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Reinhold Niebuhr is Unseen Force in 2008 Elections

by Benedicta Cipolla
Religion News Service

Thirty-six years after his death, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr seems more alive than ever. Perhaps not since President Jimmy Carter acknowledged Niebuhr's influence in his 1976 campaign has the name been on so many people's lips.

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama told New York Times columnist David Brooks that Niebuhr is "one of my favorite philosophers." Brooks himself quotes Niebuhr consistently, describing him as a thinker we could use today "to police our excesses" in foreign policy.

Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne's forthcoming book takes note of the current longing for a new Niebuhr to inspire religious liberals, while GOP hopeful John McCain, in his volume, "Hard Call," wonders what the critic of pacifism during World War II would say today about Iraq. As political theorist William Galston put it recently: "After a period of neglect, Reinhold Niebuhr is the man of the hour."

Niebuhr is widely regarded as one of the most significant Christian intellectuals of the 20th century. Born in 1892 in Missouri to German parents, Niebuhr was ordained in the German Evangelical Church (later part of the United Church of Christ) and taught for more than three decades at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was a founder of the liberal anticommunist lobbying group Americans for Democratic Action, and in 1948, he appeared on the cover of Time magazine.

Over the years, Niebuhr won the admiration of political figures on the left and the right, including the late historian and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, who served as Ronald Reagan's U.N. ambassador.

Niebuhr's unrelenting gaze inward -- at a United States he refused to herald as the world's unquestioned savior -- runs counter to the renewed sense of American exceptionalism that followed the 9/11 attacks.

Niebuhr's Christian realism -- his recognition of the persistence of sin, self-interest, and self-righteousness in social conflicts -- highlights the distinction between the acknowledgment of evil's existence and America's own involvement in that evil.

"As Niebuhr famously said, we always use evil to prevent greater evil," said Peter Beinart, who advocated a Niebuhr-inflected American humility in his recent book "The Good Fight: Why Liberals -- and Only Liberals -- Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again." "The recognition that America is capable of evil has been brought home to a new generation, in things like Abu Ghraib, in the most topical way since Vietnam."

As the 2008 election heats up, Obama has emerged as perhaps the most visibly Niebuhrian candidate. At a June forum on faith for Democratic candidates, he spoke of the peril inherent in seeing America's actions as always virtuous and in drawing battle lines too neatly between good and evil.

In his keynote address to the United Church of Christ that same month, he called the challenges of poverty, racism, war, and unemployment "moral problems rooted in societal indifference and individual callousness, in the imperfections of man, the cruelties of man towards man" -- in other words, the inescapable fact of sin.

But his UCC speech also captured Niebuhr's insistence that neither sin's inevitability, nor the idea that worldly justice can only ever approximate divine justice, should give rise to a "Christian pessimism which becomes an irresponsibility."

University of Virginia religious studies professor Charles Mathewes suggests Niebuhr "is the best theologian to think about things if you want to think about sin without being cynical." Mathewes said he sees in Obama "the complexity of the Niebuhrian outlook," but he also believes Hillary Clinton possesses "theological depth I think people don't pick up on."

Niebuhr's last teaching assistant, Ronald Stone, now professor emeritus of Christian social ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, sees Clinton as a Niebuhrian candidate because of her bipartisan pragmatism.

As a teenager in Park Ridge, Ill., she read Niebuhr and other theologians such as Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer with her Methodist youth minister, Don Jones.

Niebuhr's own grounding of his political beliefs in his Christian faith may serve as another factor in the increased interest in him. While Republicans have long cloaked their programs and policies in the language of faith, Democrats have increasingly turned to a religious vocabulary to cast foreign and domestic issues in moral terms.

At debates and forums, candidates from both parties have spoken about how faith has informed their public policies and personal lives with a pietistic emphasis some believe would have discomfited Niebuhr.

