

U.S. Election: Obama, Of Course

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Elsewhere on my website I've posted a brief article comparing Barack Obama and Jesus Christ—not a political endorsement but rather an exploration of leadership and character. Like most other presidents in U.S. history, Obama has rather limited national political experience, so it is right to raise questions.

Here now is my political calculation. Having followed the current long election cycle fairly closely, and having read both of Obama's autobiographical books, I will be voting for Obama and Biden, for several reasons.

The Big Picture

The major and overriding reason is Obama's vision for reconciliation among politically and culturally warring parties in the U.S., and his vision for working cooperatively, rather than unilaterally, with the nations of the world. Though those are not explicitly Christian values, they seem to me more in harmony with the vision of the kingdom of God than does the current narrow and one-sided Republican vision.

If you read Obama's journey, you see it is all about reconciliation. This reflects his own life story, his own interracial history, his own quest for identity. He came to a sense of mission and purpose in life when he awoke to the fact that he had to live for a higher vision than his own self-interest. Eventually this led him to faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior.

I could wish that his vision of reconciliation were more explicitly Christian. His political vision is an odd but not atypical mix of Christian idealism and progressive American political liberalism. But I do strongly affirm a key conviction that arises out of this mix: In the pluralistic, multiethnic and multi-religious society that the United States has become, the only effective and morally acceptable way forward is to seek common ground across our divides—practicing “the art of the possible” and taking seriously the best interests of all people, not just those of our own group, whether nationally and internationally. This is anathema to U.S. political conservatism, but it has characterized most of our greatest presidents and is much more compatible with the biblical vision of the kingdom of God than is the “country first,” American-security-and-prosperity-first, ideology of most Republicans and a few Democrats.

Specific Issues

Beyond this general perspective, here are several specific points:

1. *Universal Health Care*. Since Richard Nixon (in fact, since FDR), American leaders have tried to move the country in the direction of universal health care as fundamental national policy. The United States is virtually the only economically advanced nation in the

world that does not provide universal health care, and U.S. health is falling behind as a result.

Since World War II, the pharmaceutical and medical insurance industries in the U.S. have grown so hugely powerful that they have successfully blocked any real reform—spending billions of dollars in lobbying and deceptive “public interest” advertising. This is a scandal that must end, first of all for the health of our citizens, especially the poor, and secondly for the health of the economy. (This situation is the current version of an old story in U.S. history. Think of the unfettered power of railroads 150 years ago, or corporate monopolies a century ago, and the government-initiated reforms required to redress the imbalances of power.)

Obama is committed to universal health care; McCain is not. Either would bring some measure of reform. But McCain would resist truly universal health care as government policy, while Obama would build the kind of consensus to institute, at long last, effective “socialized medicine”—just as we already have “socialized” food protection, a “socialized” military, and a “socialized” postal service. (The postal service, in fact, provides a good analogy for what universal health care infrastructure could look like.)

2. *Environmental Care and Protection.* This a key issue—as both McCain and Obama recognize, fortunately. McCain sponsored with Senator Joe Lieberman a climate protection bill a few years ago; it got nowhere because of Republican and Administration opposition. Whoever wins in November, we will finally get some action. But again, Obama’s approach is much more comprehensive and global, less exclusively tied to the question of U.S. security and “energy independence” (though it includes that aspect).

I disagree with Obama on some points here. He’s too ready to endorse “clean coal” (an oxymoron) and biofuels, though his position is nuanced on these matters and he recognizes the environmental risks that would need to be addressed.

The global economy has begun a historic shift from fossil-based energy to renewable, sustainable sources. Obama will speed that along in a much more ecologically sound way than will McCain. Time is of the essence due to the rapid pace of climate change. We are already experiencing the multiplied effects of climate instability as weather becomes more and more unpredictable and increasingly prominent in the news.

On environmental issues, clearly Obama is the better choice—especially now that McCain has chosen Palin, who apparently still thinks global warming is a myth.

