

It's The Past, Stupid!
How the Culture Wars Are Drowning the Issues of this Election

“If we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory.”

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*.

Abstract

This take on the U.S. presidential elections argues that current events are *not* the decisive factor in determining its outcome. The race, gender and trajectory of the various contenders have inflamed unresolved issues, energized old actors, and rekindled tired stereotypes. There is race, because of Obama: Is he too Black, or not enough? Is he elitist, bred in an Ivy League tower and disconnected from the painful past that hampered the lives of so many Blacks? So think, for instance some veterans of the Civil Rights movement. On the other hand, a sizeable portion of the white working class has been made suspicious about his background. Is he a foreigner? Do his Kenyan father and his multiracial background truly allow him to claim the U.S. presidency? Worse, is he a Muslim? Is his middle name – Hussein – an indication of some concealed affiliation to terrorists? Does his opposition to the Iraq war reflect a lack of patriotism?

The race issue is tied to gender. Many of Hillary Clinton’s supporters – the white middle class – harbor negative connotations when asked to characterize African Americans. Her women supporters contend that her nomination as the candidate would have vindicated the long struggle towards equality. The frustration is so great as to have turned a portion of this electorate towards the McCain ranks, especially since it was he who chose a woman as his running mate.

And then, there is Vietnam. Is the political struggle over Iraq not actually one over this divisive trauma, The amnesia that followed it, and which now is dooming Washington in the Middle East?

Events, of course, determine political outcomes. So one could wager, as do many today, that the dismal state of the economy gives a net advantage to Obama. So would have Gustav, if the hurricane’s thrust had zeroed in again on New Orleans, causing devastation similar to Katrina’s in 2005, and fracturing the still precarious levies.

On the other hand, a new terrorist attack prior to the presidential election would almost certainly profit the fortune of John McCain. Hence, drastic events can easily produce political regroupings.

But to what extent do they? Is the on-going election not also, and arguably mostly, about the culture wars finally unfurling into a de facto contention between the traditional white establishment and other groups formerly excluded on the basis of race or gender? Can a candidate who transcends both race and partisanship actually win in a country so polarized politically?¹

As George W. Bush's ratings plummeted, we were certain for a while that we had finally bridged the extreme political division. Earlier this year, in a series of conferences organized by the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute, an effort later sponsored by Princeton and Stanford, we heard the best brains of the country pointing towards a clear break with the past. The American population had surpassed the red-blue divide and was melting into purple.² Increasing population density in the suburbs and exurbs meant rising proportions of Democrats. So did mounting opposition to the war in Iraq, and concerns about the economy. The conservative Christian coalition was losing strength, partly because of the passing of an older leadership, and also because religious momentum appeared to favor those not so concerned by private issues (abortion, and gay marriage), but by pressing social challenges (health care, poverty and AIDS). One of the reasons for this change was the increasing laicism of the population, in which a growing number of babies were born either to single mothers or into common law unions. The coming of age of the new generation of "millenials" who had not partaken of the bitter culture wars, which polarized the country in the sixties and seventies, presaged

¹ Some authors contend that the notion of culture wars is a myth, the ploy of a tiny political elite, which includes the media to manipulate the public. See Dick Meyer, *Why We Hate Us. American Discontent in the New Millennium*, New York, Random House, 2008, pp. 138 ff. We do not dispute that politicians, journalists and some academics, agitate inflame and distort public perspectives, but regard the issues of race, gender, and war as being central and divisive in this country.

² Ruy Teixeira, Ed., *Red, Blue & Purple America*, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2008.

fundamental change. Another indicator was the mutual distrust between Christian leaders and McCain. In short, the stern custodians of our privacy appeared to have lost the battle against the crusaders for social justice. Dominating now, were Christians of the “Bono” persuasion— a reference to the colossal humanitarian work of the U2 rock band’s Irish vocalist. In short, maps and charts and polls informed us of a renewed social contract.

The purple kaleidoscope was soon, however, to revert to the compact horizon of 2004. The covert war lingered on. It was less about issues and demographics and more about forty years of grievances.

