

2007 - 2008 MEDIA & POLITICS



A Case Study: Barack Obama

The following opening remarks were written by San Jose State University Journalism Professor Bob Rucker. He compiled the articles and info that follows to help bring you up to speed on the impact this politician is having in the media today.

In American history, several African-Americans have run for President of the United States including the Reverends Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton. None, however, garnered enough public support nationally to win their political party's nomination, nor less any general election in November.

With a national history which included several centuries of the slavery of blacks from Africa, the Civil War which was fought to end slavery, and the rise of racial prejudice in America after that war, it was never a serious option to consider a black for President.

While usually not spoken aloud, it was generally thought that America was not, and might never be ready to elect an African-American person to the highest job in the land. Further, it has been thought by some that standards and expectations for such a candidate would be high, the pressure on such a candidate enormous, and the threat to his or her life might always be a concern.

Some academic and political experts have thought no African-American candidate has ever emerged who had "electability" based on "sound qualifications," i.e. their education, political experience and credentials, communication skill, poise and charisma.

This person would also have to have a family the nation could embrace, a religious philosophy which did not turn off the electorate, and broad-based financial backing outside the black community.



In 2004, first time candidate for the U.S. Senate, Barack Obama from Illinois was asked to give The Democratic Convention Keynote Address by the Presidential nominee, John Kerry. The thinking was to get Barack Obama national exposure and help him win his senate race for the Democrats.

The 17 minute speech delivered by Obama, however, electrified the convention hall and the nation watching on TV. Literally, his eloquent words, powerful delivery and personal charm inspired crowds of people in his home state and around the nation. He won his senate race in Illinois with more than 60% of the vote, making him the second African-American to do that in a state where in rural areas, outside Chicago, voters tend to lean Republican. That convention speech also catapulted Barack Obama onto the national stage and began fueling early thoughts that this young, African-American lawyer could be a potential presidential candidate someday.

In 2006, America was mired in the War in Iraq. By the time of the mid-term elections in November, 3000 Americans had died and thousands more had been disabled for life. Republican President George W. Bush's popularity polls nationwide dipped below the 30% mark in most surveys. Democrats won back control of the U. S. House and Senate for the first time in ten years.

Freshman Senator Barack Obama campaigned for other Democratic candidates nationwide, denounced the war as a "mistake," and offered political rallying speech calling for a new direction in America. Crowds flocked to hear him speak. Democratic candidates lined up to invite him to come to their state and campaign.

During 2006, Senator Obama's staff greatly enhanced their online presence and began offering daily briefings on his positions on a variety of issues. Supporters created new websites focused on getting Obama to be a candidate for President of the United States.



Tee-shirts were being sold with this logo and others even though the Senator had not formally declared his intentions to run.

Nevertheless, his staff, masterfully continued to use the internet and e-mail messages to keep his name in front of the American voter. Even though he represents only the state of Illinois, his online service sent the following electronic holiday card out to all who logged-on and signed up to receive updates from his official website.



Media coverage of Barack Obama has helped fuel speculation that he might run for President in 2008. He has been portrayed as the popular young Senator who has captured the interest of the nation. While online, print and broadcast new media have identified his views on major issues, this early scrutiny has not been seen as being very tough or vigorous. Close examination of views and ideas, along with red hot review of every word, success, misstep or stumble usually comes after a formal declaration of intent to run for president.



Barack Obama - Background Information

Party: Democrat

Residence: Chicago

Marital Status: Married (Michelle)

Prev. Occupation: Attorney, Lecturer

Prev. Political Exp.: IL Senate, 1996-2004

Education: BA Columbia University, 1983; JD Harvard University, 1991

Birthdate: 08/04/1961

Birthplace: Honolulu, HI

Religion: United Church of Christ

Other Information

Term: 1st

First Elected: 2004

Percentage in Last Election: 70%

Major Opponent: Alan Keyes

Committees:

- [Foreign Relations](#)
- [Health, Education, Labor and Pensions](#)
- [Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs](#)
- [Veterans' Affairs](#)

PAC Contributions

[2005-2006 Election Cycle](#)

[2003-2004 Election Cycle](#)

Obama launches White House bid

January 16, 2007

By NEDRA PICKLER, Associated Press Writer 21 minutes ago



<http://www.barackobama.com>

U.S. SENATOR
BARACK OBAMA
PRESIDENTIAL EXPLORATORY COMMITTEE

(AP) Sen. Barack Obama launched a historic campaign Tuesday to become the first black president of the United States and immediately tried to turn his political inexperience into an asset with voters seeking change.

