

Obama's Pivot

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In the closing minutes of his epic battle with Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama unveiled a brilliant new tactic: he pivoted and ran against John McCain. Obama's focus on McCain rather than his primary opponent gave him presidential stature that led to the collapse of Clinton's last vestiges of political support. Led by Rahm Emanuel, a stalwart Clintonian factotum and grandee of the now obsolete DLC, the exodus from Clinton's campaign recalled the whoosh of gas escaping from a hot air balloon over the Grand Canyon.

The morning after his victory in the final primary in Montana, Obama found himself in a totally new and much more dangerous political landscape at the opening of the next precarious phase of the marathon for the White House. Of course, there were the secret meetings between Obama and Clinton staffers and between him and Senator Clinton, but those were conciliatory and came after long and arduous clandestine negotiations between the two camps.

The starkest challenge facing Barack Obama on the morning after Montana came from a decidedly unfriendly and potentially hostile audience, the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC). Much has been written in The Huffington Post, The Nation and elsewhere about the disappointment now coursing through Obama's progressive base at the remarks he made before AIPAC. These appraisals are understandable. Obama appeared to lavish praise on an organization that has unflinchingly supported the failed foreign policy of George W. Bush. In this rush to judgment of Obama's obeisance to AIPAC, the backstory is rarely considered, and the political dimension of his strategy to confront John McCain appears never to have been taken into serious account.

For months Barack Obama has been assailed via an insidious smear campaign as a closet Muslim fanatic on a secret mission programmed into his brain by Islamic manipulators hell-bent to manufacture a Manchurian candidate who will surrender America and her allies to the control of Osama Bin Laden and his murderous minions in Tora Bora, Peshawar and Kandahar. The anti-Obama campaign was not subtle. Underlings in the Clinton campaign aided and abetted by their fellow-travelers at the DLC and AIPAC fanned the flames of Islamophobia that linked Barack Obama to radical terrorists in turbans lurking in the shadows and scattered across the face of America from Manhattan to Montana. Headlines screamed out from front pages including those of the New York Times insinuated that Obama had a "Jewish problem." While the disinformation campaign was absurd, because Obama enjoys the support of more than sixty per cent of America's Jewish community, the irrational but resonant undercurrent of racism and Islamophobia was simplicity itself: Barack Hussein Obama, with his multicultural heritage and his unique embodiment of ethnic diversity could not be trusted in the White House.

Nowhere in America were these artificial fears more entrenched than among the membership of AIPAC a lobbying group that consists largely of the most orthodox and conservative thirty per cent of America's Jewish community. AIPAC consistently supports Republican foreign policies and most Republican candidates, while a few of its wealthiest members help the organization hedge its bets by supporting a few token Democrats of the most conservative variety: neocons groomed by the DLC like Senator Joseph Lieberman and 'centrists' like Senator Hillary Clinton. In May one of the most philanthropic supporters of AIPAC, Haim Saban, was exposed when he allegedly attempted to offer Democratic super-delegates one million dollars each to support Hillary Clinton instead of Barack Obama. Many now believe that Saban predicated his support for Clinton on his personal fears and prejudice against her multicultural rival – Obama.

Congressman Rahm Emanuel was a faithful servant in the Clinton White House. An assertive and frequently abrasive character, Emanuel helped to enforce a strictly hawkish AIPAC line on every dimension of Middle East policy during the Clinton era. The leading advocate of genuine peace negotiations in Israel, Uri Avnery criticized the Clinton White House for surrounding the president with advisors vetted by AIPAC who worked to sabotage serious peace negotiations between the government of Israel and the Palestinians. While Emanuel is a member of the House of Representatives, Senator Joe Lieberman leads the AIPAC faction in the Senate. Today, AIPAC is a house divided. Emanuel supports Obama while Lieberman supports McCain, but many believe that they might just be hedging their bets.

The sage of Israel, Uri Avnery was among the first to excoriate Obama for breaking "all records for obsequiousness and fawning" before AIPAC. Avnery's column was a stern rebuke that struck both Obama and AIPAC and emboldened others, among them Stephen Zunes, to publish their critiques in what became a cottage industry – an explosion of articles criticizing Obama for his AIPAC speech. Nowhere has this explosion of angst had more impact than in the Middle East where throngs of Palestinians and their millions of Muslim supporters huddled in hopes of a new American era led by a multicultural president with an appreciation for international law. As a direct result of his AIPAC speech, Obama's stock is collapsing not only in the Middle East, but also around the globe.