In an article for the Atlantic Monthly in December 07, Andrew Sullivan pointed out perceptively that the Clinton-Obama contest represented a clash between two generations, the first tied to the Vietnam legacy and the second wedded to a transformational perspective that would transcend past confrontations. “At its best,” he writes, “the Obama candidacy is about ending a war—not so much the war in Iraq, which now has a momentum that will propel the occupation into the next decade—but the war within America that has prevailed since Vietnam and that shows dangerous signs of intensifying, a nonviolent civil war that has crippled America ... It is a war about war—and about culture and about religion and about race.”³

Nothing perhaps underscored better the return of the gaping red and blue divide than reactions to McCain’s selection of his running mate, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. A typical hockey Mom from main America, she magnetized those cultural segments that felt slighted by what they perceived as Obama’s effete persona, and his privileged background. Had he not referred to gun owners and churchgoers as motivated by bitterness? Standing firmly on red turf, Palin hit the populist cord of a large group of Republicans: “No American politician plays the class-warfare card as constantly as Palin,” remarked New York Times columnist, David Brooks. “Nobody so relentlessly divides the world between the ‘normal Joe Sixpack

³ Andrew Sullivan, “Goodbye to All That: Why Obama Matters,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2007. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200712/obama>

American' and the coastal elite."⁴ Through her sheer command of the vernacular, Ms. Palin seemed to assuage fears about her questionable competence among Republicans. Her insularity and disconcerting lack of knowledge were actually an *advantage* over Obama and Biden's intellectual approach: "Transcripts and videos from her time in Alaska show her parlaying the barest minimum of rhetorical and intellectual resources into a formidable electoral weapon", writes Jonathan Raban in *The London Review of Books*. "Palin never thinks," he adds. Instead, she relies on a limited stock of facts, bright generalities and pokerwork maxims..."⁵ In short, her presence on the ticket helped to revert the political dynamic back to 2004. George W. Bush had undone the coalition successfully engineered by his then advisor Karl Rove – an alliance between libertarians, religious fundamentalists, and corporate interests. Palin reenergized it. There is a libertarian streak in Alaskans' ways that appeals to the American backwoods, which elected George W. Bush.

Palin's widespread resonance among equally plain folks has, in addition, reengaged a core Christian constituency, previously suspicious of McCain. She drew strong support from Evangelicals: she was proud of her choice to have kept her baby with Down syndrome, and fully supportive of her pregnant unwedded teen-age daughter. Some recognized in this again the seal of Karl Rove. She appears to be the "...ideal leader to renew and continue the Rovian effort to use religion as a political tool. During the Bush Years, ... Rove used a rallying cry focused upon fear of the secular spread of Darwinian evolution, abortion, gay rights, prayer in schools, and women's liberation. He turned up the volume on this fear to create an angry alliance among disenchanted Jews, Protestant Christians, and Catholic Christians."⁶

⁴ David Brooks, "The Class War Before Palin," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/10/opinion/10brooks.html?em>

⁵ Jonathan Rabin, "Cut, Kill, Dig, Drill," *The London Review of Books*, 9 October 2008, p. 7. The article, which is really worth reading, is available at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n19/raba01_.html

⁶ James Anderson, "Palin, Evangelical Religion and Enlightened Religion," [newsweek.washingtonpost.com](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/james_anderson/2008/09/sarah_palins_god.html), September 12, 2008. http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/james_anderson/2008/09/sarah_palins_god.html Anderson draws insight from the recent work of a seasoned

The reversion to scare tactics after the McCain campaign hired some collaborators of Karl Rove, consisted in demonizing the opponent and raising doubts about integrity of character. Today, months after the controversy stirred by the inflammatory remarks of Obama's Christian Pastor, Reverend Wright, the Democratic contender is being branded as a Muslim. "Almost one-third of voters 'know' that Barack Obama is a Muslim or believe that he could be," writes Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* of September 20. He cites a recently released Pew Research Center survey estimating that only half of Americans know that Obama is a Christian. "Meanwhile, 13 percent of registered voters say that he is a Muslim, compared with 12 percent in June and 10 percent in March." The belief that Obama is Muslim is especially widespread among white voters. The same Pew report estimates that more than three times as many white voters as African Americans perceive Obama to be a Muslim (14% vs. 4%).⁷