Stone found Niebuhr to possess a deep personal religiosity, while disdaining discussion of personal beliefs in the public square. "Far better to have good political ideas and a way to carry them out pragmatically than to win votes through pious protestations," Stone said.

Future global threats, Mathewes said, are going to require collaboration across religions, national boundaries, and ideologies, and the U.S. response will need to be "infused with moral urgency, but also moral humility."

The 21st century, he predicts, will be a Niebuhrian century. If the current political moment is any gauge, he just may be right.

April 26, 2007

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Obama, Gospel and Verse

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

Sometimes you take a shot.

Yesterday evening I was interviewing Barack Obama and we were talking about effective foreign aid programs in Africa. His voice was measured and fatigued, and he was taking those little pauses candidates take when they're afraid of saying something that might hurt them later on.

Out of the blue I asked, "Have you ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?"

Obama's tone changed. "I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers."

So I asked, What do you take away from him?

"I take away," Obama answered in a rush of words, "the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away ... the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism."

My first impression was that for a guy who's spent the last few months fund-raising, and who was walking off the Senate floor as he spoke, that's a pretty good off-the-cuff summary of Niebuhr's "The Irony of American History." My second impression is that his campaign is an attempt to thread the Niebuhrian needle, and it's really interesting to watch.

On the one hand, Obama hates, as Niebuhr certainly would have, the grand Bushian rhetoric about ridding the world of evil and tyranny and transforming the Middle East. But he also dislikes liberal muddle-headedness on power politics. In "The Audacity of Hope," he says liberal objectives like withdrawing from Iraq, stopping AIDS and working more closely with our allies may be laudable, "but they hardly constitute a coherent national security policy."

In Chicago this week, Obama argued against the current tides of Democratic opinion. There's been a sharp rise in isolationism among Democrats, according to a recent Pew survey, so Obama argued for global engagement. Fewer Democrats believe in peace through military strength, so Obama argued for increasing the size of the military.

In other words, when Obama is confronted by what he sees as arrogant unilateral action, he argues for humility. When he is confronted by what he sees as dovish passivity, he argues for the hardheaded promotion of democracy in the spirit of John F. Kennedy.

The question is, aside from rejecting the extremes, has Obama thought through a practical foreign policy doctrine of his own — a way to apply his Niebuhrian instincts?

That question is hard to answer because he loves to have conversations about conversations. You have to ask him

every question twice, the first time to allow him to talk about how he would talk about the subject, and the second time so you can pin him down to the practical issues at hand.

If you ask him about the Middle East peace process, he will wax rhapsodic about the need to get energetically engaged. He'll talk about the shared interests all have in democracy and prosperity. But then when you ask him concretely if the U.S. should sit down and talk with Hamas, he says no. "There's no point in sitting down so long as Hamas says Israel doesn't have the right to exist."

When you ask about ways to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, he talks grandly about marshaling a global alliance. But when you ask specifically if an Iranian bomb would be deterrable, he's says yes: "I think Iran is like North Korea. They see nuclear arms in defensive terms, as a way to prevent regime change."

In other words, he has a tendency to go big and offer himself up as Bromide Obama, filled with grand but usually evasive eloquence about bringing people together and showing respect. Then, in a blink, he can go small and concrete, and sound more like a community organizer than George F. Kennan.

Finally, more than any other major candidate, he has a tendency to see the world in post-national terms. Whereas President Bush sees the war against radical Islam as the organizing conflict of our time, Obama sees radical extremism as one problem on a checklist of many others: global poverty, nuclear proliferation, global warming. When I asked him to articulate the central doctrine of his foreign policy, he said, "The single objective of keeping America safe is best served when people in other nations are secure and feel invested."

That's either profound or vacuous, depending on your point of view.

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June 20, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Two Obamas

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

God, Republicans are saps. They think that they're running against some academic liberal who wouldn't wear flag pins on his lapel, whose wife isn't proud of America and who went to some liberationist church where the pastor damned his own country. They think they're running against some naïve university-town dreamer, the second coming of Adlai Stevenson.

