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Helping L.A.'s Foster Kids Grow Up

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OP-ED

Bibi and Barack

Aaron David Miller

BARACK OBAMA has an Israel problem. Almost three years in, the president still can't decide whether he wants to pander to the Israeli prime minister or pressure him. The approach of the 2012 elections makes the former almost mandatory; the president's reelection may make the latter possible. Buckle your seat belts. Unless Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu find a way to cooperate on a big venture that makes both of them look good, and in a way that allows each to invest in the other, the U.S.-Israel relationship may be in for a bumpy ride.

The president's view of Israel is situated in two fundamental realities. The first is structural and is linked to the way Obama sees the world; the second is more situational and is driven by his view of Netanyahu and Israeli policies. Together they have created and sustained a deep level of frustration bordering on anger.

Unlike his two predecessors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Obama isn't in love with the idea of Israel. Intellectually he understands and supports the pro-Israeli trope — small democratic nation with dark past confronts huge existential threats — but it's really a head thing.

Clinton and Bush were enamored emotionally with Israel's story and the prime ministers who narrated it. Clinton sat at the feet of Yitzhak Rabin — the authentic leader and hero in peace and war — as a student sits in thrall of a brilliant professor (some said like a son to a father). "I had come to love him," the former president wrote in his memoirs, "as I had rarely loved another man."

And Bush 43, though often frustrated in the extreme with Ariel Sharon, loved his stories of biblical history and more contemporary war tales. Bush reacted — as he did on so many issues — from his gut, certainly when it came to



KEVIN LAMARQUE Reuters

The Israeli prime minister and the U.S. president neither like nor trust each other.

Israel's security. While flying with Sharon over Israel's narrow waist, the then-governor said, "We have driveways in Texas longer than that."

The main source of Obama's view of Israel lies in his broader assessment of conflict and how problems are resolved. Obama didn't get his vision of Israel from the movie "Exodus," in which the Israelis are cowboys and the Arabs are Indians. Nor does he have Clinton's Southern Baptist Bible sensibilities or Bush's evangelical ones relating to Israel as the Holy Land.

Obama's views came from another place: his own logic, the university environment in which he developed intellectually and his own moral sensibilities. And according to this view, the Arab-Israeli dispute isn't some kind of morality play that pits the forces of good against the forces of darkness. Instead, it's a more complex tale, not of heroes and villains but

of a conflict between two rights and two just causes. It's also a conflict that is vital to American interests. And those interests are being threatened by the divide between those who want a solution and are serious about moving toward one, and those who aren't serious about finding a solution and throw up obstacles. After three years, the president has clearly placed the Israelis in the latter category and the Palestinians in the former.

The tendency to look at Israel analytically instead of emotionally, and to view the conflict through a national-interest prism rather than some sort of moral filter, dovetails with Obama's poisonous relationship with Netanyahu. Obama doesn't like him, doesn't trust him and views him as a con man. The Israeli prime minister has frustrated and embarrassed Obama and gotten in the way of the president's wildly exaggerated hopes for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he's been pursuing with more enthusiasm than viable strategy since his inauguration. To make matters worse, when the president went after a settlements freeze, Netanyahu called his bluff and Obama backed down — a terrible humiliation.

It's worth pointing out that tensions between American presidents and Israeli prime ministers are fairly common, particularly between Democratic presidents and tough Likud prime ministers. Two things tend to ameliorate them, but only temporarily. The first is a joint project, usually an Arab-Israeli peacemaking one, in which both sides invest in the other and come out looking good. Examples include Jimmy Carter and Menachem Begin's peace treaty with Egypt; Bush 41 and Yitzhak Shamir's Madrid peace conference; Sharon and Bush 43's "war on terror."