Because Muslim faith is today associated with terrorism, false rumors that Obama frequented terrorists at the beginning of his political career compound anxieties, which are fueled on the internet: "In videos circulating on the internet, Obama is derided as not only unpatriotic but a terrorist sympathizer, black radical, America-hater and closet Muslim."⁸

scholar on these topics: Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities*, New York, Penguin Press, 2007.

⁷ Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Push to 'Otherize' Obama," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/opinion/21kristof.html?em> A google search of "Obama and Muslim" yields about 10,200,000 results. For more specifics about the survey, see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "46% -- Don't Know Obama is Christian," September 18, 2008.

<http://peoplepress.org/report/?pageid=1374> This factor is arguably not so important since a narrow majority of American conservatives believe that religion should stay out of politics (50% vs. 30% four years ago): "More Americans Question Religion's Role In Politics. Some Social Conservative Disillusionment," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, August 21, 2008. <http://people-press.org/report/445/religion-politics>

⁸ Ken Silverstein, "Useful Amateurs. How the Smearing of Barack Obama Got Crowd-Sourced," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2008, p. 50. Silverstein's article is an interesting description of the empowerment given by the internet to amateurs.

Could he also be the incarnation of the Anti-Christ? In the New York Times, Nicholas Kristof mentions widespread web rumors according to which Obama “just may be the Antichrist. Seriously.”⁹ The McCain campaign has tapped into this dread in an ad called “The One” circulated on the internet.¹⁰

Race

It seemed easy for the Clintons to dismiss Obama as an unknown and inexperienced Senator with only two years in this august body, when they could count on their formidable political leverage gradually acquired throughout the years. Hillary’s campaign against this newcomer would be a breeze. Former President Clinton referred to him as a “boy”, an epithet clearly reminiscent of times when black adults were “typically denied ... the courtesy titles of Mr. and Mrs. — and reduced them to children by calling them by first names only.”¹¹ Obama’s childlike image tied in neatly with other portrayals of him as inexperienced, an elitist, and a dreamer -- as when Bill Clinton patronized his “fairy-tale” and “naive” perspectives, or when the McCain-Palin campaign dismissed his will to engage Iran in talks as credulous and out of touch with reality. Did such remarks not reproduce the notion of the “uppity nigger”, scorned by the disadvantaged of his kind, and scoffed at by whites?¹²

⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Push to ‘Otherize’ Obama,” *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Amy Sullivan, “An Antichrist Obama in McCain ad?” *Time Magazine*, August 8, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1830590,00.html> On the internet’s most widely searched rumors (among which “Obama Muslim” and “Obama Antichrist”, see Bill Tanger, “The Web’s Word: Obama Is Not the Antichrist,” *Time Magazine*, August 29, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1837170,00.html?iid=sphereinline-sidebar>

¹¹ Brent Staples, “Barack Obama, John McCain and the Language of Race,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/22/opinion/22observer.html?em> See also Matt Bai, “Is Obama the End of Black Politics?” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2008, p.8. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10politicst.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print

¹² Brent Staples, “Barack Obama, John McCain and the Language of Race,” *op. cit.*

After the South Carolina primary win by Obama, President Clinton condescended that Jesse Jackson had won that state in 1984 and 1988. The racial overtones of the remark were clear.

