

— Linda Chavez, chairman of the Center for Equal Opportunity and a White House aide during the Reagan administration

***
The world’s richest nation dare not forget the world’s poorest people. Obama’s top priority should be adopting a strategy of what I call sustainable development—a strategy that combines economic development with environmental sustainability, for the United States and for the world. Such an approach merges science and policy, thinks in terms of decades rather than years, and recognizes that solutions must be cooperative and global rather than unilateral and national.

Currently, we lurch from crisis to crisis, from food to energy to natural disaster to finance, without recognizing that these cascading shocks are interconnected. Darfur, Somalia and Afghanistan are at least as much about water scarcity, climate and population as they are about politics; even the global financial crisis was triggered, in part, by the contemporaneous energy crisis. As president, Obama will need to lead the U.S. government to address these problems holistically. As thankless as government reorganization can be, he should create a new Department of International Sustainable Development to work together with the rest of the world on the Millennium Development Goals and the interconnected long-term challenges of poverty, disease, energy, climate, water and population—all of which are key to sustainable growth, prosperity and security.

-- Jeffrey Sachs, director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute and special adviser to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

* * *

As President-elect Obama turns his attention to the economy, I hope he will make the needs of the poor, and particularly poor children, a top priority—not just because the poor will be among the hardest hit in the current economic crisis but because this country needs to end what the Children’s Defense Fund calls «America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline.» Because of our failure to educate children, a black boy born in 2001 has a 1-in-3 chance of eventually going to jail.

We need a massive intervention to educate poor children, starting at birth and staying with them so they can succeed in school and the workplace. By doing so, these kids will avoid the fate of hundreds of thousands of poor young men and women who fail academically: unemployment, drug abuse, prison. Instead of contributing tax dollars to our society, these young people are contributing to the $62 billion cost that the government spends on corrections annually.

-- Geoffrey Canada, president, Harlem Children’s Zone

* * *

America’s economic vitality must be priority No. 1 because it is the foundation for both our global political power and our military might. Brainpower, innovation and entrepreneurship are the keys to 21st-century prosperity. The new president should focus on pro-growth tax policies, incentives for job creation and investments in innovation, worker retraining and education.

The United States levies the second-highest business tax rate in the world. A lower rate will keep more jobs here. Small business is the engine of economic growth. We must make it easier for small businesses to form, hire and prosper.

We also must enact comprehensive immigration reform so that the United States continues to attract entrepreneurs, risk-takers and hardworking people from all over the world. And we must engage fully in the world if we are to lead. We must embrace free trade with new enthusiasm.

-- Carly Fiorina, former chief executive of HP and chief executive of Carly Fiorina Enterprises
Job One

* * *

A Category 5 hurricane has hit the world’s financial system, but a bigger storm is approaching. Climate change threatens the economic, political and environmental health of the world. Now is the time to remake the vast systems that power the nation and the world. The president must make this his top economic priority -- and establish a National Energy Council in the White House to get the job done. Critical needs for investment include:

Modernizing the electric-power grid with digital equipment and creating renewable-energy transmission corridors to bring wind and solar energy to market.

Retooling Detroit to produce plug-in hybrid vehicles that will get American cars off oil.

Putting U.S. contractors and builders to work on energy efficiency. Chicago’s plan to retrofit 40 percent of its buildings by 2020 is a model approach for the nation.

Investing much more boldly in research, development and deployment of the low-carbon technologies of the future.

Capping our emissions in order to put a price on carbon, provide incentives for investment in alternatives and secure a new U.N.-led global climate agreement

-- Ted Turner, chairman, United Nations Foundation

* * *

By moving immediately to use wind and solar power for electricity generation and tapping our abundant supplies of natural gas as a transportation fuel, we can reduce the amount of oil the United States imports by up to 50 percent over the next 10 years.

Building out our wind capacity would provide more than 130,000 new jobs in the first year alone. The Energy Department estimates that it would create upwards of 3.5 million jobs over a 10-year period.

Americans must not be fooled by low gas prices at the pump. Whether the price is $2.50 per gallon or $4.50, hundreds of billions of dollars per year are going to foreign governments. Using our abundant natural gas reserves for transportation fuel is cheaper, cleaner and American. It will result in immediate cost savings and keep the money here to invest in new domestic sources.

For more than four decades, low gas prices, little federal leadership and a lack of accountability have not changed my target: Reduce our dependency on foreign oil. Fast.

-- T. Boone Pickens, chairman, BP Capital Management

* * *

President-elect Obama must deal quickly and boldly with Afghanistan. But doing so will require an early initiative to help Pakistan and India settle their differences on Kashmir. The problems of Afghanistan and Pakistan are inseparable. But Pakistan’s ability to deal with Taliban and other extremists on its western border is hampered by its preoccupation with India, its traditional adversary to the east. India has resisted U.S. mediation on Kashmir in the past, but the growing U.S.-India strategic relationship may now make American involvement possible.

One intriguing model for Kashmir is the 1998 Belfast agreement, which established a web of overlapping institutions that have allowed the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to, in effect, share sovereignty over Northern Ireland -- and end decades of deep-seated violence.
It’s easy to say, «Close Guantanamo.» It’s not just that the prison camp has become an international symbol of U.S. lawlessness, abuse and bungling. The real problem is that every time a prosecutor quits in disgust, a judge finds evidence of torture or another prisoner is cleared but not released, we blacken our own eye all over again. Guantanamo has become its own form of ongoing self-torment.

Closing Guantanamo will be enormously complicated. As a result of our actions there, it holds some extremely dangerous terrorists who can no longer be tried in domestic criminal proceedings. As a result of our actions there, men who were not terrorists six years ago may well be terrorists today. And as a result of our actions there, some detainees -- such as the Muslim Chinese Uighurs -- are completely unconnected to terrorism yet still unwelcome anyplace in the world. But to close the camp is to recognize that the vast problems associated with moving, prosecuting and repatriating detainees are still preferable to perpetuating the fiction that we are holding just «the worst of the worst.» Many of Gitmo’s remaining detainees are merely the unluckiest of the unlucky. Others just don’t come from countries willing to fight for them.

Closing the prison camp will go a long way toward restoring America’s reputation as a nation of laws and will signal a long-overdue willingness to admit to past error.

-- Peter Mehlman, former writer for «Seinfeld»

As his first order of business, the new president must heal our relations with the rest of the world. Immediately after learning the names of his staff and making sure they have fresh office supplies, the president should announce a meeting at the White House in which all world leaders significant enough to own their own planes are flown in and put up in Washington hotels at their own expense. After all the delegations are treated to a generously discounted continental breakfast in the East Wing, the new president must, in effect, apologize to everyone in the world for our behavior over the past eight years and buttress that apology with a blizzard of lame yet creatively worded excuses. For instance, he could explain to the world that we, like a sullen teenager, were just going through a phase.

All right, another phase.

He must explain that, really, we swear, we were just, you know, in a bad place. But that’s over. Now we feel like we’ve passed the subprime of our lives, and we promise to stop acting up, acting out . . . acting period. Torture, nation-building, bugging our friends, bombing our enemies, snowing the United Nations -- that’s over. Kyoto, Guantanamo, New Orleans, Abu Ghraib, Darfur, Pennsylvania Avenue -- we’re on board with however the world community sees fit to deal with these trouble spots.

To assure the world community that we’re not just paying lip service, end the meeting by announcing that all the leaders can stay in town an extra night at weekday rates.