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OPINION

Obama the rhetorical magician

BY RICH LOWRY

George H.W. Bush made a “read my lips” no-new-taxes pledge in his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in August 1988, and broke it two years later. That seemed a fast turnaround, but President Barack Obama has outpaced him by making, and then signaling his intention to break, a no-new-taxes pledge all in the same address.

“If your family earns less than \$250,000 a year,” Mr. Obama said in his speech to Congress, “you will not see your taxes increased a single dime. I repeat: not one single dime.”

Unless, that is, your family pays a utility bill. Earlier from the same podium, Mr. Obama exhorted Congress to send him “legislation that places a market-based cap on carbon pollution.” This cap-and-trade program would increase the cost of energy for everyone, regardless of income. It is a broad-based (if indirect) tax increase of the sort the casual listener would have thought Mr. Obama ruled out in categorical language.

Mr. Obama’s recently released budget outline proposes using revenues raised by cap-and-trade to fund his

“making work pay” tax credits that were part of the stimulus bill. Of those credits, Mr. Obama said, “The recovery plan provides a tax cut — that’s right, a tax cut — for 95 percent of working families.” This was a central Obama pledge during the campaign, although he never mentioned he’d fund it with a countervailing tax increase on working families and everyone else.

Mr. Obama is a talented, but a wily and dishonest, salesman. Nineteenth-century pol Martin Van Buren earned the sobriquet “the little magician” for his skillful manipulation of New York’s political machine. Mr. Obama is the rhetorical magician, depending — as all magicians do — on deft sleight of hand.

In his speech, he didn’t want his listeners to think he’s a big-government heir to Lyndon Johnson, so he talked of slashing waste. He said his team had begun going “line by line” through the budget, and “we have already identified \$2 trillion in savings over the next decade.”

In common parlance, “savings” is taken to mean ... well, savings. But half of this \$2 trillion is accounted for by Mr. Obama’s planned tax increases on the rich — in other words, he has iden-

tified revenue, not savings. Much of the rest is arrived at by assuming the Iraq War would cost \$170 billion a year for the duration, even though the president has long planned a drawdown. Mr. Obama portrays himself as ruthlessly paring back government when he is simply raising taxes and leaving Iraq.

Even as he expands government, he forswears any interest in expanding government and says he’s scaling back: “Everyone will have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars, and that includes me.” Really? His budget increases discretionary spending by 12 percent next year. To paraphrase Bob Dole, where’s the austerity?

Mr. Obama prides himself on a facility with words that has fueled his political rise. He clearly respects words, including their power to manipulate and mislead. “A good catchword,” Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “can obscure analysis for 50 years.” To pass a vast program changing the relationship of American government to its citizens, Mr. Obama only needs to obscure analysis for about a year. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

GUEST OPINION

The missing bridge



danRATHER

Special to Florida Weekly

This past week began with the details of the U.S. government’s latest rescue of Citigroup. It progressed — if you want to call it that — with the announcement that the Treasury would be sliding \$30 billion more over to AIG, the insurance giant that, when initially bailed out last fall, brought the phrase “too big to fail” into daily use. Too big to fail, apparently, because it’s got its fingers in so many financial pies, though the Treasury and the Federal Reserve Bank have yet to tell taxpayers — that would be those of us ultimately footing the bill for these bailouts — just which pies those are.

And there, at midweek, was British Prime Minister Gordon Brown addressing a joint session of Congress to make the pitch for what he has called “a global New Deal.”

Seeing a head of government stand in front of Vice President Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and talk about the need to commit to new energy technology and create green jobs induced

a certain degree of déjà vu — didn’t we see this just last week? The effect was heightened by the sense that Prime Minister Brown has been studying President Barack Obama’s rhetoric: “There is no old Europe, no new Europe,” the prime minister told Congress, “there is only your friend Europe.” There is not a red America and a blue America ...

The British prime minister sent a message that the U.S. and Europe are once again on the same page, and that both need to “seize the moment” (echoes of Mr. Obama’s “Now is the time”) provided by the global economic crisis to unleash “the biggest expansion of middle-class incomes and jobs the world has ever seen.”

It might be an auspicious moment, this confluence of domestic, economic and foreign policy goals between America and her strongest ally. And in our current 1932 mind-set, it’s good to see the kind of optimism that looks straight ahead to what might be our own version of the 1950s, skipping past all that nastiness about dust bowls and world war.

But there’s something about the Brown and Obama visions that puts one in the mind of a big house being erected on the spot where another house is still burning. And that’s how it will likely continue to feel, unless and until the

Obama administration comes forth with a clearly articulated (including an honest accounting of the likely astronomical costs), broad-based plan to put our financial system on sound footing.

Or, to use another metaphor, the recently passed “stimulus” bill, Mr. Obama’s budget proposals and Mr. Brown’s concomitant vision can all be likened to major economic surgery; surgery performed while the patient’s heart — the organ “too big to fail” — requires periodic defibrillating shocks. If the heart gives out, all the other surgery will be for naught.

Until we treat the institutions at the heart of our financial system in a more sustainable way — with a comprehensive, long-term plan that would be the equivalent of a pacemaker — the rest of the work we’re doing and plan to do for the economy and for the people who depend on it will be welcome, but is unlikely to generate much optimism.

Last fall, Prime Minister Brown won praise from some economists for pointing the way forward with direct cash injections to troubled institutions. Now old Europe, new Europe and the world look toward the new American administration to come up with a systemic plan that will move beyond ad hoc measures. There’s a vision for the future, and there’s anxiety in the present — a real plan to deal with our imperiled banks is the bridge without which we cannot get from here to there. ■

MOMENTS IN TIME

• On **March 12, 1933**, eight days after his inauguration, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gives his first national radio address, or “fireside chat,” broadcast directly from the White House. Roosevelt went on to deliver 30 more of these broadcasts between March 1933 and June 1944.

• On **March 13, 1781**, English astronomer William Herschel discovers Uranus, the seventh planet from the sun. Herschel’s discovery was the first to be made by use of a telescope, which allowed Herschel to distinguish Uranus as a planet, not a star, as previous astronomers believed.

• On **March 15, 44 B.C.**, Julius Caesar, the “dictator for life” of the Roman Empire, is murdered by his own senators at a meeting in a hall next to Pompey’s Theatre. The conspiracy against Caesar encompassed as many as 60 noblemen, including Caesar’s own protegee, Marcus Brutus. ■