It is difficult for pollsters to assess the weight of racism in the election, since those queried are naturally reluctant to admit to any bias. However, Newsweek's "Racial Resentment Index" established earlier this year, estimated the resentment of white voters by asking questions about racial hiring practices, interracial marriage, and general opinions of Blacks. A wide proportion of what the survey dubs High "RR" (70%) favored Hillary Clinton over John McCain (18%).¹³ A more recent survey conducted by AP-Yahoo in partnership with Stanford between August 27 and September 5 estimated that "one third of white Democrats harbor negative views toward blacks – many calling them 'lazy', 'violent', responsible for their own troubles."¹⁴

Obama's major stumbling block has been the white working class, which expressed large support for Hillary Clinton, just as elitist, one might add, as her contender. This is no small challenge: "The white working class – a group that often speaks of itself, and is spoken of, as forgotten, marginalized, even despised – is the golden key to political power, and it voted overwhelmingly for George W. Bush twice, by seventeen per cent in 2000 and twenty-three per cent in 2004."¹⁵ One of Ohio's Obama supporters interviewed by George Packer for the *New Yorker*, said: "The conventional wisdom is that the economy will trump this year. I'm not so sure. The economy may

¹³ For an analysis of the survey results, see Evan Thomas, "A Memo to Senator Obama," *Newsweek*, June 2, 2008, pp. 22-27. Available on the web at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/13861>

¹⁴ Ron Fournier and Trevor Tompson, "Poll: Racial Views Steer Some White Dems Away From Obama," September 2008. http://news.yahoo.com/page/election-2008-political-pulse-obamarace;_ylt=AqTnBrFoTQfn9zjjZPkDRXI2KY54] Contains a link for the detailed poll results.

¹⁵ 14 George Packer, "The Hardest Vote. The Disaffection of Ohio's Working Class," *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2008, p. 62. Packer discusses the various interpretations of the working class's drift towards the Republican party, ranging from Thomas Frank's 2004 book -- *What's the Matter With Kansas*, to considerations about the resentment caused by the loss of jobs that migrated overseas, the weakening of trade-unions and the stagnation of incomes.

override social issues... and people still might not vote for Obama... You can't make the assumption that because people are suffering economically and the last eight years have been downhill and things are very bleak for them – you can't make the assumption they'll vote Democratic. There's just no basis for that.”¹⁶ New York Times reporter Matt Bai points out that the challenge for Obama among this electorate will be even greater than for his two Democratic predecessors: “Given the fact that he is not, in fact, a white male, Obama would seem to face an even-less-forgiving landscape among white-male voters. While voters overall give Obama the advantage over John McCain when asked which candidate is better equipped to navigate these tumultuous economic times, Gallup polls throughout the summer and into the fall consistently showed McCain with a double-digit lead among white men who haven't been to college.”¹⁷ Of course, Bai concedes, circumstances have aided Obama: bleak economic circumstances, the internet, which has helped him raise unprecedented funds, and even the drawn-out primaries during which he mobilized nation-wide support for his campaign. Nevertheless, Bai alludes in the same piece to the red-blue divide, noting that “after 40 years of culturally divisive politics, colors don't easily bleed.”¹⁸

Obama's candidacy has also polarized the black electorate. Many black political leaders, e.g. the members of the Congressional Black Caucus, were hesitant to support Obama, considering that his race would doom his candidacy. Hillary was long a favorite, also, among black women.¹⁹ Most notably, at the DNC's Women's Caucus meeting in August 2008, Donna Brazile, the first African-American to have organized a major national campaign (that of Al Gore)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ Matt Bai, “Working for the Working Class Vote,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 15, 2008.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/magazine/19obama-t.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Michelle Peltier, “Why Black Women Prefer Clinton to Obama,” CBSNews.com, December 3, 2007.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/12/02/politics/main3562837.shtml>

Josephine Hearn, “Congress' Black Women Favor Hillary,” Politico.com, January 23, 2008. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0108/8055.html>

announced her support for Senator Clinton. Decades of discrimination have been interiorized.