The most egregious statement Obama made during his star-crossed speech to AIPAC involved the city of Jerusalem. Obama called for an era of peace in an "undivided" Jerusalem. Avnery reproached Obama for this remark, reminding him that Jerusalem had been the capital of Palestine, and there was no conceivable set of circumstances that could change that fact. After hearing the cries of those appalled by his mistake, Obama clarified his statement on Jerusalem with a refinement designed to reassure the Palestinians over the future of their beloved city. Obama's clarification was revealing. In his clarification, Obama stated that he had meant that Jerusalem must not be divided by walls or barricades or check-points in a clear slap at current Israeli policy on the West Bank where the grotesque security wall has disfigured the landscape. But, Obama's clarification came one day too late. A great deal of damage had already been done to Obama's credibility in the Middle East. The president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbaas hastily said that Obama's statement to AIPAC should be "totally rejected."

But Obama's AIPAC speech did not occur in a vacuum for there was a lengthy prelude that has yet to be taken into account by any serious observer. For starters, President George W. Bush, a man who has shamelessly conducted his presidency on the twin bases of his peculiar religious beliefs and the notion that what is good for his friends in the oil business is

good for America, took the unprecedented step of criticizing Obama while Bush was visiting old friends scattered across the globe on his farewell tour. Nowhere was Bush's attack on Obama so pointed as before the Israeli Knesset.

During Bush's final official sojourn to Israel, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert brought Bush to tears when he praised the lame duck president from the dais of the Knesset. Bush has been reduced to tears many times during his troubled presidency, but the tears he shed in the Knesset were those of an evangelical president devoted to his messianic vision of an apocalyptic theocracy. Rising to the occasion of his last presidential visit to Israel, Bush attacked Obama for offering what he described as policies that would lead to the deaths of Israelis and the destruction of the state of Israel through the appeasement of terrorists.

Upon learning of Bush's broadside attack from the dais of the Knesset, Obama responded swiftly and decisively with a counter-attack in which he promised a new era of American diplomacy that would be predicated on peaceful, thoughtful, deliberate and, at times, tough negotiations in sharp contrast with the cowboy presidency of George Bush whereby America shoots first and asks questions later. The clash between Bush and Obama dominated the front pages in the weeks just before the end of the primary season on the 4th of June.

Shortly after Bush's unprecedented attack on Obama from Israel, Senator Joe Lieberman made allusions to what he presented as ambiguities in Obama's religious background fueling the smear campaign that the Democratic nominee for president just might be a closet Muslim. The case of Senator Lieberman is well known. A right-wing Democrat and neocon who is deeply conservative and orthodox in his religious piety, Senator Lieberman has emerged as probably America's strongest supporter of the presumptive Republican nominee, Senator John McCain. It is a rarely mentioned fact that during Lieberman's primary defeat by the progressive candidate Ned Lamont, Lieberman enjoyed the support of both the Clintons and Barack Obama who came to Connecticut to campaign for him when he was losing the confidence of his state's Democratic voters. When Lieberman recently began to make allegations about Obama's personal religious views, he went too far. Obama confronted Lieberman privately in the Senate. In a tense conversation that was witnessed by members of the Senate and broadly reported by the MSM, Obama made several emphatic points in his tete a tete with Lieberman. Observers presumed that Obama had taken umbrage at Lieberman's betrayal of him, one of his few Senate supporters during his defeat to Lamont in 2006, but their discussion may well have gone deeper into new developments taking shape in the Middle East.

Last week, Europe's most conservative broadsheet, The Daily Telegraph, reported that during the early days of June, Israel conducted military exercises in rehearsal for an imminent attack against Iran. The Bush-Cheney government has reportedly planned a devastating attack on Iran. Seymour Hersh published a series of authoritative papers in The New Yorker on such US plans to attack Iran. When Vice President Cheney made his last visit to the Middle East, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced that the Vice President had informed him of a forthcoming US attack on Iran. In the aftermath of Bush's visit to Tel Aviv, Israeli media reported that the US would soon attack Iran.