The freshman Illinois senator — and top contender for the Democratic nomination — said the past six years have left the country in a precarious place and he promoted himself as the standard-bearer for a new kind of politics.

"Our leaders in Washington seem incapable of working together in a practical, commonsense way," Obama said in a video posted on his Web site. "Politics has become so bitter and partisan, so gummed up by money and influence, that we can't tackle the big problems that demand solutions. And that's what we have to change first."

Obama filed paperwork forming a presidential exploratory committee that allows him to raise money and put together a campaign structure. He is expected to announce a full-fledged

candidacy on Feb. 10 in Springfield, Ill., where he can tap into the legacy of hometown hero Abraham Lincoln.

Obama's soft-spoken appeal on the stump, his unique background, his opposition to the Iraq war and his fresh face set him apart in a competitive race that also is expected to include front-runner Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York.



Obama has uncommon political talents, drawing adoring crowds even among the studious voters in New Hampshire during a much-hyped visit there last month. His star has risen on the force of his personality and message of hope — helped along by celebrity endorsements from the likes of Oprah Winfrey, billionaire investor Warren Buffett and actors Matt Damon and Edward Norton.

"I certainly didn't expect to find myself in this position a year ago," said Obama, who added that as he talked to Americans about a possible presidential campaign, "I've been struck by how hungry we all are for a different kind of politics."

The 45-year-old has few accomplishments on the national stage after serving little more than two years in the Senate. But at a time when many voters say they are unhappy with the direction of the country, a lack of experience in the nation's capital may not be a liability.

"The decisions that have been made in Washington these past six years, and the problems that have been ignored, have put our country in a precarious place," Obama said.

He said people are struggling financially, dependence on foreign oil threatens the environment and national security and "we're still mired in a tragic and costly war that should have never been waged."

Clinton is expected to announce her presidential campaign within days, but her spokesman said there would be no comment on Obama's decision from the Clinton camp. Back from Iraq, she abruptly canceled a Capitol Hill news conference minutes after word of Obama's announcement, citing the unavailability of a New York congressman to participate.



Fmr. Sen. John Edwards



Fmr. Gov. Tom Vilsack



Sen. Chris Dodd



Rep. Dennis Kucinich



Sen. John Kerry



Sen. Joe Biden

Other Democrats who have announced a campaign or exploratory committee are 2004 vice presidential nominee John Edwards, former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd and Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich. Sens. John Kerry of Massachusetts and Joe Biden of Delaware and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson also are considering a run.

Obama's decision was relatively low-key after months of hype, with no speech or media appearance to accompany his online announcement. He said he will discuss a presidential campaign with people around the country before his Feb. 10 event, and he wasted no time calling key activists Tuesday.

New Hampshire lobbyist Jim Demers talked with Obama for about five minutes. "He is extremely pumped and excited that this campaign is coming together," said Demers, who accompanied Obama on his visit to the state last month.

Obama's quick rise to national prominence began with his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and his election to the Senate that year. He's written two best-selling autobiographies — "The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream" and "Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance."

BIOGRAPHY OF BARACK OBAMA

Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, where his parents met while studying at the University of Hawaii. His father was black and from Kenya; his mother, white and from Wichita, Kan.

Obama's parents divorced when he was two and his father returned to Kenya. His mother later married an Indonesian student and the family moved to Jakarta. Obama returned to Hawaii when he was 10 to live with his maternal grandparents.

He graduated from Columbia University and Harvard Law School, where he was the first African-American elected editor of the Harvard Law Review. Obama settled in Chicago, where he joined a law firm, helped local churches establish job training programs and met his future wife, Michelle Robinson. They have two daughters, Malia and Sasha.

In 1996, he was elected to the Illinois state Senate, where he earned a reputation as a consensus-building Democrat who was strongly liberal on social and economic issues, backing gay rights, abortion rights, gun control, universal health care and tax breaks for the poor.