Another reason for the lack of consensus on Obama among blacks is generational. His elders had partaken of the struggle for Civil Rights, and many remain fiercely resentful of the white establishment, as epitomized by the clash and eventual estrangement between Obama and his pastor, Reverend Wright. They had carried the stigma, lived through the humiliation, and seen a majority of their people sink into poverty and social dissolution. Their aim was to go against the white establishment, challenge structural inequity and fight for quotas. That is why, earlier this year on Father's Day, when Barack Obama reproached black fathers for abandoning their families, he awoke Jessie Jackson's wrath -- the Reverend was caught on tape saying he would like to castrate Obama, causing his own son, Representative Jesse Jackson Jr., to condemn his statements. This rift between father and son reflects more than outrage over the insult. Younger black leaders are weary of being automatically associated with challenges the blacks face and reduced to questions on that topic. Their mental landscape has been shaped in universities, not in seminaries, and they resent being "pigeonholed," as Newark's mayor, Cory Booker, told Matt Bai: "I want people to ask me about nonproliferation," he continued. "I want them to run to me to speak about the situation in the Middle East... I don't want to be the person that's turned to when CNN talks about black leaders."²⁰

The black press, to some extent, shares the resentment of the elders. Like previous nominees of the Democratic Party, Obama has been faulted for forgetting them in his racially neutral (some have written "ambiguous") campaign. Dorothy Leavell, who publishes the Chicago Crusader and the Gary Crusader in Indiana, and who chairs the National Newspaper Publishers Foundation (NNPA), said of the Obama campaign: "They are the worst liars... Our papers are supportive of the Democratic Party, but they have always taken us and our readers for granted. They spend millions on the white media and won't even spend petty cash on us."²¹ The charge that the

²⁰ Matt Bai, "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?" *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²¹ Betty Pleasant, "Obama Snubs Black Media," *Black Agenda Report*. The

Harvard graduate is “uppity” is therefore shared by Black America, part of which wonders just how much of an ally the candidate is. Will this world be able to bend to a new political reality in which compromise is key? Or, questions a commentator on BlackAmerica.web.com, will it go “out of sorts if [Obama] doesn’t work race—particularly Blackness into – every speech and conversation?”²²

Obama’s candidacy indeed threatens the entire structure of the black political machine, and puts into question its traditional strategies. As Valeria Sinclair-Chapman and Melanye Price explain, “Organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League are expected to devise a black agenda and mobilize outside pressure to get pro-black policies enacted. Will the rules change if a black president sits in the White House? Will critiquing a black administration or making protest demands be perceived as traitorous? Making race-specific demands will be a more delicate enterprise if African Americans must tread the difficult waters of protesting against the first black president. One cannot be sure how this strategic uncertainty will influence the receptiveness of an Obama administration to black policy demands or how ordinary African Americans will evaluate intra-racial disputes at the highest levels of government.”²³

If polls are any indication, as of September 3rd 2008, eight million blacks – or just above one third of the eligible black population nationwide were not registered.²⁴

journal of African-American political thought and action, April 23, 2008.
http://www.blackagenda.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=599&Itemid=1

²² Deborah Mathis, “Commentary: If Black Folks Really Want Barack Obama To Be President, Here’s What We – and He – Must Do,” Blackamericaweb.com, January 21, 2007.

²³ Valeria Sinclair-Chapman, Melanye Price, “Black Politics, the 2008 Election, and the (Im)Possibility of Race Transcendence,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. XLI, No. 4, October 2008, p. 741

²⁴ NNPA, “8 Million Blacks Not Registered,” The Roland Report. Black America’s source for the news you need to know, September 3, 2008.
<http://essence.typepad.com/news/2008/09/nnpa-8-million.html>

Enter Gender and Class.

Grown indignant over the continued headway of Obama's campaign during the primaries, some die-hard Hillary supporters – like Geraldine Ferraro – vituperated his candidacy as only viable because of his race. In a New York Times op-ed article, Gloria Steinem argued that the crucial point at issue was not that Obama was black, but that he wasn't a woman: "Gender is probably the most restricting force in American life, whether the question is who must be in the kitchen or who could be in the White House," she wrote; she then charged that "black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot, and generally have ascended to positions of power, from the military to the boardroom, before any women".²⁵ Finally, Linda Hirschman invoked class, writing that wealthy and educated women could endorse Obama because they could afford to pay the expenses for a similar privileged background.²⁶ McCain's selection of a woman was partly geared to target some disgruntled Hillary supporters. His choice, writes Matt Bai, was "oddly retro ... premised primarily on old-school identity politics, the 80's-era idea that women pledge allegiance to the family of women more than they do to party or ideology."²⁷

Gender therefore exacerbated racial tensions and class fractures: "Lines were drawn in the sand – does the feminist movement – or at least female Clinton supporters ... acknowledge differences of race

²⁵ Gloria Steinem, "Women are Never Front-Runners," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2008.