The second fix doesn't so much ameliorate the problem as eliminate it. That would be the political

defeat of one or the other and the emergence of a new cast of characters that can create a more functional relationship. This is precisely what happened in the case of Bush 41 and Shamir — Clinton and Rabin emerged to take their place. In the case of Carter and Begin, Ronald Reagan became president — one of the most pro-Israel presidents in American history. Even so, he too wrangled with Begin, although the American-Israeli relationship got stronger.

What's so intriguing about the near future is that neither a viable joint project nor a change in leaders may take place. The Iran nuclear issue is a wild card in all of this. The impact of an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites can't be gamed out, but a pretty good case can be made that the consequences would bind the U.S. and Israel closer together, particularly in the event of a tough Iranian response.

In the end, the Barack-Bibi relationship is likely headed south because the trust and capacity to give each other the benefit of the doubt has long ago evaporated. If both are still in office in 2013 when the political dust settles, the game of gotcha will continue. Newly empowered but still wary and suspicious, neither will be in the mood to kiss and make up.

Without some common enterprise to bind them together, and with a great many issues to drive them apart (settlements, the peace process), relations will get worse, taking their toll on the U.S.-Israel relationship; Israel's security; American interests; and, for certain, any remaining hope for a two-state solution.

AARON DAVID MILLER, a public policy scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, served as a Middle East negotiator in Republican and Democratic administrations. He is the author of "Can America Have Another Great President?" to be published in 2012.

Helping L.A.'s foster kids grow up

Thomas Byrne, Dennis Culhane and Stephen Mettraux

THE AVERAGE young person who "ages out" of the foster care system in Los Angeles County at age 18 goes on to use almost \$13,000 worth of health, mental health, criminal justice and social services before his or her 22nd birthday. That is more than two years' worth of college tuition in the Cal State University system. For former foster youth who also have had involvement in the juvenile justice system — so-called crossover youth — the amount is almost three times as high, about \$35,000.

These are among the starker findings from our recently completed study of outcomes for those who exited the foster care and juvenile justice systems in Los Angeles County during their young adult years. These findings highlight the economic and social hardships that many former foster youth face as they transition to adulthood, and might be cause for pessimism. But there are strong reasons to be optimistic.

One of those reasons is the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, which takes effect Jan. 1. This state law, once it's phased in over a three-year period, will allow young people to continue receiving the support of the foster care system until the age of 21, rather than forcing them to fend for themselves at 18. This change is long overdue and will help place the 5,000 foster youth who age out of care each year in California on more equal footing with their peers.

They will finally benefit from the type of financial and social support that most of their peers receive from their families during young adulthood. Indeed, American parents offer "total material assistance" averaging about \$40,000 for each child between the ages of 18 and 34, according to researchers at the University of Michigan.

However, to ensure that the funds behind the new law are leveraged to their full potential, more needs to be done to figure out what types of assistance work best for which types of youth.

For example, roughly half of former foster youth enroll in community college, but less than 5% complete a degree. Special on-campus programs might help more of them complete their degree programs. Or, intensive support services might be targeted toward promoting better outcomes for the one-quarter of crossover youth who receive treatment for a serious mental illness. Similarly, housing subsidies tied to participation in employment or educational programs might help more of these young people achieve self-sufficiency and avoid homelessness.

Los Angeles County is uniquely situated to be a national leader for developing innovative programs to help ensure successful adult outcomes for foster youth. It is one of only a handful of communities nationwide that has a system in place that enables county officials to link health, mental health, criminal justice, social service and education records. This system enabled us to complete our study, but it has a potentially more valuable use. The county could use it to quickly determine which programs for foster youth are effective and expand them or refine them. For example, the county could evaluate whether providing an array of intensive support services to crossover youth was successful in preventing adverse outcomes such as jail stays or inpatient hospitalizations.

