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# Honor versus Unity

*Laurence D. Cooper*

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THIS SHOULD have been the year of the wonk. With a credit crunch, rising inflation, falling home prices, and a growing sense of menace arising from the behavior of the Russians in the Caucasus and the mullahs in Iran, one might have expected the presidential campaign of 2008, even more than previous contests, to focus on policy prescriptions. At a time when four-fifths of Americans say the country is on the wrong track, logic suggests voters would want to know specifically what programs the presidential candidates intend to put into place when they take office, and how those programs differ.

Yet by placing John McCain and Barack Obama atop the Republican and Democratic lines on Election Day, primary voters have presented general-election voters with a contest that is very nearly the opposite. These are two unusually personal candidacies whose animating texts are not policy compendia but uncommonly interesting best-selling autobiographies with strangely similar titles—Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* and McCain’s *Faith of My Fathers*. The most compelling aspect of each candidate is his life story.

McCain’s is a tale of sacrifice, heroism, and service, from a military brat’s upbringing through the Naval Academy, into Vietnam and five years in cap-

tivity as a prisoner of war, followed by a steady climb to the top of the political greasy pole as one of the most important Senators of the era. Obama’s is a classically improbable American success story about overcoming emotional adversity and finding a path for oneself, from a fatherless, half-Kansan, half-Kenyan wayward youth in Hawaii and Indonesia, into the Ivy League and then an astoundingly rapid ascent to his present standing as the most successful black political figure in American history.

With the undeniably significant exception of their contrasting positions on the war in Iraq, neither McCain nor Obama has constructed a candidacy primarily based on the policies he would enact in the White House. Neither vows to roll up his sleeves and make the necessary repairs to the nation’s malfunctioning machinery; and to the extent that he does propose specific solutions, these seem grafted on to his candidacy rather than intrinsic to it. What makes both candidacies unique is that each promises to bring *others* together to solve the problems of the nation and the world. The means the new President will use to achieve his aim will be the force of words and the power of example—in other words, he will govern more through who he is than through the merit of his ideas.

So who is McCain? Who is Obama? In August, the two candidates were interviewed seriatim at Saddleback Church in Southern California. Its pastor, Rick Warren, asked each man why he wanted to be President. Obama replied: “I think I have the

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ability to build bridges across partisan lines, racial, regional lines to get people to work on some common-sense solutions to critical issues.” McCain answered the same question by saying he wished “to inspire a generation of Americans to serve a cause greater than their self interest.”

In essence, McCain was saying he seeks to *elevate* the American people; Obama was saying he wishes to *unify* them. To be sure, by elevating us, McCain also means to unify us, since in rising above self-interest we will be rising to the common interest. In the same way, Obama’s unifying would also elevate us, since what could be more inspiring than genuine feelings of national brotherhood? Still, what is paramount for McCain is the elevation, and for Obama the unification.

At root, then, these two highly personal candidacies are more than personal. The contest between McCain and Obama has a distinct moral and philosophic dimension. One might even call it a metaphysical dimension, in the sense that each candidacy seeks to transcend present-day political boundaries and address voters in terms that are deeper and more elemental. McCain is a candidate of honor. Obama is a candidate of reconciliation.

JOHN MCCAIN is a student of history and lover of grand literature. He recounts these life-long passions in *Faith of My Fathers* and displays them in his other books, *Hard Call* and *Character Is Destiny*. However much these tomes may owe to his amanuensis, Mark Salter, they accurately reflect McCain’s sensibility in a manner consistent with great works of the past that examine and celebrate the moral struggles of ordinary and extraordinary people.

Such struggles are perennial, since in every age the same impulses tempt human beings from the responsibilities of duty and the burdens of honor. Because these struggles between selfishness and selflessness help to shape history, it is fair to say that, for McCain, contemporary events are animated by the same forces and the same principles that have governed human affairs from time immemorial. Weapons change, but war persists. Over time, a free society’s understanding of an abstract principle like justice may grow more expansive, yet, through it all, human nature itself does not change. If we forget this, we will disarm ourselves against dangers not only from without but also from within.

A person who recognizes what McCain himself has referred to as “the darker side of human nature” need not be blind to the lighter side, and McCain is anything but. Having taken on Obama in

what one disgusted reporter, Michael Crowley of the *New Republic*, has termed “the most sarcastic campaign ever,” McCain inclines toward a deflating humor that he aims both toward himself and toward interlocutors (especially journalists) he thinks take themselves too seriously. Still, a man for whom duty and honor are paramount will always be mindful of, and gravely serious about, the terrible vulnerability of the good, and will be animated by the desire to protect it. He will have something of the disposition of a sheriff, or knight errant. Think of McCain’s instant solidarity with what he called the “brave little nation” of Georgia in the wake of the recent Russian invasion, and of his call for immediately admitting Georgia to NATO.