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/opinion/08steinem.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

²⁶ Linda Hirschman, "For Hillary's Campaign, It's Been a Class Struggle," *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2008.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/02/29/AR2008022902991_pf.html For a good overview of the various positions, see Joe Gandleman, "Who's more of a feminist? Hillary Clinton, or Barack Obama?", *The Moderate Voice*, April 7, 2008.

²⁷ Matt Bai, "The Way we Live Now – Retro Identity Politics," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/14/magazine/14wwIn-ledet.html?pagewanted=2>

and class? Should there be a blind allegiance to those whom we share the same womanly parts? Can feminists be racist too?”²⁸ The Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered community also voted overwhelmingly for Hillary, who, according to a poll conducted in November 2007, garnered overwhelming support from this segment of the population (63% vs 22% for Obama).²⁹ The contention between Hillary and Obama supporters showed that Obama was portrayed as “uppity” not only by many blacks, and by many blue collar whites, but also by many feminists.

After the nomination of Barack Obama as the Democratic contender, the anger of some Hillary supporters has not died down. According to a CNN poll, 27% of Hillary supporters were as of August 2008, determined to support McCain. This marked an increase of 11 percentage points since June.³⁰

Enter patriotism.

Perhaps even more compelling and divisive than race, class and gender, is the issue of patriotism. Portraying Obama as effete and inexperienced, implicitly addresses his weakness and inadequacy, especially when contrasted with McCain, the Vietnam veteran. In the last presidential elections, John Kerry experienced a similar

²⁸ Laina Dawes, “Did Black Women Support Hillary Enough? Should White Feminists Support Michelle?” BlogHer.com, September 28, 2008.

<http://www.blogher.com/did-black-women-support-hillary-enough-should-whitefeminists-support-michelle>

²⁹ Kirk Johnson, “Clinton Polls Best Among Gays, Lesbians,” *The Caucus, The New York Times Politics Blog*, November 29, 2007.

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/29/clinton-polls-best-among-gays-lesbians/?apage=2>

³⁰ Paul Steinhauser, “CNN poll: post-Biden poll shows dead heat,” August 24, 2008. Available on CNNPolitics.com at

<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/08/24/cnn-poll-post-biden-poll-showsdead-heat/>

In a positive development for Obama, an increasing number of women who supported Senator Clinton will vote for Obama, yet the latter’s support in circles that favored Clinton still lags behind the backing that McCain is getting from those who favored another Republican contender: see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “McCain gains on Issues, But Stalls As Candidate Of Change,” September 18, 2008.

<http://peoplepress.org/report/?pageid=1373>

treatment. Commenting on his “frenchiness” meant at the same time underscoring his sophistication and decadence – not exactly attractive qualities for a crowd who claims powerful Mars as its ruler, not weakly Venus, which nurtures Old Europe. John Kerry from France? John Kerry, foreigner. Obama Kenyan? Obama Muslim? Obama terrorist? Who is Obama?

These questions and doubts find answers in the public narrative, which hails, to some extent, from the recent past. Since the 9/11 attacks, public pundits and preachers wildly denounced the events as punishment from God, or in a McCarthyist reflex, as the machinations of traitors. This was the opinion of then conservative columnist Andrew Sullivan, who pointed not at the red part of the country that voted for Bush, but at the suspicious blue fringe.³¹ In his new book, *Party of Defeat*, conservative right-winger David Horowitz argues that the opponents of the war in Iraq are in fact enemies of the United States. “The ‘antiwar’ left,” he writes, “promoted the idea of an American global retreat, not out of an aversion to war itself, but because they were themselves at war with American purposes.”³² Among conservatives today, this perspective is common: “The ‘New Right’ who began to dominate the national Republican party in 1964... viewed liberals as ‘cultural enemies who were traitors to American values and who need to be destroyed.’”³³ Is Obama at war with America? Is Obama a traitor?