But as recent weeks have made clear, Barack Obama is the most split-personality politician in the country today. On the one hand, there is Dr. Barack, the high-minded, Niebuhr-quoting speechifier who spent this past winter thrilling the Scarlett Johansson set and feeling the fierce urgency of now. But then on the other side, there's Fast Eddie Obama, the promise-breaking, tough-minded Chicago pol who'd throw you under the truck for votes.

This guy is the whole Chicago package: an idealistic, lakefront liberal fronting a sharp-elbowed machine operator. He's the only politician of our lifetime who is underestimated because he's too intelligent. He speaks so calmly and polysyllabically that people fail to appreciate the Machiavellian ambition inside.

But he's been giving us an education, for anybody who cares to pay attention. Just try to imagine Mister Rogers playing the agent Ari in "Entourage" and it all falls into place.

Back when he was in the Illinois State Senate, Dr. Barack could have taken positions on politically uncomfortable issues. But Fast Eddie Obama voted "present" nearly 130 times. From time to time, he threw his voting power under the truck.

Dr. Barack said he could no more disown the Rev. Jeremiah Wright than disown his own grandmother. Then the political costs of Rev. Wright escalated and Fast Eddie Obama threw Wright under the truck.

Dr. Barack could have been a workhorse senator. But primary candidates don't do tough votes, so Fast Eddie Obama threw the workhorse duties under the truck.

Dr. Barack could have changed the way presidential campaigning works. John McCain offered to have a series of extended town-hall meetings around the country. But favored candidates don't go in for unscripted free-range conversations. Fast Eddie Obama threw the new-politics mantra under the truck.

And then on Thursday, Fast Eddie Obama had his finest hour. Barack Obama has worked on political reform more than any other issue. He aspires to be to political reform what Bono is to fighting disease in Africa. He's spent much of his career talking about how much he believes in public financing. In January 2007, he told Larry King that the public-financing system works. In February 2007, he challenged Republicans to limit their spending and vowed to do so along with them if he were the nominee. In February 2008, he said he would aggressively pursue spending limits. He answered a Midwest Democracy Network questionnaire by reminding everyone that he has been a longtime advocate of the public-financing system.

But Thursday, at the first breath of political inconvenience, Fast Eddie Obama threw public financing under the truck. In so doing, he probably dealt a death-blow to the cause of campaign-finance reform. And the only thing that changed between Thursday and when he lauded the system is that Obama's got more money now.

And Fast Eddie Obama didn't just sell out the primary cause of his life. He did it with style. He did it with a video so risibly insincere that somewhere down in the shadow world, Lee Atwater is gaping and applauding. Obama blamed the (so far marginal) Republican 527s. He claimed that private donations are really public financing. He made a cut-throat political calculation seem like Mother Teresa's final steps to sainthood.

The media and the activists won't care (they were only interested in campaign-finance reform only when the Republicans had more money). Meanwhile, Obama's money is forever. He's got an army of small donors and a phalanx of big money bundlers, including, according to The Washington Post, Kenneth Griffin of the Citadel Investment Group; Kirk Wager, a Florida trial lawyer; James Crown, a director of General Dynamics; and Neil Bluhm, a hotel, office and casino developer.

I have to admit, I'm ambivalent watching all this. On the one hand, Obama did sell out the primary cause of his professional life, all for a tiny political advantage. If he'll sell that out, what won't he sell out? On the other hand, global affairs ain't beanbag. If we're going to have a president who is going to go toe to toe with the likes of Vladimir Putin, maybe it is better that he should have a ruthlessly opportunist Fast Eddie Obama lurking inside.

All I know for sure is that this guy is no liberal goo-goo. Republicans keep calling him naïve. But naïve is the last word I'd use to describe Barack Obama. He's the most effectively political creature we've seen in decades. Even Bill Clinton wasn't smart enough to succeed in politics by pretending to renounce politics.

