

Obama's Prayer Warriors

Can religious leaders faithfully serve the president and God at the same time?

by Joseph Loconte

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When, in the throes of his presidential bid, Barack Obama cast off his controversial pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, his campaign advisers began soliciting for more acceptable replacements. There was no shortage of willing applicants. In a provocative essay called "The Inner Ring," C.S. Lewis suggested why that might be so: "I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods . . . one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring, and the terror of being left outside." President Obama has recruited several Christian leaders to join one of the world's most exclusive inner rings, the presidential prayer team.

As reported over the weekend by the *New York Times*, Obama has carefully cultivated relationships with at least five influential ministers--all described as evangelical "centrists"--for private sessions of prayer and occasional political advice. There is nothing unusual about American presidents seeking spiritual support and counsel. For his part, President Obama has made a point of denouncing the abuse of religion for political gain. Yet given the roster of the anointed, and the Obama record on religion thus far, the temptation to manipulate faith for partisan ends is likely to prove irresistible.

The Obama prayer caucus includes Rev. Otis Moss Jr., a veteran of the civil rights movement, and Rev. Jim Wallis, political activist and editor of a left-leaning magazine. Two others, Bishop T.D. Jakes and Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, black megachurch pastors and successful entrepreneurs, served as occasional spiritual advisors to President George W. Bush. Rev. Joel Hunter, leader of an evangelical megachurch in Florida, made a public break with the Christian Coalition a few years ago. "These are all centrist, social justice guys," Rev. Eugene Rivers, a politically active pastor in Boston, told the *Times*.

A problem with this characterization, reported with facile approval by Laurie Goodstein of the *Times*, is that it blinks at political reality. Jim Wallis, for example, has been a fierce and partisan critic of the Bush administration, the Republican party, and religious conservatives. On the eve of the Iraq war, Wallis compared Bush to the Egyptian pharaoh who persecuted the Jews, one of the most despicable characters in the Old Testament. He once attacked the late Catholic thinker, Father Richard John Neuhaus, as a "hired political assassin on behalf of the rich and the powerful." Even a brisk review of his magazine, *Sojourners*, reveals a political agenda nearly indistinguishable from the Democratic party platform. "It's a politically astute move," says Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. "But calling Jim Wallis a centrist is a lot like calling Jesse Jackson and Pat Roberson centrists." Another issue is whether these ministers can square their approach to "social justice" with that of team Obama. Rev. Caldwell warmed to George Bush quickly when, in 1995, they met to discuss ways the Texas governor could engage churches in social problems ranging from poverty to juvenile crime. His Windsor Village United Methodist Church, actively involved in community revitalization in Houston, provided much of the inspiration for President Bush's faith-based initiative. Like Bishop Jakes and his Potter's House ministry, Caldwell has built a network of social-service programs that blend biblical principles with economic empowerment. Both ministers shared with Bush a commitment to the local church--and its emphasis on strong families, moral accountability, and spiritual renewal--as the catalyst for social change.

That's a distant cry from the "liberation theology" of Jeremiah Wright, the minister who Obama once put at the center of his personal political narrative. Wright's grammar of grievance and conspiracy theories--he claimed the HIV virus was unleashed on blacks by a white supremacist government--nearly derailed Obama's candidacy. Though he eventually denounced Wright's extremist views, Obama's own social justice agenda could prove as radical as his pastor's rhetoric.

Consider a few items. The administration plans to open the flood gates of federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research and, in all likelihood, abortion, trampling the moral convictions of millions of ordinary Americans. A revamped faith-based initiative, which would deny the right of charities to consider religious commitment in hiring decisions, threatens to become a protocol for secularization. The president's education proposal throws hundreds of millions of dollars at failing public schools, but rejects vouchers for children from poor families to help them escape these mismanaged monstrosities and attend private religious schools. In short, much of Obama's political vision contradicts the religious ideals of his prayer partners and the constituencies they supposedly represent.

How will the ministers respond to these challenges? It's conceivable that they will quietly discourage the president from some of his policies, even as they support him in prayer. It can be argued that other presidents--including Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and Bush--turned to favorite ministers for spiritual nurture.

They surely did, and with mixed results for the cause of Christianity in public life. One of the deep regrets of evangelist Billy Graham is that his close relationship with Richard Nixon blinded him to the president's faults in the days leading up to Watergate. During his impeachment crisis over Monica Lewinsky, Bill Clinton exploited the prestige of religious leaders and the sanctity of the pastoral relationship. With the willing help of a cohort of spiritual advisors, Clinton enlisted the biblical language of repentance and forgiveness to escape prosecution. "When

compassion is evoked to excuse the abuse of power, a holy virtue is made to appear as a vice," wrote Robert Jewett in *judgment day in the White House*. "When redemption is touted for political advantages, its hope becomes hollow and dishonest."

The danger for Obama's inner circle is not only that they'll keep quiet about issues that are contentious. They now face a relentless temptation to rationalize policies that are morally dubious or offensive--to give them a religious veneer--for the sake of continued access to the president. Is Jim Wallis, a professed pro-life evangelical, likely to challenge Obama's pro-choice agenda? So far he has managed to praise the president for "breaking the symbolic cycle" of debate over abortion, whatever that means. Will T.D. Jakes play the role of prophet if the White House's faith-based initiative treats churches as pawns of the secular state? "Our hope," Jakes wrote after the election, "is in his ability to provide the medicine this nation desperately needs to rise again." That doesn't sound like the same minister who tells his flock to take responsibility for their own lives and put their trust in God. Likewise, in a recent *Time* magazine interview, Joel Hunter expressed not a whisper of worry about Obama's social vision. "I find it hard to believe that I'm in the inner prayer circle," he gushed. There may be a reason for his inclusion that goes beyond the legitimate need of a political leader for spiritual support. Barack Obama, after all, has made no secret of the fact that he plans to change the anti-God image of his party. Even men with good intentions, armed with faith, are not immune to the delicious intimacies of power: A short ride in Air Force One could produce more converts than a week of revival meetings. "Of all the passions," explained C.S. Lewis, "the passion for the Inner Ring is the most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things."

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