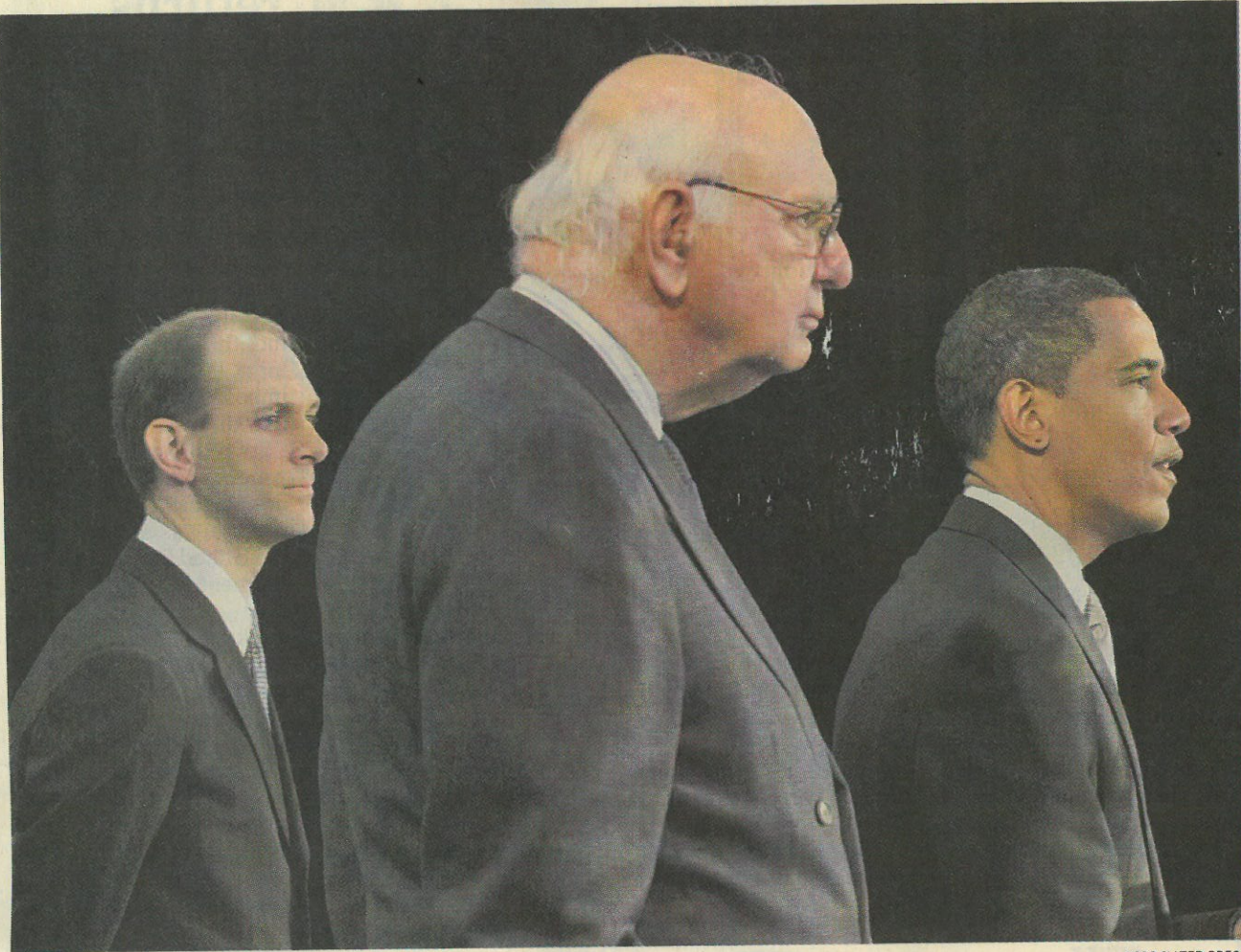


Voices & Commentary

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President-elect Barack Obama, right, stands with Paul Volcker, chairman-designate of the Economic Recovery Advisory Board, center, and chief economist-designate Austan Goolsbee, left, at a news conference Wednesday in Chicago.

Obama demonstrates depth of knowledge

When I started covering the White House, more than 50 years ago, I believed that the smarter a president was, the better he would be. That was wrong.

Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan were certainly not intellectuals, but they grasped the power of the presidency and they knew how to impose their agendas on their political partners and rivals.

By contrast, Jimmy Carter was a whiz at policy analysis and Bill Clinton grasped the connections among issues almost intuitively. Yet neither one of them was able to leave the White House with a record of great achievements.

So for several years, I have been arguing that there are traits much more important to the success of a president than his brainpower. Self-confidence, curiosity, an eye for talent, the ability to communicate, the temperament that invites collaboration — all these and more rank higher on the list of desirable presidential traits.

I am not ready to abandon that view. But I am struck at how lucky this country is, at the moment, that the president-elect of the United States is a super-smart person like Barack Obama.