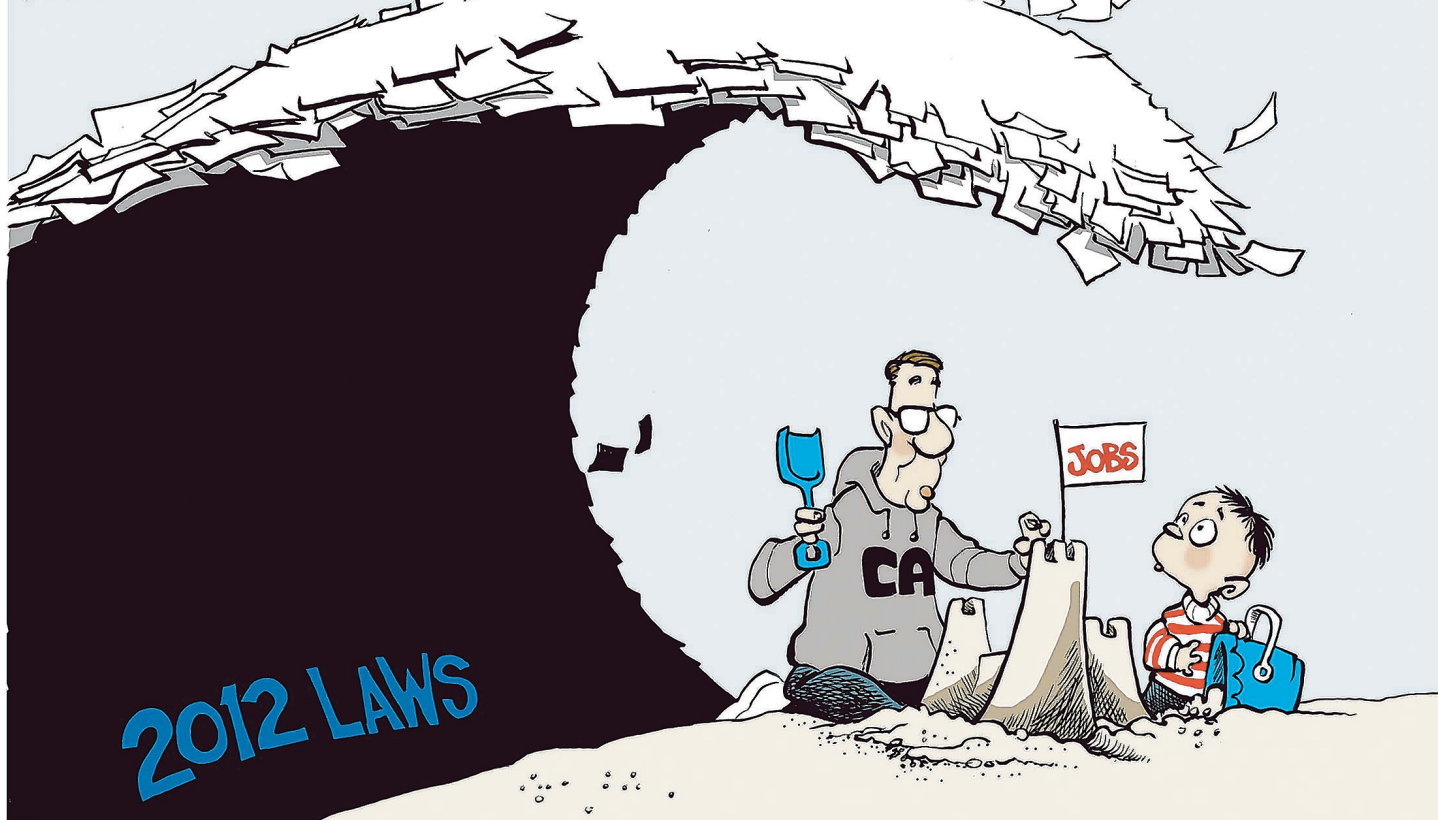
If successful, programs that provide additional supports to foster youth are likely to generate substantial economic benefits, both for the young people and for the public purse. Having more foster youth excelling in the college classroom, on the job and in their own homes means that fewer will be filling jail cells, hospital beds and shelters. This will free up much-needed public resources for other uses.

