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**Rev. "Icarus", the Obama Campaign & the Left
Think Piece**

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The Greek myth is both simple and compelling. Daedalus, imprisoned on the island of Crete with his son (Icarus), fashioned wings made of feathers and wax in order for the two of them to fly to freedom. Daedalus warned Icarus, however, not to fly too close to the Sun because the wax would melt and he would fall. The two of them took off, but Icarus became entranced with flight and, ignoring his father's warnings, flew higher and higher until the wax melted and Icarus plunged to his death in the sea.

Rev. Jeremiah Wright made two mistakes, only one of which deserves criticism. The first mistake was that of playing "Icarus." Throwing all sense of tactics aside, Rev. Wright became enchanted, if not entranced, by the publicity he received. Clearly angry about his perception of having been "dissed" by Senator Obama, this was his time in the Sun, so to speak. As demonstrated by his performance at the National Press Club, his speech was compelling, but his approach in the Q&A failed to take account his circumstances: he was not in his own church; indeed, he was not in any church. Clearly, by the time of the Q&A, Rev. Wright was in the stratosphere, inspired, perhaps by both the sound of his own voice and the "Amens" he received from supporters in the room. Yet, the responses he should have paid attention to were those of the journalists, most of whom were apparently not part of his Amen Corner. Since then, he has been plunging into the sea. The problem is that many people believe that he is taking Senator Obama with him. I happen to not agree, for reasons I will present below.

The second "mistake," however, was very different. Rev. Wright has, throughout his career, dared to challenge the myth of US history. For the larger society this

"mistake" is of far greater importance than his performance at the National Press Club, and for that matter, whether or not he brings down Senator Obama, US history has a basic narrative: The settlers were heroes; the indigenous people were either heathens or naive primitives, but in either case they were in the way of progress. Slavery was an unfortunate episode that was cleaned up by the Civil War, though it has never been quite clear that the former slaves were ever meant to rule themselves, let alone anyone else. US foreign policy has generally been benign, nearly always driven by either a God-given imperative to improve the world or our sense that the planet would be better off with our version of capitalism and democracy. Where Rev. Wright fell into problems was by challenging this myth. Taking the standpoint of those who have seen the underside of the "American Dream", he was prepared to speak to a counter-narrative that identifies the problematic nature of US history. By doing so he opened himself to ridicule, but only when his counter-narrative was treated in sound-bites rather than taken as a whole.

For this reason the attack on Rev. Wright must be examined very carefully because there are multiple agendas unfolding. The larger problem is that the Obama campaign was treated to a media onslaught that was completely inappropriate to the circumstances. Rev. Wright never spoke for the Obama campaign and on that basis alone, Senator Obama would have been well within his rights to simply stop responding to questions. Certainly both Senators McCain and Clinton have done that when they have been caught in uncomfortable situations. There was no reason that Obama should have been expected to handle it differently. Well, there was a reason that has something to do with his coloring.

It is in this sense that progressives generally, but especially those supporting the Obama candidacy (even if critically supporting it, as is this writer) should remind people that it is not Rev. Wright pulling the campaign down but instead it is the media that tastes blood and is trying to promote an atmosphere of pessimism. Needless to say both the Clinton and McCain campaigns (and their allies) have been complicit in this.

It is also important to emphasize that the Wright/Obama conflict is largely about a means for the mainstream political establishment to situate Senator Obama with those to his Left. To the extent to which Rev. Wright played into this, it was possible, if not essential, in the view of the Obama campaign, to distance itself not only from Rev. Wright but from Wright's message. In this way the message was being trounced along with the messenger. No real discussion is being permitted about the issues that Rev. Wright raised because he is being treated as an out-of-control old man and his message is being treated as incoherent at best, anti-American at worst. Insofar as Rev. Wright's message was maligned as crazy and inappropriate ANYONE conveying that message was also so categorized. Certainly by ignoring tactics and focusing more on proving his own dignity and correctness, Rev. Wright lost control over the situation. His own anger and desire for rehabilitation of his reputation outweighed any sense of the current political situation. This was a major mistake and one that many people will have difficulty forgiving. This is unfortunate.

Rev. Wright should be criticized for abandoning tactics and putting himself before the movement. He should not, however, be criticized for challenging the myths associated with US history. Even if one disagrees with aspects of what he relayed - such as his


take on the origin of AIDS - much, if not most of his argument is backed up by a genuine examination of the foundations of the USA and its current role domestically and internationally. Space to make that argument is essential. And we, to the Left of Senator Obama, must continue to advance an accurate sense of the history and role of the USA. This will put us at odds, at times, with the Obama campaign which either cannot or will not agree with such an analysis. Yet if there is a significant constituency that does, this argument will gain attention, if not traction.


"Critical support" means walking on two legs, both offering genuine support, as well as offering sincere and constructive criticism where there are disagreements. Rev. Wright apparently decided that now was a time for lashing out in hurt and anger, rather than recognizing that the sweetest "revenge" is success. For those of us to the Left of Senator Obama, success is more than the election of Senator Obama as president of the USA. It is really about the building of a social movement that embraces much of the counter-narrative Rev. Wright attempted to articulate. With that counter-narrative, we have the basis for a left/progressive strategy. Without that counter-narrative, we are simply wandering in the wilderness, hoping for change.

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