With each passing day, it becomes more evident that the smartest and most experienced managers of the American economy are struggling to understand — and fix — what has gone wrong in our markets.



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I attempt to follow the discussion in serious newspapers and on the Jim Lehrer "NewsHour" and other deeply serious television programs about the latest moves of the Federal Reserve Board and the Treasury — and I am stumped.

The sums are so staggering, the vocabulary so unfamiliar, the experience so uninformative that I have not a clue whether Bernanke, Paulson and Co. are on top of the situation or inadvertently are making things worse.

That's an embarrassing admission. I get paid to cover the government, and this is by far the most important challenge now facing Washington. But I am utterly dependent on others to decipher the clues that may unravel these mysteries.

Obama is not similarly handicapped. Even in the emotional maelstrom of his election victory and even with the pressures of assembling his administration, everything points to his managing to focus on the policy choices looming in the economic field.

I have talked to two people on the fringe of the transition team — both

members of Congress with major responsibilities in the economic area. Both have been asked for input by Obama and both say that the quality of his questions — and the follow-ups — were a measure of the depth of his knowledge of the situation.

He has not been tested that rigorously in the news conferences he has held so far, but his ability to respond to the questions he has been asked, to make his points in a coherent, balanced way, and to avoid any misstatement has certainly been a treat to watch.

The appointments he has made to the economic team have been impressive, and the response has been almost uniformly positive, from Capitol Hill to Wall Street. But it is not just the new White House and Cabinet people who have been reassuring; it has been Obama himself.

As well as he handled himself in the long campaign, he has been equally sure-footed in the transition. And behind the smooth public performance is a mind that seems able to stretch to encompass even the most complex of policy choices.

I am sure that in coming weeks and months, there will be judgments that will jar this confidence, and decisions that Obama himself may come to regret.

But for a nation in crisis, it is worth giving thanks for the performance the new president has turned in so far — and for the mind that is working on the nation's behalf.

Iowa View

From Iowa to Vietnam

Children's letters warmed holiday far from home

It was almost 40 Thanksgivings ago to the day that I arrived in Vietnam in November 1968. The Tet Offensive was still fresh in everyone's mind, and U.S. troops moved about the city fully armed and ready for violence to erupt almost anywhere.

Not knowing anyone and feeling desperately homesick, I was seeking a place to eat supper before the 7 p.m. curfew. The streets were nearly deserted, and almost every place was closing. It was then that I spotted the one place where I thought I could have a

Thanksgiving turkey dinner — the USO center in downtown Saigon, which was open to anyone deployed with the U.S. military. The lights were still on, so, looking out for any would-be urban guerrillas, I nervously dashed across Nguyen Hue Boulevard and into the storefront shop, hoping for a taste of home.

It was empty, and the staff was cleaning up, preparing to close. But I must have looked hungry, because they agreed to reopen the cafeteria line and feed me. The ambience offered nothing to make one feel as if he were in Iowa. No fireplace with crackling logs; no smell of turkey roasting or pumpkin pie to fill the air.

Rather, I ended up sitting alone under fluorescent lighting, on a folding chair at a bare Formica table, eating off a paper plate. And the food wasn't much like my mom used to put on our holiday table. It was pressed turkey loaf, watery gravy and lumpy instant mashed potatoes.

I was feeling very lonely, but then, I looked up and saw a series of big envelopes attached to the distant dull-green wall, each with a state name on it. Wondering what they were, I stopped eating, got up and walked over.

When I looked in the "Iowa" envelope, I saw it was filled with dozens and dozens of letters written by schoolchildren and sent to cheer up a member of the military who was far from home. I reached in and took out a few letters, brought them back to my table and read them as I ate.

I wish I could remember the names of the young students who wrote them, or even the town where they went to school. But I don't. What I do remember, as intensely as if it were yesterday, is the uplifting feeling that surged through me as I read their words of encouragement, appreciation and love. Written in a penmanship that suggested the students must have been in just the second or third grade, those simple sentiments filled me with a warmth that is hard to put into words. Those feelings remain with me to this day.

I have experienced many wonderful holiday celebrations over the years. Two of our children will be home this Thanksgiving, so I know we will have a marvelous time being together again. But that meal in Saigon so long ago will always be a special memory.



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Iowa View

Religion, politics mixed to give birth to freedom

Once upon a time, politics and religion were mixed, and freedom as we know it was born.

When freedom's parents later gave thanks, it was not just for a bountiful harvest.

The religion in the mix was a sect of



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incentive. The Jamestown colonists in 1607 dropped off like flies because the "nobles" wouldn't work alongside their servants, but that didn't persuade them to try freedom.

In the name of God, Amen. The whole names are underwritten. The loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James by the grace of God, of great Brittain, France, & Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, &c. Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our King & Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia. God by these presents solemnly & mutually in the presence of God, and