3. *Tax policy.* I strongly oppose the Bush tax policy, which McCain seems now to endorse. It is based on the old theory that cutting taxes on the wealthy and on corporations stimulates the economy so that everyone, including the poor, benefits. This is the old “rising tide lifts all boats” theory. The theory is valid only under certain conditions. It works only when combined with lower taxes for the middle class and the poor, a livable minimum wage, environmental protection, and universal health care. (Brazil’s enlightened *bolsa familia*, or “family purse” program, which has lifted millions of Brazilians out of poverty, shows how policies that help the poor can benefit the whole society.)

The Clinton Administration proved that reasonable corporate taxation combined with help for the poor (e.g., a rising minimum wage and the earned-income tax credit, first instituted by Reagan), stimulates across-the-board prosperity. Cutting taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals, as McCain now wants to do, increases the gap between rich and poor. This is not the way to go and is socially dangerous long-term.

McCain claims that Obama will raise taxes. This is an unfair attack; Obama plans to cut taxes for 95% of the population. Presumably the Republicans think Obama will be forced to raise taxes in order to pay for his new initiatives. But Obama has adequately explained how he would finance his reforms. He merely wants to put taxes on the wealthy back up where they were when the country was prospering.

4. *Abortion and related issues.* My views are closer to McCain's here, but I appreciate Obama's concern to reduce the number of abortions and to try to find agreement between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" folks in order to strengthen families and address the social factors that lead to increased abortions. I also agree with Rick Warren, Ron Sider, and other evangelicals, and Obama himself, who say we should be just as "pro-life" concerning children after they are born as before.

Many evangelicals will vote for McCain because they think he will appoint conservative Supreme Court justices who will not "legislate from the bench" (as they like to say). But this cuts both ways. Very conservative justices might vote to restrict abortion (and I probably would support that, depending on the specifics). But they would be likely also to undercut civil rights, and possibly also undermine needed environmental and firearms legislation.

Obama has a fine chapter on the U.S. Constitution in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, and I largely agree with his moderate—rather than right-wing or left-wing—views.

Country First?

Then there is the Republican "Country First" mantra. I worry about this emphasis in the McCain-Palin campaign. The slogan is of course code for the claim that Obama is not a "true patriot," that he is a mere "celebrity" who puts himself, not his country, first. This Republican theme is dangerous on two counts.

First, it is dangerous globally. It is the ideology of the current Administration, especially since 9/11/01, that has created so much havoc and suffering, undermining U.S. credibility and values worldwide.

Second, and more importantly for Christians: No devout Jesus-follower can ever say "Country First." That is out and out idolatry. When the early Christians said "Jesus is Lord," they meant that therefore Caesar was not. And when devout Christians today say "Jesus is Lord" they mean that our country is not. Our life and worldview say "Jesus' Kingdom First," not "Country First." Since Jesus is Lord of history and Lord and Lover of all nations, not just the U.S., Christians can never say "Country First" in any unqualified way. (Whole biblical passages could be inserted here, especially from the O.T. prophets,

about the idolatry of nation.)

I am particularly worried about an ideology that sees no conflict between “Country First” and “God First.” If there is no conflict, no tension, then country has become god, and we have moved outside genuine Christian faith—either that, or become schizophrenic in our faith and allegiances.

Hope for Reform

The United States desperately needs a new Age of Reform—across-the-board reforms in health care, infrastructure, transportation, education, environmental protection, and government, among other areas. Most of all the country needs a thoroughgoing revival centered in Jesus Christ and a vision for the global kingdom of God. Such a spiritual revival could, and probably would, trigger reforms in many areas of society and culture.

Both McCain and Obama are reformers of sorts. Or at least want to be. But the direction and vision of Obama’s reforms seem to me to be much more compatible with the kingdom of God than do McCain’s. Obama’s vision is global; McCain’s vision is parochial, almost totally “country first,” even if more enlightened than Bush’s.

When I think of desperate concerns such as crisis in Haiti, the need for a broad-scale peace settlement in the Middle East, increasing global environmental crises and climate instability, violence and famine in parts of central Africa, and many other concerns, and then ask: Which candidate would be better for these areas and concerns, the answer to me seems obvious.

I am not bothered by Obama’s lack of experience because he has shown himself a quick learner, a careful organizer, a person of considerable wisdom and intelligence, a student of history, and one who draws upon the experience and expertise of others.

For these reasons—and a good many others which it would take more space to elaborate—I will vote for Obama and Biden.

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