In his appearance at Saddleback Church, McCain was asked for a summary statement regarding the problem of evil: “Do we ignore it? Do we negotiate with it? Do we contain it? Do we defeat it?” Like Obama an hour before him, he affirmed the existence of evil as a force in the world. But unlike Obama, who mentioned a number of incontrovertible evils without naming any specific evildoers (tellingly, the only proper noun in Obama’s answer was a place name, Darfur), McCain focused his answer exclusively on Islamic extremism and al Qaeda, an identifiable group at war with the United States. Obama called for a general “confrontation” with evil. McCain said flatly that he would “defeat it.”

Perhaps more illuminating than his answer at Saddleback, though, is a theme McCain developed in a speech in May at Oakland University, in which he presented his “Vision for Defending the Freedom and Dignity of the World’s Vulnerable.” McCain suggested that the failure to fight evil diminishes us even when the evil does not materially threaten us:

Confronting evil has never been easy—in our age or any other. But the failure to do so affects even those who are complacent with our own blessings and secure in our human rights. Accepting the degradation of values we believe are universal is to relinquish some of our own humanity. America was founded on the belief in the inherent dignity of all human life and that this dignity can only be preserved through shared respect and shared responsibility. We can retain our own freedom when others are robbed of theirs, but not the sense of virtue that made our revolution a moral as well as political crusade, and which recognizes that personal happiness is so much more than pleasure, and requires us to serve causes greater than self-interest.

The journalist E.J. Dionne has aptly described the “moral style” that characterizes McCain’s speeches and books: “It begins with self-deprecation. . . . It then moves to a realistic and not particularly optimistic view of human nature. But it finally arrives at a heroic sense of human possibility. Everything depends on the capacity of human beings to will themselves to transcend their egos.” One does not join the struggle against evil as an out-of-the-box hero; it is the struggle against evil that turns an ordinary person into a hero.

As all of this suggests, McCain practices a highly moralized politics, but it is of a different order from the moralized politics we have come to know. Unlike most of the American politicians who claim to operate from a moral base, he does not possess a particularly religious sensibility. His perspective seems based as much in Stoicism (the spirit if not the doctrine) as in Christianity, with his emphasis on the nobility of service and the virtue of self-sacrifice.

On matters of domestic policy, McCain’s moralistic brand of politics is not tied to a particular ideology, nor does it follow a partisan line. It is based, rather, in his determination to fight on behalf of the weak against the unjust aggregation of power by the strong—by the Big over the not-so-big. His targets over the years have included Big Tobacco, Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Cable Companies, and the lobbyists who represent their interests in Washington. For McCain, the size of these adversaries is a key element in the threat they pose. They owe their successes, in his view, to the unfair advantages of largeness rather than to the proper workings of the free market in business and ideas.

This perspective offers a useful way of understanding McCain’s idiosyncratic departures from conservatism and the agenda of the Republican party. He shares with other Republicans a deep distrust of another large force, Big Government, and his default position on issues of less than passionate concern to him (like abortion) is usually straight out of the standard GOP platform. But he departs from his party and from contemporary conservatism when he deems they are aligned with the self-interest of the powerful, i.e., the wealthy.

He explained his opposition to the Bush tax-rate reductions of 2001 in just such terms: “I cannot in good conscience support a tax cut in which so many of the benefits go to the most fortunate among us at the expense of middle-class Americans who most need tax relief.” If this example seems tainted by McCain’s lingering anger over his defeat at the hands of George W. Bush in the 2000 primary campaign, then consider instead his undeni-

ably aggressive assaults on the drug companies and Wall Street, neither of which has any particular connection to Bush (and both of which are prominently featured in McCain’s television advertising).

McCain’s political moralism, like all moralism, can degenerate into self-righteousness on occasion, never more so than in the case of his campaign-finance legislation. When faced with legitimate and serious objections to its provisions on constitutional grounds, he frequently reacted with impatience and anger, and a tendency to impute dishonorable motives to his opponents. In defending his position, he was prepared to flout a basic founding principle of the United States, as when he told the radio host Don Imus that “I would rather have a clean government than one where quote First Amendment rights are being respected, that has become corrupt. If I had my choice, I’d rather have the clean government.” In this instance, and in others, McCain’s moralism has proved corrupting.

Nonetheless, when his moralism is grounded in the qualities of virtue exemplified by his own life, it has a potency that cannot be matched by the moralism of the ideological true believer or the partisan who excuses the failings of those with whom he shares an affiliation even as he spews fire and brimstone at those on the other side who break the rules.

McCain’s political affect is, in the end, grounded in non-partisanship, though of an unusual kind. His is not the non-partisanship of the straddler, who fears giving offense; nor that of the pragmatist, who leaves it to others to concern themselves with ends and principles. Rather, McCain seeks to rise above partisanship by going *beneath* it, by exemplifying and appealing to ancient ideals of personal honor. McCain’s appeal is, therefore, essentially *pre-partisan*.

