THE METAPHOR OF COPENHAGEN

It was a metaphor for his young presidency.

Barack and Michelle Obama travel to Copenhagen in regal splendor to lobby the International Olympic Committee to support Chicago's bid to host the Summer Games in 2016. They are given rock star treatment by our sycophantic news media. And then they get stiffed.

When Chicago finished fourth, receiving just 18 of 94 votes, the question on the minds of many people was: How would Democrats contrive to blame the debacle on George W. Bush?

The answer was not long in coming.

"I thought we had really turned a corner with the election of President Obama," Illinois State Rep. Susana Mendoza told the Chicago Sun Times. "People are so much more welcoming of Americans now. But this isn't the people of those countries. This is the leaders still living with outdated impressions of Americans."

Meanwhile, back in in Copenhagen the Danes thought the rejection had more to do with the behavior of Barack and Michelle.

Zipping in at the last minute probably offended IOC members, Hans Bonde, a professor of sport history at the University of Copenhagen, told the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*.

"He clearly won the battle in the media, but it turned out to be indifferent," Mr. Bonde said. "IOC members did not feel important, and they were indeed reduced to spectators and not players. So if he had come (earlier), then he would have had time for personal buttering up."

In their formal presentations, Barack and Michelle spoke more about themselves than about what Chicago could offer the IOC or the people who would come there to watch the games.

The Obamas violated the fundamental rules of selling, which are to stress the benefits of the product to the customer (the IOC) rather than the seller (Chicago), and to talk about the product, not the sales force (themselves), noted professional salesmen.

Perhaps Mr. Obama was thrown off his game by the need to say something nice about his country, which he is more in the habit of apologizing for in his speeches to foreign audiences.

Or maybe the president and the first lady spoke mostly about themselves because there wasn't much good they could say about Chicago. The city is broke, notoriously corrupt, and so violent its gang murders have been making international news. Why would anyone in his right mind prefer Chicago to Rio, where the weather is balmier and the women prettier?

Still most observers -- myself among them -- thought it was in the bag for Chicago when the president announced he was going to Copenhagen. That's because heads of states don't negotiate deals. They arrive to ratify them.

"Presidential visits are staged down to the last detail," said blogger Rick Moran. "If a treaty is to be signed, experts work for weeks prior to a president's trip to make sure there are no last minute hitches. Nothing is left to chance."

The stage management is because the consequences of a screw-up can be profound.

"Rarely has a president put his credibility on the line on the world stage in such a personal way and been slapped down so sharply in real time," said the New York Times in a story by reporter Peter Baker which appeared, oddly enough, on the sports page.

For the president to be blind-sided by the result suggests either appallingly bad staff work, or astounding hubris, or both.

"The defeat will be used as a political metaphor and raise painful questions," the Times said.

"Why did he invest so much time, taxpayer money, and perhaps most important, presidential prestige in a losing effort? How did he misjudge the potential vote so badly that Chicago evidently was not even in the top tier? What does it say about a leader who may be far more popular abroad than his predecessor yet has trouble converting that esteem into tangible benefits for the United States?"

New Republic editor Martin Peretz, who supported Mr. Obama for president, asked a more pertinent question:

"If Obama could not get Chicago over the finish line in Copenhagen, which was only a test of his charms, how will he persuade Tehran to give up its nuclear weapons capacity?"

In his egotism -- Mr. Peretz thinks "the president is probably a clinical narcissist" -- Mr. Obama doesn't recognize that many in his foreign audiences applaud him primarily because they think he is weakening the United States.

Many Americans think that, too, which is why fewer of them are joining in the applause.

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