

The value of a good reputation

THE ISSUE | The U.S. improves its image.
OUR OPINION | How the world sees us is key to getting along with our allies and dealing with our enemies.

Some American politicians tend to paint foreign leaders – indeed, foreigners in general – with a broad brush in just two colors: pro-American and anti-American. For those Americans paying attention, this assumption was upended in 2007 when France, often characterized as bitterly anti-American during the Bush years, elected as president Nicolas Sarkozy, who praises the U.S. at every turn and delights in being called “the American” by his countrymen.

In his 2008 book, “The Post-American World,” Fareed Zakaria recalls the first meeting Sarkozy had after his election with Condoleezza Rice, then secretary of state:

“She asked him, ‘What can I do for you?’ His response was revealing. ‘Improve your image in the world,’ he said. ‘It’s difficult when the country that is the most powerful, the most successful – that is, of necessity, the leader for our side – is one of the most unpopular countries in the world. It presents overwhelming problems for you and overwhelming problems for your allies. So do everything you can to improve the way you’re perceived. That’s what you can do for me.’”

Sarkozy got his wish. America’s brand is now the most popular in the world, up from number 7 a year ago, at least according to GfK Roper’s Nation Brand Index.

“In all my years studying national reputation, I have never seen any country experience such a dramatic change in its standing as we see for the United States in 2009,” explains Simon Anholt, NBI founder and an independent adviser to more than a dozen national governments around the world.

“Despite recent econom-

ic turmoil, the U.S. actually gained significant ground. The results suggest that the new U.S. administration has been well received abroad and the American electorate’s decision to vote in President Obama has given the United States the status of the world’s most admired country.”

It is in this context that Obama’s Nobel Prize should be understood. We share the view – as does Obama – that the Nobel decision was embarrassing premature. But recovering America’s international standing from the damage done by Bush is not inconsequential, and it is a result not just of Obama’s color, but of his efforts, beginning months before his election, to project a different image to the world.

Being admired has long been America’s not-so-secret weapon. For centuries, it is what has drawn the world’s brightest and most ambitious people to build a better life here. It pays off in foreign investment, in the visits of tourists from around the world, and in the popularity of American products.

Our international reputation also strengthens the president’s hands in foreign relations, but within limits. Being popular gets Obama to the table, but it doesn’t make Vladimir Putin or Mahmud Ahmadinejad any less difficult to deal with. It doesn’t make the disagreements in the Mideast any less intractable. Success abroad requires persistent, patient diplomacy, not popularity polls.

But America’s image abroad is an element of soft power, and, as Sarkozy says, it changes the equations that guide the actions of allies and adversaries alike. It is a resource Obama should carefully steward.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Facilities plan is necessary

TO THE EDITOR | The Corning-Painted Post facilities plan is an absolute necessity for our community’s children’s education. And, if you don’t believe that the physical surroundings correlate to test scores and increased initiative and creativity among our teachers and students, then you are wrong.

Building a school is different from building an office. School facilities not only have to be functional, economical, and environmentally friendly, they have to give a sense of self-worth to the student. The facilities have to show the community’s commitment to education. Indeed, schools send an important message, that our children have value. The building can either say to students: “Tough it out and get by – we’re not completely committed to your education,” or it can say: “You are a vital part of our community. We want you to feel safe, comfortable, challenged, inspired, proud – we believe in you and your future.” The message that facilities sends is not lost on teachers, students, or the community at large.

School facilities also symbolize something to

the community. An attractive school is a source of pride and generates good will for public education. For students, it inspires good conduct, increases academic achievement, and reduces truancy. It has been said that a good teacher can teach anywhere and that a willing student is capable of learning in spite of the setting. There may be some truth to that. The issue is, however, whether teachers teach as well or students learn as much as they could have in better surroundings. It is simply a fact that the school environment itself has a largely untapped potential as an active contributor to the learning process.

Education is about developing human beings, and human development is not mechanical or linear. It is organic and dynamic. Like all living forms, we flourish in certain conditions and shrivel in others. Great teachers, great parents, and great leaders understand those conditions intuitively. The answer is not to standardize education, including the buildings, but to personalize and customize it to the need of each child and community. There is no alternative. There never will be.

Kristina M. Belanger
Painted Post

ARTIST’S VIEW



COMMENTARY | LEONARD PITTS JR.

Family and clash of cultures

We don’t know why Faleh Hassan Almaleki came to this country in the mid-’90s, and it’s unlikely he’ll be able to tell us anytime soon. He’s in jail in Maricopa County, Ariz., at this writing, in lieu of a \$5 million cash bond. It hardly seems far-fetched, however, to suppose he emigrated from his native Iraq for the same reason immigrants typically seek these shores: America promises opportunity and freedom.

But one wonders if he truly knew the meaning of the words.

Almaleki is the 48-year-old Glendale, Ariz., man who stands accused of using his Jeep Cherokee to run down his 20-year-old daughter, Noor, and another woman, Amal Edan Khalaf. Khalaf, said to be the mother of Noor’s boyfriend, is expected to survive the Oct. 20th attack in the parking lot of a state government building. Noor was less fortunate. She died last Monday.

About her, we know only a few things: She had a page on Facebook and another on MySpace. She was interested in modeling. And at some point she either went to Iraq and got married – or went there and rejected the suitor her family had arranged for her. Police are still trying to determine which of those stories, both in circulation, is true. Either way, she

returned to the States, where she moved in with her boyfriend and his mother.

Something else we know: Almaleki felt his Facebook-using, husband-rejecting daughter had become too “Westernized.” His son, Peter Ali, told a local TV news station that tensions ran high between father and daughter. Noor, he said, went “out of her way” to disrespect their conservative Muslim father.