**I**NTERESTINGLY, Barack Obama’s defenders and supporters have consistently used the term “*post-partisan*” to describe him. Obama vaulted into the first rank of American politicians in 2004 with a speech in which he repudiated the country’s divisions:

There is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America. The pundits, the pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into red states and blue states; red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. . . .

We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

He has deepened and broadened that portrait this year, promising to be an agent of national reconciliation and to bring an end to efforts to separate us.

Obama's post-partisanship is also post-historical. While the lessons of history—what they can teach us about the dangers we face—are central to McCain's worldview, they play very little role in Obama's. For him, history is less a source of wisdom about the constancy of human nature than it is a tragic horror that must be overcome, just as a traumatic childhood must be overcome. The tale history tells is one of oppression and injustice, and its tendrils extend into the present like weeds, interfering with the proper reordering of society. As Michelle Obama, speaking at the Democratic national convention, said of the Obama daughters:

I think about how one day, they'll have families of their own and how one day, they . . . will tell their own children about what we did together in this election. They'll tell them how this time, we listened to our hopes instead of our fears, how this time, we decided to stop doubting and to start dreaming; how this time, in this great country . . . we committed ourselves to building the world as it should be.

"The world as it should be" will bear little resemblance to anything that has preceded it. Obama described it this way at the end of the primary season:

Generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth. This was the moment—this was the time—when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.

Obama's detractors complain that his vaulting rhetoric is empty, and it often is from the standpoint of politics—from "yesterday's politics," he would say. But it does have meaning. Change, Hope, a New World: these words may be maddeningly free of substance, but they point to substance. They point toward a metaphysics, just as inspiring pulpit oratory might point toward an eschatological theology.

WHAT IS the root of Obama's metaphysics? I have already indicated the answer: unity. In speech after speech, Obama has presented unity as both the means to and the result of the "hope and change" his candidacy offers.

To be sure, bringing together people of good faith in both parties to solve problems is a campaign cliché of long standing. George W. Bush put just such a promise at the center of his presidential campaign in 2000. But Obama's call for unity is something new. He is not saying he can work with Senators of the rival party to pass a piece of well-meaning legislation. He is saying he can heal the nation's rifts—its racial divide, primarily—and thereby find a way to heal other rifts as well. In a January speech at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pulpit, Obama invoked King's statement, in response to the trial of Rosa Parks in 1955, that "unity is the great need of the hour," and updated it to the present moment:

Unity is how we shall overcome. . . . Unity is the great need of the hour—the great need of this hour. . . . All too often when we talk about unity in this country, we've come to believe that it can be purchased on the cheap. We've come to believe that racial reconciliation can come easily—that it's just a matter of a few ignorant people trapped in the prejudices of the past, and that if the demagogues and those who exploit our racial divisions will simply go away, then all our problems would be solved. . . . But of course, true unity cannot be so easily won. It starts with a change in attitudes—a broadening of our minds, and a broadening of our hearts.

That revolution in consciousness must also occur in America's relations with the rest of the world, and here too Obama wants to bridge a chasm. It was in support of this promise that he made his somewhat offhand remark in a 2007 debate about meeting with the leaders of enemy countries "without preconditions."

Over the past year, he has attempted to add various provisos and subsidiary clauses to that phrase to dull the deleterious effect of the idea that the President of the United States should treat the dictators of North Korea and Venezuela as though they were his equal. And yet his "without preconditions" comment was certainly a vital element in the tsunami of enthusiasm that greeted his presence in the Democratic race in the last month of 2007 and the first two months of 2008. It represented a fundamental break with George W. Bush's more aggressive approach; rather than isolating

those who oppose the United States, Obama would instead seek to find a path down which they might walk together.

OBAMA'S JULY address before multitudes in Berlin offers the fullest expression of this break with Bush. The speech follows a trajectory from the conventional politics of the present day to a new politics grounded in a post-historical metaphysical vision. In the opening section, Obama describes how the Soviet Union sought through blockade in 1947 "to extinguish the last flame of freedom in Berlin," and how that challenge, in Obama's rendering, was met and defeated through the power of unity:

The people of Berlin refused to give up. And on one fall day, hundreds of thousands of Berliners came here, to the Tiergarten, and heard the city's mayor implore the world not to give up on freedom. "There is only one possibility," he said. "For us to stand together united until this battle is won. . . . The people of Berlin have spoken. We have done our duty, and we will keep on doing our duty. People of the world: now do your duty. . . . People of the world, look at Berlin!"

Obama tells the story powerfully, though falsely. Berlin was not saved by "standing together united"; it was rescued by the United States and its airlift.