The retirement of Republican Sen. Peter Fitzgerald of Illinois in 2004 drew a raft of candidates to the Democratic primary, but Obama easily outdistanced his competitors. He was virtually assured of victory in the general election when the designated Republican candidate was forced from the race by scandal late in the election.

Obama insisted during the 2004 campaign and through his first year in the Senate that he had no intention of running for president, but by late 2006 his public statements had begun to leave open that possibility.

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CBS News POLL: January 6, 2007

2008: VIEWS OF POSSIBLE DEMOCRATIC CONTENDERS

	Favorable	Unfavorable	Undecided/ Haven't heard enough
Clinton	43%	38%	19%
Edwards	34%	21%	44%
Gore	32%	46%	21%
Obama	28%	10%	61%
Kerry	22%	48%	29%
Biden	9%	14%	77%
Richardson	7%	8%	85%
Dodd	4%	9%	86%
Kucinich	4%	11%	85%

Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois receives much more positive ratings than negative, but he remains largely unknown on a national level. Six in 10 Americans say they are unable to offer an opinion of him.

Sen. Hillary Clinton has the highest favorable rating among potential 2008 Democratic presidential candidates, while former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Sen. John McCain are viewed most favorably among potential Republican contenders, according to a CBS News poll.

Forty-three percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of Clinton (D-N.Y.), but almost as many — 38 percent — view the former first lady unfavorably. She is also the best known of the potential Democratic contenders, with just one in five of those surveyed unable to evaluate her.

Former Sen. John Edwards, the 2004 Democratic candidate for vice president, has the next-highest favorable rating among Democrats, at 34 percent.

[MEDIA Reports on Barack Obama:](#)



What Obama's record tells voters

In Democratic center on environment, death penalty, judicial nominees

By Tom Curry

National affairs writer

MSNBC Jan 16, 2007

WASHINGTON — "The rock star Obama is fun to think about, but does anyone really know what he stands for?"

That's what Tim LaPointe, a Mason City, Iowa attorney who has long been active in Democratic politics in his state and who supported Howard Dean in 2004 wrote to me last month.

Democrats, and Republicans too, are curious about Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., — curious not merely about the Obama allure, but about his voting record and where he'd try to lead the country if he were elected president.

Obama's record as a United States senator and as an Illinois legislator shows him to fit comfortably into the Democratic mainstream of sympathy for lower-income people (he voted to raise the minimum wage), support for the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision on the right to get an abortion, support for phased withdrawal of troops in Iraq war but continued funding of those now there, and wariness about laws that might impose what he sees as an undue burden on racial minorities.

Low rating from conservatives

If you're a conservative, there's no surprise here: Obama isn't one of you, except on his support for more disclosure of earmarks, targeted federal spending for local projects.

The American Conservative Union, a right-of-center group that issues a report card on the voting records of members of Congress, gives Obama an 8 out of 100 lifetime rating.

If you're eco-friendly and want to see certain places kept off limits to oil and gas exploration, Obama is one of you.

Last March he voted against a bill that would have paved the way to oil and gas exploration in part of Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Last July he voted to filibuster a bill that would have opened eight million acres in the Gulf of Mexico to oil and gas drilling.

The confirmation vote on Chief Justice John Roberts provides a good case study in how Obama places himself on the political spectrum: he aligned himself with West Coast and Northeastern liberals in his party such as Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein of California and Sens. Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton of New York, all of whom voted against Roberts.

Obama was at odds with western and southern Democrats, most of whom who voted for Roberts: Sens. Max Baucus of Montana, Ken Salazar of Colorado, Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and others.

Praise for John Roberts

In explaining why he voted against Roberts, Obama told the Senate that he was "sorely tempted" to vote for him. Why?

"There is absolutely no doubt in my mind Judge Roberts is qualified to sit on the highest court in the land," Obama said.

"He seems to have the comportment and the temperament that makes for a good judge. He is humble, he is personally decent, and he appears to be respectful of different points of view."

"He does, in fact, deeply respect the basic precepts that go into deciding 95 percent of the cases that come before the Federal court: adherence to precedents, a certain modesty in reading statutes and constitutional text, a respect for procedural regularity, and an impartiality in presiding over the adversarial system."

So what's not to like?

Obama said he was skeptical of Roberts's "deepest values," his "broader perspectives on how the world works" and his "empathy."

