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by Benedicta Cipolla
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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

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

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.

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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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.

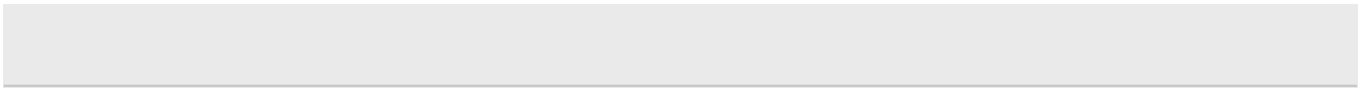
Dr. Barack said he could no more disown the Rev. Jeremiah Wright than disown his own grandmother. Then the political costs of Rev. Wright escalated and Fast Eddie Obama threw Wright under the truck.

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.



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, na