After this passage there comes a fascinating shift in tone. The summons to unity so stirringly delivered by Mayor Ernst Reuter turns out to have been a prelude, both rhetorically and historically, to a far greater event. For just as unity saved Berlin after World War II, Obama says, it saved Germany 42 years later when the Berlin Wall fell: "People of the world, look at Berlin—where a wall came down, a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one."

This too, to put it mildly, is an odd way of looking at historical events, in this case during the months leading up to the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989. True, Germans on both sides of the wall welcomed its fall. But this was hardly remarkable: both populations, East and West, had always wanted it to go. (Remember why the wall was built in the first place.) If, moreover, unity may be said to have brought the wall down, it was solely unity in the West, unity *in opposition* to a regime and ideology that had sought to impose a darker sort of unity on the world since 1917. As McCain himself offered in rejoinder: "The cold war ended not be-

cause the world stood 'as one,' but because the great democracies came together, bound together by sustained and decisive American leadership."

Obama's idiosyncratic interpretation of the events of 1989 is a necessary bridge to his invocation of the need for unity today:

Partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity. That is why the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another. The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand. The walls between the countries with the most and those with the least cannot stand. 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.

While Obama is always careful to acknowledge that aggressors still stalk the earth, that acknowledgement provides merely a minor qualification of his overall worldview. He has great faith in the power of diplomacy and other mechanisms of "soft power" to defuse aggressive intent. He presents international challenges as global problems that arise from no particular agency and can be solved by no particular agency but only by *everyone* working together.

And his attention to foreign affairs gravitates to those issues that either transcend national boundaries or in some other way bespeak a need for oneness: reversing global warming, securing loose nuclear material, curtailing the drug trade, overcoming poverty and violence in the developing world, and doing something (not exactly sure what) about genocide in Darfur. These are the "new dangers" he cited in Berlin, dangers that require a unified global response and that are the reason why "the greatest danger of all is to allow new walls to divide us from one another."

If McCain's worldview occasionally leads to self-righteousness in the face of stubborn resistance, how will Obama react when, inevitably, new walls do divide us from one another? The depth of Obama's emotional investment in his vision of unification is unknowable. What does seem clear, however, is that although he tends to speak about problems in terms of impersonal forces, he takes himself seriously as an agent and facilitator of change. If the change he believes in does not happen as easily or as quickly as he thinks it should, Obama might well interpret the obstacles in his path as personal affronts and greet them with

anger, as he apparently became angry at his one-time mentor Jeremiah Wright only after the pastor called into question Obama's claim to be a different kind of politician.

RECALL NOW the similar titles of the respective memoirs of the two candidates. Both evoke something timeless, but in wildly and instructively different ways. McCain's title is *Faith of My Fathers*. It suggests that we must live within a tradition guided by the permanent things, the things that do not change. Obama's title is *Dreams from My Father*. It implies that we must focus our minds on what has not yet been. McCain evokes tradition. Obama evokes transcendence. And this is the metaphysical difference between them, with profound implications for the policies each would enact were he to be elected President.

McCain's confrontational approach arises from his view that the basic sources of injustice are inherent in human nature, but that injustice can be overcome by men and women of honor performing acts of heroism that will change the world for the better. Obama's belief in "soft power" arises from his contrasting view that the sources of international conflict, though tenacious, can be overcome by an appeal to something even deeper in human nature—if not quite natural goodness, then something like a hunger for respect that turns violent only when we refuse to satisfy it.

The implications for domestic policy are no less pronounced. To start this time with Obama, his conception of unity is grounded in the view that one's true self-interest lies in community. As he said in his convention speech in August: "Individ-

ual responsibility and mutual responsibility; that's the essence of America's promise." In pursuit of that promise of mutual responsibility, he possesses an unyielding belief in the redeeming power of political action, not just as a useful instrument but as an end in itself. That belief would likely lead to increased governmental scope, a penchant for redistributionist economics, an activist judiciary giving voice to an evolving public ethos, and the advancement of social liberalism.

McCain's philosophical disposition would be less apt to lead to such sweeping ambitions in domestic affairs. Rather, we might expect two kinds of moral crusades: first, as we've already seen in his various campaigns against the Big, efforts to combat perceived unfairness and abuses of power; second, an attempt to overcome the cowardice (as he might view it) that has kept the country from taking on looming structural problems like entitlement and immigration reform. Neither of these crusades is ideological, and there can be little doubt that solutions to the structural problems would include much that would stray from Republican-party orthodoxy.

THE NOVEMBER presidential election will determine which of two competing visions, honor or unity, the traditional or the transcendent, has greater purchase with the electorate. There is no knowing which will prevail, or, more important, how long it will prevail once it begins to govern. The only thing we can be sure of is that, whatever the outcome of the ensuing governance, it will be interpreted very differently by adherents of the two opposing visions—and neither McCain's appeals to honor nor Obama's appeals to unity are likely to heal the breach between them.