According to Obama, the chief justice nominee told him that “he doesn't like bullies and has always viewed the law as a way of evening out the playing field between the strong and the weak.”

But Obama didn't believe it.

“He has far more often used his formidable skills on behalf of the strong in opposition to the weak,” Obama said.

Roberts 'dismissive' on race and women's rights

Obama's assessment: “he seemed to have consistently sided with those who were dismissive of efforts to eradicate the remnants of racial discrimination” and “seemed dismissive of the concerns that it is harder to make it in this world and in this economy when you are a woman rather than a man.”

Although Obama did not specify what evidence he had for these judgments, he was probably referring to cases such as one in 1990, when as a Justice Department official, Roberts opposed the use of racial preferences by the Federal Communications Commission in awarding broadcast licenses, and in 1982, as a Reagan administration lawyer, when he opposed lowering the standard in voting rights cases from needing to prove a racially discriminatory intent to only needing to show a discriminatory effect.

Perhaps because he is the child of a biracial marriage, Obama seems especially concerned about government treatment of racial minorities.

As a member of the Illinois state senate in 1999, he sponsored a bill to require police to compile statistics on the racial identity of all motorists they stop, a response to allegations that police stopped black drivers more frequently than white drivers.

In 2001 he voted against a bill in the Illinois legislature that would have allowed the death penalty to be imposed if a gang member committed murder “in furtherance of the activities of a gang.”

Obama said it would treat black and Latino people unfairly, and that lawmakers were over-reacting to one incident in which gang members murdered a man in Chicago.

“It's problematic for us to continually pass criminal laws based on anecdote. When we have a single situation when a prosecutor doesn't get what he wants, we come down here and pass a law, which is why we have a criminal code rife with contradictions,” the Associated Press quoted Obama as saying.

Self government for Hawaiians

In 2005, Obama, who was born in Hawaii, supported a bill, the Native Hawaiian Government

Reorganization Act which would have allowed Native Hawaiians to set up their own governmental body to open government-to-government negotiations with the United States.

The bill limited eligibility to take part in this new government to the direct lineal descendants of “the aboriginal, indigenous, native people” who lived in Hawaiian Islands prior to 1893.

Explaining why he backed the bill, Obama said, “Young Native Hawaiians have had difficulties in terms of unemployment, in terms of being able to integrate into the economy of the islands... Some of the historical legacies of what has happened in Hawaii continue to burden the Native Hawaiians for many years into the future.”

The new governing body would “make sure that the Native Hawaiians... are full members and not left behind as Hawaii continues to progress.”

But critics of the bill, such as Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said it “would create a race-based and racially separate government for Native Hawaiians.”

In the end the supporters of the bill could not overcome the 60-vote filibuster threshold.

Out of Iraq, but with some conditions

On the premier issue of the day, the war in Iraq, Obama has called for a gradual withdrawal of American troops.

But in a speech last November he left openings for a long-term U.S. military presence in Iraq.

He specified a number of conditions under which the withdrawal could be halted or delayed, for example “if the parties in Iraq reach an effective political arrangement that stabilizes the situation and they offer us a clear and compelling rationale for maintaining certain troop levels” and “if at any point U.S. commanders believe that a further reduction would put American troops in danger.”

And he made it clear that, for him, leaving Iraq did not mean leaving *northern* Iraq, the Kurdish region.

“Drawing down our troops in Iraq will allow us to redeploy additional troops to Northern Iraq and elsewhere in the region as an over-the-horizon force,” he said.

He said it was important to “consolidate gains in Northern Iraq, reassure allies in the Gulf, allow our troops to strike directly at al-Qaida wherever it may exist, and demonstrate to international terrorist organizations that they have not driven us from the region.”

Last week Obama said he was trying to figure out some way to pay for some operations in Iraq, but not pay for the additional 21,500 troops that President Bush has ordered to go there.

Obama said he wanted to avoid “a game of chicken” with the president.

The “big dilemma,” he said, is “trying to figure out what mechanism we can use to stop what I’m convinced is the wrong policy, without shortchanging the young men and women who’ve already been deployed.”

This carefully modulated position seems right in character for a politician who has already gotten very far in his ten-year career as an elected official.

