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The Shoe Heard ‘Round the World [1]

I think my son was disappointed at what he got this year. After opening his gifts, he started throwing shoes at me.”
-David Letterman, December 29th

By now it should be obvious: President Bush’s final visit to Iraq, planned in secrecy for dramatic impact, will be remembered for the startling gesture of disrespect invented by a shoe-throwing Iraqi journalist. Late-night American comedians mined the incongruous hilarity of this recycled image for weeks, but this ignored the gesture’s deadly earnest nature. The shoes thown at President Bush were no absurd protest. At the same time that a new U.S.-Iraqi status of forces agreement was taking effect, mandating withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq within two years, Iraqi and world publics were not applauding the success of the “surge,” or expressing appreciation for years of American expenditure and sacrifice, but instead uniting emotionally behind a gesture of contempt for the U.S. President. Worse yet, juxtaposed once again were elaborate and expensive U.S. security measures on the one hand and a simple act of aggression that defeated those measures on the other. This one insolent act thus illustrated not only the unpopularity of a U.S. President and his policies, but the weaknesses in U.S. security. It seemed to underline that the American footprint in the Middle East and Southwest Asia was large, wealthy and high-tech, but the indigenous shoeprint of the Islamic world there is invisible, poor and low-tech. With its overwhelming power and intelligent leaders such as David Petraeus, the U.S. could win wars in this region, but it was far from clear whether the U.S. could win hearts and minds.

To be clear, high-tech **does** have its place. If American reports are correct about the most recent targeting of Al Qaeda leaders in Waziristan, then the Predator drones have scored some notable successes. But the essential view on the Arab “street” is one of resentment against U.S. power and technology, not respect for it. And this is the view of average Arabs and Moslems, not just “jidhadists.”

Now one strikingly unpopular American President departs Washington and an amazingly popular one arrives. How will the Moslem world regard Barack Hussein Obama? His clear commitments stated today against the use of torture, and respect for the Geneva Convention, are tremendously helpful as a start toward repairing America’s image in the Middle East, but his studious avoidance of any comment until now on the latest episodes in the war between Israel and her Moslem neighbors reminds us that America’s attitude on the Arab-Israeli conflict is a kind of litmus test for both sides. However unwise Hamas’ provocations against Israeli border towns may have been, the humanitarian catastrophe wreaked by Israel’s massive counterattack must motivate Obama’s greater concern. If expressed convincingly, it can be the start of a reversal of America’s image throughout the region.

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