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July 25, 2008

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Playing Innocent Abroad

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

Radical optimism is America's contribution to the world. The early settlers thought America's founding would bring God's kingdom to earth. John Adams thought America would emancipate "the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush preached their own gospels of world democracy.

Barack Obama is certainly a true American. In the first major foreign policy speech of his campaign, delivered in Chicago last year, he vowed a comprehensive initiative to "ensure that every child, everywhere, is taught to build and not to destroy." America, he said, must promote dignity across the world, not just democracy. It must "lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good."

In Berlin on Thursday, it was more of the same. Speaking before a vast throng (and a surprising number of Yankees hats), he vowed to help "remake the world." He offered hope that a history-drenched European continent could "choose its own tomorrow free from the shadows of yesterday." He envisioned "a new dawn in the Middle East."

Obama's tone was serious. But he pulled out his "this is our moment" rhetoric and offered visions of a world transformed. Obama speeches almost always have the same narrative arc. Some problem threatens. The odds are against the forces of righteousness. But then people of good faith unite and walls come tumbling down. Obama used the word "walls" 16 times in the Berlin speech, and in 11 of those cases, he was talking about walls coming down.

The Berlin blockade was thwarted because people came together. Apartheid ended because people came together and walls tumbled. Winning the cold war was the same: "People of the world," Obama declared, "look at Berlin, where a wall came down, a continent came together and history proved there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one."

When I first heard this sort of radically optimistic speech in Iowa, I have to confess my American soul was stirred. It seemed like the overture for a new yet quintessentially American campaign.

But now it is more than half a year on, and the post-partisanship of Iowa has given way to the post-nationalism of Berlin, and it turns out that the vague overture is the entire symphony. The golden rhetoric impresses less, the evasion of hard choices strikes one more.

When John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan went to Berlin, their rhetoric soared, but their optimism was grounded in the reality of politics, conflict and hard choices. Kennedy didn't dream of the universal brotherhood of man. He drew lines that reflected hard realities: "There are some who say, in Europe and elsewhere, we can work with the Communists. Let them come to Berlin." Reagan didn't call for a kumbaya moment. He cited tough policies that sparked harsh political disagreements — the deployment of U.S. missiles in response to the Soviet SS-20s — but still worked.

In Berlin, Obama made exactly one point with which it was possible to disagree. In the best paragraph of the speech,

Obama called on Germans to send more troops to Afghanistan.

The argument will probably fall on deaf ears. The vast majority of Germans oppose that policy. But at least Obama made an argument.

Much of the rest of the speech fed the illusion that we could solve our problems if only people mystically come together. We should help Israelis and Palestinians unite. We should unite to prevent genocide in Darfur. We should unite so the Iranians won't develop nukes. Or as Obama put it: "The walls between races and tribes, natives and immigrants, Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down."

The great illusion of the 1990s was that we were entering an era of global convergence in which politics and power didn't matter. What Obama offered in Berlin flowed right out of this mind-set. This was the end of history on acid.

Since then, autocracies have arisen, the competition for resources has grown fiercer, Russia has clamped down, Iran is on the march. It will take politics and power to address these challenges, the two factors that dare not speak their name in Obama's lofty peroration.

The odd thing is that Obama doesn't really think this way. When he gets down to specific cases, he can be hard-headed. Last year, he spoke about his affinity for Reinhold Niebuhr, and their shared awareness that history is tragic and ironic and every political choice is tainted in some way.

But he has grown accustomed to putting on this sort of saccharine show for the rock concert masses, and in Berlin his act jumped the shark. His words drift far from reality, and not only when talking about the Senate Banking Committee. His Berlin Victory Column treacle would have made Niebuhr sick to his stomach.

Obama has benefited from a week of good images. But substantively, optimism without reality isn't eloquence. It's just Disney.

Paul Krugman is off today.

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