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<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-0612060034dec06,1,6299295.story?coll=chi-opinionfront-hed>

Obama should run

With the 2008 presidential field taking shape, the striking thing is how little excitement most of the possible candidates are likely to evoke.

There are the polarizing figures: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Rudy Giuliani and Newt Gingrich. There are the candidates who've been here before, such as Sens. Joe Biden, John McCain and John Kerry. There are the little-known politicians whose best hope may be the second spot on the ticket, like Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack and former New York Gov. George Pataki. There are the capital veterans, including Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) and Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), whose importance inside the Beltway may make them imagine they have electoral strength beyond it.

And then there is Barack Obama. It's safe to say that when he decided to run for the Senate in 2004, he didn't imagine there would be lots of people now urging him to seek the highest office in the land. But ever since his electrifying address to the last Democratic convention, he has been marked for greater things.

To run for president would be a big leap for someone who just a couple of years ago was commuting to

Springfield as a state senator. There is a plausible case why Obama should bide his time and burnish his credentials for the future--plausible, but not persuasive. When a leader evokes the enthusiasm that Obama does, he should recognize that he has something special to offer, not in 2012 or 2016, but right now.

What would he bring to the race that others don't? The most obvious is an approach that transcends party, ideology and geography. In his convention speech, Obama demolished the image of a nation of irreconcilable partisan camps: "We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states."

No one else has shown a comparable talent for appealing to the centrist instincts of the American people--instincts that often go unsatisfied as each party labors to rally its most uncompromising factions. After the divisive events of the last decade, the nation may be ready for a voice that celebrates our common values instead of exaggerating our differences.

Any presidential race is a long shot, and there is no guarantee that Obama could succeed. But he may never again find such favorable circumstance.

With his unifying themes, he would raise the tone of the campaign. His intellectual depth--he was editor of the Harvard Law Review and taught law at the University of Chicago--and openness would sharpen the policy debate. He could help the citizenry get comfortable contemplating something that will happen sooner or later--a black president. His magnetic style and optimism would draw many disenchanted Americans back into the political process.

He and the nation have little to lose and much to gain from his candidacy.

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Barack Obama's Candor

January 8 2007

Confessions of illegal drug use in high school and college, contained in a memoir published more than a decade ago, would hardly raise an eyebrow were it not for the fact that the author, Barack Obama, is a likely presidential contender. Even so, the admissions seem to present a surprisingly small liability.

Mr. Obama's confessions in "Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance" were published 11 years ago, shortly after his graduation from Harvard law school. Born of a white woman from Kansas and a black father (who returned to his native Kenya when his son was 2), Mr. Obama was raised by his mother and her family.

His recollections of drug use are cast in the context of a youthful struggle to reconcile that dual heritage. "Junkie. Pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man," Mr. Obama writes. "I got high [to] push questions of who I was out of my mind."

Mr. Obama, 45, pushed in other ways, too. After graduating from Columbia University, he worked in Chicago as a community organizer. At Harvard Law, he became the first black person to be elected editor of the law review. A civil rights attorney, he served for seven years in the Illinois state Senate until his election to the U.S. Senate in 2004. He's also married and has two young daughters. His latest book is a best seller.

Impressive accomplishments all. Instead of using them as a firewall against his youthful indiscretions, however, Mr. Obama embraces the whole story.

In his race for the U.S. Senate two years ago, Mr. Obama said his story of drug use is important for "young people who are already in circumstances that are far more difficult than mine to know that you can make mistakes and still recover."

There's a strategy of damage control that says it's better to disclose than to be exposed. The idea is that a transgression's political consequences can be lessened with deftly applied doses of honesty. Mr. Obama's admissions, written before he contemplated life on the national stage, appear to be less calculation than straightforward statement.

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OpinionJournal

from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL *Editorial Page*



PEGGY NOONAN

Conceit of Government

Why are our politicians so full of themselves?

June 29, 2005

What's *wrong* with them? That's what I'm thinking more and more as I watch the news from Washington.

A few weeks ago it was the senators who announced the judicial compromise. There is nothing wrong with compromise and nothing wrong with announcements, but the senators who spoke referred to themselves with such flights of vanity and conceit--*we're so brave, so farsighted, so high-minded*--that it was embarrassing. They patted themselves on the back so hard they looked like a bevy of big breasted pigeons in a mass wing-flap. Little grey feathers and bits of corn came through my TV screen, and I had to sweep up when they were done.