There has been a massive internecine struggle between the Bush-Cheney White House and the Pentagon as well as other branches of government over the timing, the launch and the advisability of a US attack on Iran. John Bolton and Elliot Abrams are the leading proponents of an imminent US attack on Iran, while James Baker, Lee Hamilton and Robert Gates are deemed to be its leading opponents. Critics of the Iran attack fear repercussions across a

blazing arc spanning Asia and especially in Iraq as well as explosive reprisals against the people of Israel and a massive surge in the price of oil at the gas pumps of America and the West that would drive the cost of a gas as high as ten dollars per gallon or even higher over night in the wake of a US attack on Iran. Propelled by a huge wave of speculation, the cost of petroleum is now at its all time peak and trending higher. There is no question at all about the source of the feverish speculation in oil for it is merely the product of greed driven by the belief that the US and or Israel will attack Iran in the run-up to the November election in a brazen attempt to reverse the political polarity of America – to improve the presidential ambitions of Senator John McCain.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mohamed El-Baradei is the head of United Nations investigations into the nuclear program of Iran. In a statement issued last week, Mohamed El-Baradei threatened to resign his critical post if Iran is attacked. El-Baradei's threat is music to the ears of John Bolton and Joseph Lieberman, not to mention legions of neocons inhabiting government positions in the US and Israel. The absence of such an assiduous professional will depress the proponents of peace negotiations and nuclear disarmament especially in the Middle East. If El-Baradei is forced to resign by a unilateral US and or Israeli attack on Iran, it will send a green light for nuclear programs across a huge arc of the Middle East. From Pakistan on the east to Egypt and Turkey on the west, pressures will build for the dissemination of nuclear technology to the Islamic nations encircling Israel.

The Republicans' political strategy is now perfectly clear. Aided and abetted by their fellow neocons in the US and Israel, Republican operatives ultimately under the command of Karl Rove are in the process of defining Barack Obama as a closet Muslim and the hand-picked presidential candidate of Iran. Soft on Iran, soft on Iraq and not to be trusted with national security, Obama will be attacked by the Republicans as unfit for the presidency. These arguments are designed to gain traction on the back of open hostilities in the Middle East and will crystallize during a US and or Israeli assault on Iran that could take place at any time from now until the day of the election.

In his remarks to AIPAC, Obama promised an aggressive pursuit of peace from the earliest days of his presidency, and he called for the removal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank. These were not popular points with his audience. In contrast, Senator John McCain promised AIPAC a broader war in the Middle East spilling over into Iran, but he did not stop there. McCain advocated a permanent occupation of Iraq and many other sites in the Middle East from Kurdistan to Kandahar. But that was not all. Quoting suspicious sources, McCain led his audience at AIPAC to believe that the unpopular president of Iran had called for a resumption of the Holocaust. Of course, McCain's remarks were absurd. For years, McCain and many others have painted Ahmadinejad as a denier of the Holocaust. When he addressed AIPAC, McCain depicted Ahmadinejad as the proponent of a Holocaust that he has been demonized for denying. McCain's little studied speech to AIPAC was littered with absurdities, but they were absurdities designed to appeal to the deepest fears palpitating in the hearts of that august chamber.

In contrast to McCain's absurdist nightmares of a renewal of the Holocaust and promises of a pre-emptive war against Iran plus the eternal occupation of Iraq and a future engulfed in global war, terrorism and economic deprivation, Obama's statement emphasizing diplomacy, peace negotiations and the return of land to Palestinians should be interpreted as a bold model of rationality placed before a rabidly hostile audience. The day Obama addressed AIPAC, former President Jimmy Carter who knows quite a lot about the case of Israel, Palestine and the Middle East endorsed Obama for president.

Twenty-six years ago, Israel launched an attack on Saddam Hussein's nuclear facility at Osirak. Today, we await the news of Osirak II, the sequel that is to be filmed in Iran. An Israeli assault on Iran will ignite a new wave of terror in Iraq, Israel and America, and it will trigger a huge surge in the prices of crude oil and gas at the pump. While that scenario is the dream of John McCain, John Bolton, George Bush, Dick Cheney and zillions of frustrated neocons in the oil industry, it is a nightmare for the rest of us.

Barack Obama bears the huge burden of great expectations. The anticipation about Obama is not limited to the United States. Obama has become a focus for global hopes of a renewal of rationality in American government. In recent days, it has been made clear that Obama is considering a tour to foreign capitals before the Democratic National Convention in August. Obama's global tour would provide the platform to articulate his vision of a new era of US foreign policy, and it would strengthen his credentials in foreign affairs.

Obama still has everything to play for, and the limelight is now falling directly on him. Obama can now hold fast to his message of hope and change, or he could abandon it and acquiesce to the absurdist nightmares of the neocons. Nothing that Obama has done to date, including his AIPAC address, suggests that he will morph into a neocon, but we eagerly await the next phase of his battle with the proponents of fear, war and their by-products: death and destruction.

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