



President Obama's 'Nice Guy Act' Wearing Thin?

Rodney Dangerfield made a very profitable career off his famous lament, "I can't get no respect." Seems these days that President Obama knows exactly what Rodney was talking about. In an article that appeared Monday in *Der Spiegel*, a weekly magazine published in Hamburg, Germany, President Obama's "nice guy act" was mocked and the successes of his professed aim to bring civility and mutual respect back to American foreign policy were questioned.

In a piece that begins by recounting a few signal moments of President Obama's recent trek through Asia, *Der Spiegel* bemoans the President's diplomatic efforts and seems to take glee in the tepid response of Asian leaders to his overtures. President Obama, who before embarking on the Asian junket, predicted a friendly reception as he was one of their own, the first "Pacific President." Twelve banal banquets and hundreds of handshakes later, it was evident that the President's "fellow" Asians were not quite *au fait* with the welcome wagon routine he was expecting.



As evidence of Asian indifference to the American president's visit, *Der Spiegel* describes a particularly irksome meeting with journalists outside of the Blue House in Seoul, the official home of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. The report depicts a harried President Obama rushing past the gathered media offering nothing more than a "thank you" before ducking into his Korean counterpart's home and leaving his press secretary, David Axelrod to make a statement on the president's behalf.

"The Asians smiled but made no concessions," crows the magazine. The friendly but futile reception that awaited President Obama in Asia is proof, the author of the article claims, that President Obama's domestic appeal has for the most part been lost in translation overseas and he now suffers from diminished stature throughout the world. Several examples of the president's shrinking influence are cited.

First, there is the case of Israel, traditionally one of America's staunchest and loyal allies. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has informed President Obama in very clear and certain terms that his government adamantly refuses to adhere to a moratorium on development of Israeli settlements in the region. Furthermore, Netanyahu recently reiterated to the president that peace with Palestine will be brought about only through that nation's acceptance of a roster of well-defined and inviolable terms, pressure from the United States notwithstanding. "We thought we had some leverage," groaned



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a former Clinton-era ambassador to Israel, “but that proved to be an illusion.” It seems that the misdirection and sleight of hand so masterfully employed by President Obama at home is seen as fumbling and inexpert elsewhere.

Japan is another erstwhile ally of the United States that gave President Obama the cold shoulder while traveling in Asia. Ministers of the new Japanese governing coalition were scheduled to appear with President Obama at a photo opportunity in the Indian Ocean where they would watch tankers from the Japanese navy refuel American warships on their way to service in the war in Afghanistan. The Japanese officials were a no-show. With friends like these, the President doesn’t need enemies, even those with glossy pages.

Finally, the article in *Der Spiegel* cites President Obama’s failure to achieve any significant concessions from Beijing in the area of human rights abuses as convincing evidence that President Obama may not be up to the burden that has been placed upon him. His detractors are quick to compare the current American president’s foreign policy frustrations to those of another unqualified world citizen, Jimmy Carter. Carter’s weaknesses, missteps, and mishandling of delicate and complicated matters, both foreign and domestic, are legendary. The perception, whether accurate or not, that Mr. Carter was weak and too willing to quickly accede to global pressure, is to be fervently avoided according to Obama spokesmen. There is a sense in the West Wing that it would be better for Obama’s foreign policy posture to be compared to that of George W. Bush than that of Jimmy Carter.

The President’s political foes are equally dedicated to drawing the unfavorable comparison as often as possible. One of the Democratic party’s most vociferous and media-savvy critics, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, accentuates the mash-up in his inimitable fashion, “Carter tried weakness and the world got tougher because the predators, the aggressors, the anti-Americans, the dictators, when they sense weakness, they all start pushing ahead. This [President Obama’s foreign stature] does look a lot like Jimmy Carter.”

As the previous several administrations have proven, however, it matters little which party’s principal occupies the Oval Office, while the rhetoric and reasons between Democrats and Republicans may appear antipodean, the quantifiable results are undeniably indistinguishable.

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