This week comes the previously careful Sen. Barack Obama, flapping his wings in Time magazine and explaining that he's a lot like Abraham Lincoln, only sort of better. "In Lincoln's rise from poverty, his ultimate mastery of language and law, his capacity to overcome personal loss and remain determined in the face of repeated defeat--in all this he reminded me not just of my own struggles."



He's no Obama.

Oh. So that's what Lincoln's for. Actually Lincoln's life is a lot like Mr. Obama's. Lincoln came from a lean-to in the backwoods. His mother died when he was 9. The Lincolns had no money, no standing. Lincoln educated himself, reading law on his own, working as a field hand, a store clerk and a raft hand on the Mississippi. He also split some rails. He entered politics, knew more defeat than victory, and went on to lead the nation through its greatest trauma, the Civil War, and past its greatest sin, slavery.

Barack Obama, the son of two University of Hawaii students, went to Columbia and Harvard Law after attending a private academy that taught the children of the Hawaiian royal family. He made his name in politics as an aggressive Chicago vote hustler in Bill Clinton's first campaign for the presidency.

You see the similarities.

There is nothing wrong with Barack Obama's résumé, but it is a log-cabin-free zone. So far it also is a greatness-free zone. If he keeps talking about himself like this it always will be.

Mr. Obama said he keeps a photographic portrait of Lincoln on the wall of his office, and that "it asks me questions."

I'm sure it does. I'm sure it says, "Barack, why are you such an egomaniac?" Or perhaps, "Is it no longer possible in American politics to speak of another's greatness without suggesting your own?"

Even so sober an actor as Bill Frist has gotten into the act. This is the beginning of his Heritage Foundation speech yesterday:

You might have been wondering these last few months: Why would a doctor take on an issue like the judicial confirmation process? About 10 years ago, I set aside my medical career to run for the Senate. But I didn't set aside my compassion. I didn't set aside my character. And I sure as heck didn't set aside my principles. I got into politics for the same reason I got into medicine. I wanted to help people. And I wanted to heal. I just felt that, in politics, I could help and heal more than one patient at a time. I admire Bill Frist, but can you imagine George Washington referring in public, or in private for that matter, to his many virtues? In normal America if you have a high character you don't wrestle people to the ground until they acknowledge it. You certainly don't announce it. If you are compassionate, you are compassionate; if others see it, fine. If you hold to principle it will become clear. You don't proclaim these things. You *can't*, for the same reason that to brag about your modesty is to undercut the truth of the claim.

And there are the Clintons. There are always the Clintons. The man for whom Barack Obama worked so hard in 1992 showed up with his wife this week to take center stage at Billy Graham's last crusade in New York. Billy Graham is a great man. He bears within him deep reservoirs of sweetness, and the reservoirs often overflow. It was embarrassing to see America's two most famous political gifters plop themselves in the first row dressed in telegenic silk and allow themselves to become the focus of sweet words they knew would come.

Why did they feel it right to inject a partisan political component into a spiritual event? Why take advantage of the good nature and generosity of an old hero? Why, after spending their entire adulthoods in public life, have they not developed or at least learned to imitate simple class?

How exactly does it work? How does legitimate self-confidence become wildly inflated self-regard? How does self respect become unblinking conceit? How exactly does one's character become destabilized in Washington?

The Supreme Court this week and last issued many rulings, and though they were on different issues the decisions themselves had at least one thing in common: They seemed to reflect a lack of basic human modesty on the part of many of the justices. Many are famously very old, and they have been together as a court for a very long time. One wonders if they have lost all understanding of how privileged they are to have lifetime sinecures of power and authority. Do they have any sense anymore of common human wisdom, of the normal human arrangements by which Americans live?

Maybe a lot of them aren't bothering to think. Maybe Ruth Bader Ginsburg is no longer in the habit of listening to arguments but only of watching William Rehnquist, and if he nods up and down she knows to vote "no," and if he shakes his head she knows to vote "yes." That might explain some of the lack of seriousness in the decisions. Local government can bulldoze Grandma's house because it's in the way of a future strip mall that will add more to the tax base? The Ten Commandments can appear on public land but not in a courthouse, but Moses, who received the Ten Commandments can appear in the frieze of the House but he'll be sandblasted off the Supreme Court? Or do I have that the other way around?