Digging further, one finds the deeper roots of this narrative in the Vietnam experience. Small wonder that a spate of articles and books on the parallels between Iraq and Vietnam have recently been published.³⁴ The “swift boat” smear overcame John Kerry in the last

³¹ Quoted by Eric Alterman, *Why we're Liberals. A Political Handbook for Post-Bush America*, New York, Viking, 2008, p. 132. Alterman devotes two highly interesting chapters to the subject.

³² David Horowitz & Ben Johnson, *Party of Defeat. How Democrats and Radicals Undermined America's War on Terror Before and After 9/11*, Dallas, Spence Publishing Company, p. 23.

³³ Lanny Davis, quoted in Scott McClellan, *What happened. Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2008, p. 67

³⁴ Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young, Eds. *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam Or, How Not to Learn From the Past*, New York, The New Press, 2007.

presidential campaign. And it lingers on. As Peter W. Galbraith observes, "Vietnam is the image many Americans have of defeat in Iraq." The contention at issue here is between those who maintain that during the Vietnam War the administration caved in to popular and media pressure for a dishonorable retreat, whereas persistence could have allowed for a military victory, and on the other hand, those who maintain that after the Tet offensive, the U.S. had inexorably lost. Galbraith writes: "this 'blame the American people' approach has, through repetition almost become the accepted explanation for the outcome in Vietnam, attributing defeat to a loss of public support and not to fifteen years of military failure."³⁵ In his superb recent book, Phil Neisser explains the appeal of this perspective: Foreign policy experts and military planners find this "blame the media" thesis "attractive for reasons that have nothing to do with its truth or falsity and thus have seen reason to propagate it. Their concern is the specter of a loss of faith, on the part of the general public, in the wisdom, benevolence, ability, and power of the U.S. government as an international actor."³⁶ History books show a deliberate and/or unconscious attempt to dodge the issue.³⁷ A poll conducted by CBS news and the New York Times in 2000 showed that a remarkable 37% of the population "believed (the Vietnam war to have been) a 'noble cause' as opposed to 35% who thought that

Kenneth J. Campbell, *A Tale of Two Quagmires. Iraq, Vietnam, and the Hard Lessons of War*, Boulder, Paradigm Publishers, 2007. Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters. An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2008. Additional contributions can be found in the pages of *Diplomatic History*, as well as in the US Army War College, *Parameters*, a rich collection of resources available on line at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/> See in particular the valuable contributions of Jeffrey Record, who is regular contributor.

³⁵ Peter W. Galbraith, "Iraq: The Way To Go," *The New York Review of Books*, August 16, 2007, Vol. 54, No. 13. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20470>

³⁶ Phil Neisser, *United We Fall. Ending America's Love Affair with the Political Center*, Westport, Praeger Publishers, 2008, p. 77.

³⁷ See Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory. The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991, pp. 652, 661-662. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me. Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995, p. 358, note 5, gives further references.

it was not.” The debate over the ‘winnability’ of the Vietnam war also rages in academic circles.³⁸

Some political figures have had a direct stake in defending their stance on Iraq because of Vietnam: Henry Kissinger, for one, battling for his legacy through his advising of Bush and Cheney. It was Kissinger who coined the term “Vietnam syndrome” to qualify public skepticism, and “the term has stuck, as if being skeptical about what leaders say about matters of war and peace is foolish, an attack of irrationality, a kind of posttraumatic stress disorder.”³⁹ Kissinger, remarked veteran journalist Bob Woodward, in a 2006 CBS interview, by advising Cheney and Bush on Iraq that “victory is the only meaningful exit strategy... is fighting the Vietnam war again... because in his view, we lost our will... we didn’t stick to it”.⁴⁰ And then, there is Senator McCain, extolling the military value code of honor, and claiming the credit to be commander in chief from his years spent in a Vietnam jail. Is he not also validating the optimism of his late father, who maintained steadfastly that the U.S. would win the war, and who would be taken to cheer up Nixon in the President’s gloomier days? So thinks New Atlantic contributor Jeffrey Goldberg. In “The Wars of John McCain,” he remarks the “eerie parallels between Admiral John McCain’s steadfast commitment to victory in Vietnam and Senator John McCain’s pursuit of victory in Iraq.”⁴¹ The recent book by Virginia Senator Jim Webb, who fought in Vietnam, and whose son serves in the Marines in Iraq, underscores how much the military also are involved in this contention. They resent the condescending tone of civilians -- the liberals -- who protested the war as lack of recognition. They scorn also those

³⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Wars of John McCain,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2008, p. 48.

³⁹ Phil Neisser, *United We Fall...*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁴⁰ CBS News 60 minutes, “Bob Woodward: Bush Misleads on Iraq,” October 1, 2006.

http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/28/60minutes/main2047607_page2.shtml. Henry Kissinger has since said, however, that military victory was no longer possible in Iraq. For his latest opinion, urging against premature withdrawal, see Henry Kissinger, “New Premises in Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 2008.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/07/30/AR2008073002947.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>

⁴¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Wars of John McCain,” *op. cit.*, p. 42.

political leaders who send the youth in harm's way when they themselves have evaded service.⁴²

Electoral disputes over who wants to “win” in Iraq vs. those who choose surrender have little to do with the present situation because they refer to this muffled, if still divisive, chapter in U.S. history. The term “war” itself, which has been much abused, is a misnomer in characterizing the challenge of terrorism. What its use suggests, together with the interminable references to World War II (axis of evil, occupation of Iraq as a repeat of the successful experiences in Germany and in Japan, etc...) is nostalgia for the bygone era of definitive results on the battlefield. What it translates also is a yearning for the triumphalism that followed the end of the Cold War, a celebration of America, the “hyperpower,” and an oblivion of the role Gorbachev played as well as total disregard for the implosion of the Soviet Union. The world, the neo-cons believed, was now for the U.S. to fashion. It is worth quoting again the surreal transcript of remarks made a few years ago by an administration official. Ron Suskind recalls a bizarre discussion he had in the summer of 2002 with a senior aid to Bush: “The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”⁴³

In this megalomaniac perspective, where is the historical record? If Vietnam yielded one lesson, it was that the most formidable military power can do nothing against popular resolve. Yet, as Murray

⁴² Jim Webb, *A Time to Fight. Reclaiming a Fair and Just America*, New York, Broadway Books, 2008, pp. 203 ff.

⁴³ Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?scp=1&sq=suskind&st=cse>

Kempton writes, “We remain comfortable for being blessed by illusion and unconscious of being cursed by fact.”⁴⁴

Can Obama change the debate? Can he help frame the issues in terms that apply to present challenges? What these observations suggest, is that he cannot. Racism, class cleavages, and the fear of conspiracy are widespread. And then there is the illusion that absolute power bestows, and feeds.

Or can we hope for a renewal? Can reality strike a deadly blow to fiction? Can we go back to the good old days when it was “the economy, Stupid!”? David von Drehle sums up the stakes in the pages of *Time Magazine*: “Obama’s banners tout the CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN, and this slogan cuts to the heart of the task before him. The key word isn’t *change*, despite what legions of commentators have been saying all year. The key is *believe*. With gas prices up and home prices down; with Washington impotent to tackle issues like health care, energy, and Social Security; with politics mired in a fifty-fifty standoff between two unpopular parties – plenty of Americans are ready to try a new cure. But will they come to believe that this new doctor, this charismatic mystery, this puzzle, is the one they can trust to prescribe it?”⁴⁵

Laura Garcés
October 26 2008

⁴⁴ Murray Kempton, “Heart of Darkness,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 1988, Vol. 35, No. 18. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/4247>

⁴⁵ David von Drehle, “Your Answer Explained. The Five Faces of Barack Obama,” *Time*, September 1, 2008, p. 34. Emphasis his.