California should make the most of the opportunity provided by this new legislation. Not only is it a chance to take an important step toward fulfilling a moral obligation to these vulnerable youth, but it offers the potential to do so through sound public policy.

THOMAS BYRNE, DENNIS CULHANE and STEPHEN METTRAUX are researchers at the University of Pennsylvania. Their report on outcomes for L.A. County foster youth can be found at www.hiltonfoundation.org.

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The future of Hollywood

The mayor and others have big plans, but some residents feel left out.

JIM NEWTON

ON A BLUSTERY recent morning, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, City Council President Eric Garcetti and Councilman Tom LaBonge held a rooftop news conference in the heart of Hollywood. They were there to announce the completion of the Hollywood community plan, a document intended to guide the growth of the historic community. The event went the way most such things go: Villaraigosa spoke first and longest; Garcetti gave a few earnest remarks; LaBonge mugged and got off a couple of laugh lines. Congratulations were offered to the residents who participated in the process and to the bureaucrats who guided it. Reporters asked some questions, and everyone beat it back to their cars before it started to rain.

But there was grumbling at the event's periphery. While Villaraigosa and Garcetti talked of the scores of public meetings convened to solicit input into the

plan, a few Hollywood residents complained that their input had been ignored. While Villaraigosa championed "transit-oriented development" and bragged about the subway stops that have been built in the area in recent years, the neighbors grumbled that traffic continues to get worse. While the mayor sees growth as essential to pulling the city out of its nationally induced recession, these neighbors fear that the growth he envisions will simply cram more people into already crowded communities. And the mayor's push for new jobs, they worry, could benefit his union supporters at the expense of the neighborhoods where growth will occur.

In an essential way, these two groups are talking past each other. The residents express a kind of elemental conservatism: They want to preserve the qualities that drew them to their neighborhoods in the first place. The elected officials, meanwhile, are trying to create a vision for a future Los Angeles, one with denser housing and fewer cars, a place where people live close to their work and use public transportation to get to it.

The mayor and his allies, in other words, are trying to lead Los Angeles toward a break with its past. That's a sensible path

toward a better future, but the public isn't as sold as the leadership.

Hints of that disconnect were evident in the news conference, or at least on the margins of it. The mayor described his recent trip to China, where he said planners from other parts of the world saw "L.A. as what you don't want to do." To them, he said, "we're the quintessential city of sprawl."

But the neighbors who turned out on the rooftop of the Hollywood Tower weren't interested in what Chinese planners think about Los Angeles. They wanted to know why they'd only learned of the event 72 hours earlier, and they wanted to know what the mayor had in mind for Sunset Boulevard and Franklin Avenue, which they said were already too congested. One neighbor worried about plans for a 46-story tower and the burden it would place on local infrastructure; another complained that more cars on Hollywood streets would "make it unbearable" to travel through the area. A third, longtime journalist and Hollywood resident Laurie Becklund (a good friend and a former colleague), sought some assurance that the Sunday Hollywood Farmers Market would be protected. Garcetti said it would be, though not through this plan.

Garcetti seemed to grasp better than the mayor did that there is still uneasiness about the community plan, as there is with other such efforts across the city. Still, he defended the resulting work and the prospects for coherent development of the area. "Never mistake the loudest voices for being representative," he argued.

He's right about that, of course, but it raises the question of what is truly representative. Is it the local chamber of commerce, or the residents who turn out for neighborhood council meetings? Or is there a quieter majority unaware of the plans being made and the effect they will have?

Neighborhood concerns and complaints did not dominate Villaraigosa's news conference. Indeed, politeness and diffidence triumphed over discomfort, allowing the mayor to continue doling out congratulations and anticipating the council's swift approval of the plans. When it was over, Villaraigosa shook a few hands, LaBonge worked the rooftop one more time, and they parted with smiles, content to have presented their work and seemingly untroubled by the doubts of the neighbors.

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