And where Almaleki comes from, it is standard practice that the daughter who disrespects or brings shame upon her family is subject to what they call an honor killing. Repeating for emphasis: Almaleki is alleged to have run down two defenseless women as a matter of “honor.”

While you absorb that, let me tell you a few things I believe:

I believe that in most cases, I have no right to judge your culture by the standards of mine.

I believe what seems exotic to me might be enlightened to you.

I believe no culture has a monopoly on morality.

But I also believe you don’t run down your daughter because she has a page on Facebook and won’t marry the guy you choose.

That is not honor. It is, in fact, the opposite – an act of appalling cowardice suggestive not simply of religious extremism but of a people in fear of the sexuality and independence of women. It tells you

something about a culture’s lack of faith in its own mores any time it feels compelled to use violence to enforce those mores upon its people. And it tells you something about Almaleki’s “honor” that he bolted like a scared rabbit after allegedly running the women down. It took over a week for authorities to capture him.

The U.N. Population Fund estimates that more than 5,000 women a year die in “honor” killings for such “crimes” as speaking to unrelated men or being raped. Take it as brutal evidence of the way half the human race continues to oppress the other half.

It is disgraceful that such a thing happens anywhere, but it is especially galling that it has happened here. Not just because this is home soil and such things are alien to most of us, but because it suggests, poignantly, that Faleh Hassan Almaleki did not truly understand the vastness of the hope that brings immigrants like him here. If America promised him freedom and opportunity to remake his life as he saw fit, he was apparently too short-sighted and constricted in old ways to see the obvious corollary.

It promised his daughter the same.

■ Leonard Pitts Jr., winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, is a columnist for the Miami Herald.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vote yes to Alternative C

TO THE EDITOR | I’ve been to many of Superintendent Mike Ginalski’s presentations about the proposed C-PP District facilities plan. At the first meeting I attended, a member of the audience stood up and said, “Abraham Lincoln studied for law school and the presidency by candle light in a log cabin. If it was good enough for him, why do our kids need more?”

I support this plan and I was initially shocked by this statement. But, once I thought about it, I found myself agreeing with an underlying principle of her comment.

A candle was state-of-the-art technology in Mr. Lincoln’s day. Our children deserve nothing less than state-of-the-art technology in our schools to prepare them for life in an age of information and technology. Our taxpayers deserve

buildings that are designed to adapt to the ever-changing demands of our culture and economy – buildings that will hold their value over time. Our teachers deserve a work environment that is comparable to nearby districts. Our homeowners deserve a district that attracts young families who buy homes in our neighborhoods and maintain our property values. Vote yes for Alternative C on Dec. 15.

Kris West
Corning

Please support the United Way

TO THE EDITOR | I am writing today to remind people of a couple of sure-fire bets this fall and winter. It will be cold, fuel prices will increase and the United Way of the Southern Tier will be helping thousands of people improve their lives. I didn’t always give

to the United Way. However, I now find myself compelled to give and volunteer for them in order to help those who need a boost more than I do right now. By helping the campaign, I get to be a part of something special, while also being very grateful for all that I have. United Way investments are well spent because funded organizations are well researched and required to demonstrate the results of their programs. What else could a potential donor ask for? The United Way is not only the best way to help the most people in our community, it is also the smartest way to be a part of a greater good.

Please consider supporting United Way this year – it will make you feel good and do a great amount of good for everyone in the local community.

Paul Rossi
Painted Post

Reflections on the recent elections

A few closing thoughts about last week’s elections: ■ Was it the last hurrah for Frank Coccho?

That’s what he said while conceding the mayor’s race to Republican Rich Negri

Tuesday night. But should we believe him?

After all, Coccho declared he was done with politics

two years ago after losing the mayor’s race as an incumbent to Tom Reed. Low and behold, Coccho bounced back to run this time against Negri.

Is Coccho pulling a Bret Favre on us?

Could be, because I don’t think Coccho is done with politics despite claiming he no longer has the energy. I see Coccho, 65, again returning, either to run for mayor or to replace his wife Betty as the 6th Ward councilman at some point.

■ It wasn’t long ago that the Democrats had a majority in the Corning City Council, but that status was fleeting, lasting only the two years Coccho served as mayor.

Since then, the Democrats have been losing seats and after getting waxed Tuesday, their numbers have further diminished.

Not counting the outcome of the 1st Ward race, which looks like Republican Myron Crispino will win, the Democrats only hold two of nine council seats. Those are Lee Welles, D-2, and Betty Coccho, D-6, who aren’t considered close.

■ Speaking of Welles, wouldn’t she be a good pick for deputy mayor?

She’s shown to be a team player and Negri has indicated he’d like to do away with partisanship on the council. And there’s recent precedent as Republican Jim Nelson served as Coccho’s deputy mayor.

■ Now that Hilda Lando’s run for Steuben County Legislature is over, she’ll have to regroup the Democrats as the party’s city committee chairman. That won’t be easy, considering how far the party has fallen.

But a positive step would be to find a Democrat willing to be nominated for the 4th Ward seat that Negri will vacate when he ascends to mayor. Even though the Republican-led council selects who will serve as ward councilman until the next election and there’s virtually no chance that candidate would be a Democrat, I think it’s important for Dems to show they’re at least participating in the process.

The longer the Dems stay down, defeated and dormant, the harder it will be to rebound.

■ I understand those who don’t like the new method for voting, particularly those who complained of the lack of privacy.

That little cardboard screen voters sit behind to fill out that oversized ballot didn’t seem adequate and I’m told not everyone was given a folder to conceal the ballot before it is handed over to a poll worker to scan and be counted.

Also, I didn’t like the fact that my ballot was exposed and out in the open while the poll worker inserted it into the scanner. I’m not accusing the poll worker of peeking at my ballot, but I have a lot less sense of security with the new method than I did with the old.

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