What are they doing? All this hair splitting, this dithering, this cutting and pasting--all this lack of serious and defining *principle*. All this vanity.

Perhaps Justice Ginsburg or Justice Stevens will retire soon and write a memoir: *Like Jefferson I held to principle, and like Lincoln I often lacked air conditioning. But in my intellectual gifts I've always found myself to be more like Oliver Wendell Holmes . . .*

What is in the air there in Washington, what is in the water?

What is *wrong* with them? This is not a rhetorical question. I think it is unspoken question No. 1 as Americans look at so many of the individuals in our government. What is *wrong* with them?

Ms. Noonan is a contributing editor of The Wall Street Journal and author of "A Heart, a Cross, and a Flag" (Wall Street Journal Books/Simon & Schuster), a collection of post-Sept. 11 columns which appear Thursdays.

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Published Comments Written By: **BARACK OBAMA**

Politicians need not abandon religion

7/10/2006

By Barack Obama for **USA TODAY**

My faith shapes my values, but applying those values to policymaking must be done with principles that are accessible to all people, religious or not. Even so, those who enter the public square are not required to leave their beliefs at the door.

For some time now, there has been talk among pundits and pollsters that the political divide in this country falls sharply along religious lines. Indeed, the single biggest gap in party affiliation among white Americans today is not between men and women, between red states and blue, but between those who attend church regularly and those who don't.

This gap has long been exploited by conservative leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who tell evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their church, while suggesting that religious Americans care only about issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

It's a gap that has also been kept open by some liberals, who might try to avoid the conversation about their religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that constitutional principles tie their hands. Some might even dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, thinking that the very word "Christian" describes one's political opponents, not people of faith.

And yet, despite all this division, we are united by the fact that Americans are a deeply religious people. Ninety percent of us believe in God, 70% affiliate ourselves with an organized religion, and 38% call ourselves committed Christians.

This is why, if political leaders truly hope to communicate our hopes and values to Americans in a way that's relevant to their own, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.

My lesson

I've fallen into this trap myself. During my 2004 Senate race, my opponent said, "Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama." I answered with what has come to be the typically liberal response: that we live in a pluralistic society, and that I can't impose my religious views on another. I said I was running to be the U.S. senator of Illinois, and not the minister of Illinois.

But my opponent's accusations nagged at me, and I knew that my answer didn't address the role my faith has in guiding my values. I, like other progressives, should have realized that when we ignore what it means to be a good Christian or Muslim or Jew, when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, when we shy away from religious venues because we think we'll be unwelcome, others will fill the vacuum: those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.

Moreover, it's wrong to ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square. Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Martin Luther King Jr. — indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history — were not only motivated by faith, they also used religious language to argue for their cause. To say men and women should not inject their "personal morality" into policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality.

If progressives shed some of these biases, we might recognize the overlapping values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the direction of our country. We might recognize that the call to sacrifice, the need to think in terms of "thou" and not just "I," resonates with all Americans. And we might realize that we have the ability to reach out to the evangelical community and engage millions of religious Americans in the larger project of America's renewal.

But the conservative leaders of the religious right will need to acknowledge a few truths about religion as well.

For one, the separation of church and state in America has preserved not only our democracy but also the robustness of our religious practice. After all, during our founding, it was not the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of this separation; it was the persecuted religious minorities concerned that any state-sponsored religion might hinder their ability to practice their faith.

Universal values

This separation is critical to our form of government because in the end, democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. If I am opposed to abortion for religious reasons but seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

This might be difficult for those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, but in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics involves compromise, the art of the possible. But religion does not allow for compromise. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime; to base our policymaking on them would be dangerous.

In the months and years to come, I am hopeful we can bridge these gaps and overcome the prejudices each of us brings to this debate. I believe that Americans want this. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool to attack and divide.

Americans are looking for a deeper, fuller conversation about religion in this country. They might not change their positions on certain issues, but they are willing to listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in reasonable terms — those who know of the central and awesome place that God holds in the lives of so many, and who refuse to treat faith as simply another political issue with which to score points.

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