

Downside UP

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Ronald G. Woodbury

Obama Still the Man

If you have not found yourself over the past few weeks with some anxiety about the accusations that Barack Obama is engaged in major flip-flopping on key principles, you must not have been paying attention or been on vacation in the wilderness.

Take a deep breath. Openness, including openness to change, is not the same as flip-flopping and can be a good thing. The fact is that what you have been experiencing is an organized two pronged internet/columnist/Fox News/Republican assault on Barack Obama designed precisely to undermine support for him from people like us -- Democrats and Independents. One prong is aimed at the less-educated white working class which used to vote Democratic but now often votes Republican. This prong focuses on pure lies about his religion, his place of birth, and his patriotism, at its most absurd accusing him of being both a Muslim and a follower of a liberal/radical minister of the United Church of Christ!

The other prong is aimed at people like the majority of *Downside Up* readers, if not to keep us from voting for him, at least to reduce our personal and financial support. The idea is to convince us he is a serious policy flip-flopper, betraying our ideals and the ideals on which he originally ran. In this, the mainstream press, after criticizing him for being too vague during the primaries, has contributed to the problem by treating every elaboration and specification as a big change. I am pushing out this issue of *DU* ahead of schedule to help us all (including me) come to grips with what is going on.

Clearly, John McCain has done total flip-flops on Bush's tax cuts, offshore oil drilling, public financing of elections, and terrorist detention, rendition, and interrogation. The mainstream press has acknowledge this too and "Mr. McMaverick" deserves intense questioning for it. But for us, the point is not whether Obama altered a position but what he changed and, if so, whether it makes him a significantly less attractive candidate for us.

Obama's main attraction for me (and I voted for John Edwards first) has always been that his character and politics, domestic and international, stood for openness to differences of culture and opinion, and declined to define all those who disagreed with him as enemies on an either-your-with-me-or-against-me basis. The Republicans would have it that Obama's changes are mere political expediency, and the media talk about his taking for granted those of us on the Democratic left. It's true he can count on my vote over John McCain no matter what but that doesn't mean he has betrayed me. It may even be that I want him to win badly enough that he should forsake my point of view. I certainly don't want the Republicans defining what I should think!

As sample sources, I have used primarily an article in *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (July 7-13, 2008, p. 15), "the Flip-Flop Express," and a column by Victor Davis Hanson, "Barack W. Bush," in *The St. Augustine Record* (July 10, 2008, p. 6A). I do not credit blogs as necessarily sources of fact. In this case, I suspect that some blogs which claim to have supported Obama before and launch vituperative attacks on him now, are also created by the Republican election campaign.

Wiretapping

Four months ago, Obama joined leading Democrats in opposing amnesty for telecommunications companies assisting in warrantless wiretapping. Since then, he has joined in support of a compromise providing additional restrictions on warrantless wiretapping but granting legal protection to those companies who assist in them. As far as I am concerned, the Constitution bars all warrantless wiretaps so there should be none and no corporate immunity either, but ironically, that says a lot more about the absolutism (as well as correctness!) of my view than it does the flip-flopping of Obama.

Public Financing of Elections

Public financing of elections is a democratic ideal which a few states have successfully adopted. But our federal system, which allows for a proliferation of "issue" 527 organizations and political action committees, has made meaningless the limitations on political spending. McCain, who himself co-authored the present system, has flip-flopped himself and is now going to use public funding primarily because he cannot raise enough outside of it. Obama has opted out of public funding because he can raise so much money from small donations. The whole system is a disaster but Obama is closer to the ideal because he has never relied on lobbyists for his campaign and collects a record amount of his money from small donations.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

In the primaries, Obama called for renegotiating NAFTA. Now he's sounding the other way. He has been suspect with me ever since I found out that his principal economic adviser was Austan Goolsbee from the University of Chicago economics department where, as *the Nation* puts it, politics run from "right to center." I think that free trade as practiced by the United States has contributed significantly to economic growth but that growth has been distributed such as to increase rather than decrease income inequality. Free trade has decimated industrial workers – and American industry. Its exemption of US agricultural subsidies from free trade standards has resulted in subsidized US beans, corn, cotton, and other products driving Third World farmers off their land and into a wave of emigration. Since free trade is now a basic article of faith for the Democratic as well as the Republican Party, just questioning free trade is at least a step towards reconsideration of the inequities which concern me.

Handguns

Obama is accused of changing his position on the "right to bear arms," because he first seemed to accept the Washington, D.C. gun ban but now finds that the Supreme Court decision to declare the ban unconstitutional provides "much-needed guidance to local jurisdictions across the country." This is not a flip-flop but part of the difficult balance between what the Constitution means and what is good for the country. Obama has not suddenly become a "gun-rights advocate." The Constitution does tie the "right to bear arms" to "a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state," but whether that means only members of the state militia have the right to own guns is a difficult question. More important right now is for states to pursue registration and licensing of guns as we do cars, a step not barred by the Constitution.

Abortion

Obama is pro-choice. He has raised questions about late-term abortions but on abortion, the far right and the far left both try to force everyone into extreme positions. You are either choice in all circumstances or no-choice in any circumstances. Both positions optimize fund-raising but ignore the real choices about two living beings, the mother and the fetus. *Roe v. Wade* in fact provides for the banning of third-term abortions and the regulation of second-term abortions. Obama is no flip-flopper here. I'm not for choice in all circumstances either. Obama may in fact be just the person to move the country towards reconciliation and compromise on this issue.

Faith-Based Programs

This is another clear case of the Right distorting a complex issue to make Obama look like something he is not. What few realize is that mainstream churches ran social programs long before George Bush showed up in the presidency. To do so, the churches forsook any right to proselytize or discriminate against other religions. They were focused on service. What Bush

has done is fund Fundamentalist churches primarily interested in using social programs to promote their doctrines and churches – and discriminate in hiring against people who were not of their churches. Under our Constitution, the Fundamentalist churches are free to proselytize all they want but not with government money.

Foreign Policy

The Right's most miserable effort to make Obama into a flip-flopper is their description of his foreign policy ideas, distorting his prior opposition to Bush policies while alleging current support. Hanson says Obama wants to "continue Bush's successful multilateral efforts to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan." In fact it was Bush who made a mess out of the multilateral effort in Afghanistan by undertaking a unilateral war in Iraq. While Obama has upped his rhetoric about Iran and Cuba, he has not backed off on talking with them, which is Bush's insane policy. Obama has even found it good politics in Florida to address the younger generation of Cuban-Americans who want more contact with Cuba, including visiting rights. Obama did criticize Bush's demand for six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program, but the agreement Obama recently praised only came after Bush quietly reversed himself, stopped his axis of evil name-calling, conducted behind-the-scenes bilateral talks, and brought North Korea's nuclear program back to about the same place as the messy "food not bombs" agreement Clinton had.

I became an avid supporter of Barack Obama not for any specific policy but because he offers hope for another view of the world, one that, both domestically and internationally, is open to difference. He is sensitive to cultural diversity and open to compromise with different opinions. After eight years of your-either-with-me-or-against-me politics, I welcome a president who will listen to others. I welcome a president who understands that just because you don't agree with someone does not mean that you cannot reach an agreement with them.

Obama's leadership perspective has not changed at all. If he has moved towards some more mainstream Democratic views, I do not complain just because I am more liberal. McCain, by comparison, remains a starkly narrow-minded choice. I worry more than anything about how we get out of Iraq but I am sure Obama is our best hope.

Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous.

Woodbury has B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in history, economics, and international affairs from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.