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Matthew Kaminski: 'Gafa Obama'

A presidential faux pas mangles World War II history and insults Poland.

By [MATTHEW KAMINSKI](#)

Sometimes the best-intentioned gesture can backfire on the unwitting politician. This is the story of President Obama and the Poles.

Among this year's 13 recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Mr. Obama posthumously honored Jan Karski. As a member of the Polish underground during World War II, Karski was the first to provide eyewitness evidence of the Nazi extermination of Jews in occupied Europe. In 1942, he sneaked into the Warsaw ghetto and a German death camp, then made it out to London and Washington—no easy task at the time—to call on Western leaders to save the Jews. This effort included a meeting with President Roosevelt. But Karski was ignored. "No one did enough," Karski said later. But he did more than anyone at the time.

Important constituencies were satisfied with the award. Poles and Polish-Americans (a key voting bloc in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Wisconsin) were delighted. The Jewish Week newspaper called the medal "well-deserved."

The mood soured a bit before Tuesday's award ceremony. The Poles wanted Lech Walesa to receive the medal on Karski's behalf, but the White House nixed the choice. Last year, during Mr. Obama's visit to Poland, the hero of Solidarity refused to attend a large gathering to meet the younger leader. Mr. Walesa felt entitled to a tete-a-tete. Administration officials told Polish journalists that Mr. Walesa's presence was too "political" for this week's occasion. Poles read something else into it: Mr. Obama holds grudges. The counter-snob was the talk of Poland last week.

Former Foreign Minister Adam Rotfeld, a Polish Jew, stood in at the White House celebration. The Walesa episode was fading into memory when President Obama made his opening remarks. Karski was "smuggled into . . . a Polish death camp to see for himself," he read off the teleprompter, that Jews were being murdered. On second reference, Mr. Obama noted it was a Nazi camp. Too late. The damage was done.

"Gafa Obama," declared Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland's leading daily newspaper, in a story about "Obama's gaffe" on its website. The linguistic faux pas went viral. In another day this would have been ridiculed as a "Bushism," before we got a president with a Harvard Law degree who claimed to practice "smart diplomacy."

Poles are prickly about World War II. When their nation was stuck behind the Iron Curtain for four decades, they couldn't defend themselves against charges of complicity in the mass murder of Jews. Yet unlike Vichy France, the Poles didn't collaborate with the Nazis in running the country, much less in the Holocaust. The Polish underground tried to help Jews during



Associated Press

President Obama awards the Medal of Freedom to former Polish Foreign Minister Adam Daniel Rotfeld, who is accepting the award for Jan Karski.

the war, smuggling arms into the Warsaw Ghetto during the 1943 uprising. Christian Poles sheltered thousands of Jewish children and faced certain death if found by the Nazis.

Mr. Rotfeld, who was one of those kids, several years ago said that, "The thoughtless or intentional use of the phrase 'Polish death camp' is insulting and shameful. Not only does it blur responsibility for those crimes—it slanders our nation, which was the first victim of the criminal practices of Hitler's Germany." The Karski award was, in part, supposed to straighten this historical record.

As outrage grew, White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said "We regret this misstatement." Poland's prime minister, Donald

Tusk, wasn't satisfied. "I am convinced that our American friends can today allow themselves a stronger reaction," he told reporters in Warsaw on Wednesday. Obama's words had "hurt all Poles."

So much for goodwill.

Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.

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