

The Lesser of Two Evils

by Robert Tracinski

This is without a doubt the worst presidential selection we have been forced to make in many decades. In choosing between Barack Obama and John McCain, we are truly required to choose the lesser of two evils.

As common as it is to use that phrase, “the lesser of two evils,” to refer to our electoral options, we frequently are offered at least one candidate who has a few important virtues that merit our *positive* support. Yet in this election we can really say of both candidates that whatever virtues they may have are overwhelmed by the evils they would attempt to visit upon us.

Barack Obama’s basic convictions are the altruist welfare-statism and foreign policy of appeasement that he campaigned on in the Democratic primaries—leavened by the cynical calculation of his lurch toward the center at the beginning of the general election campaign.

McCain’s basic convictions are a generalized altruism expressed in his frequent exhortation to serve “a cause greater than your own self-interest”—leavened by the ideological mish-mash of Pragmatism.

There is more to the candidates, of course, than their basic convictions on morality. We also have to look at their stands on specific issues, which tell us in what form they hold those convictions and how seriously they take them. Unfortunately, on most issues this provides little to differentiate between the two candidates.

Where do they stand, for example, on the freedom of political speech? Senator McCain is the co-sponsor of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, which limits private political speech during an election season, precisely when such free-

dom is most needed.

But Barack Obama’s campaign has threatened radio and television stations that have chosen to air advertisements or interviews critical of Obama, particularly those seeking to bring attention to Obama’s close association with the rabble-rousing Reverend Wright and the bomb-throwing William Ayers. The Obama campaign has sent a series of letters to broadcasters, not merely asking them to voluntarily block these criticisms, but questioning whether such content is in the “public interest,” as required to maintain the broadcaster’s FCC license. This is a none-too-subtle threat to use the power of the FCC to put President Obama’s critics out of business.

This reflects a wider campaign on the left to revive the “Fairness Doctrine,” which dictated how much controversial editorial content could be broadcast on radio and television stations, and to use FCC and antitrust regulations to block the expansion of broadcasters like Fox News Channel who are considered hostile to the agenda of the left.

What about separation of church and state? While hardly a champion of the religious right, McCain has a consistent record of opposing the right to abortion, which is the religionists’ signature issue. But Obama has promised to expand President Bush’s “faith-based initiatives”—a dangerous merging of the welfare state and religion—and make this program the “moral center” of his presidency, criticizing the Bush administration for providing *too little* funding and support for the program.

The issue on which this contest between two evils has emerged most clearly is the financial crisis. When the crisis struck, Obama immediately blamed Wall Street “greed.” So did McCain.

Consider, for example, the exchange that opened the presidential candidates' first debate. When asked where he stood on the financial crisis, Obama indicated that his long-term solution was to reject "an economic philosophy that says that regulation is always bad," "a theory that basically says that we can shred regulations and consumer protections and give more and more to the most, and somehow prosperity will trickle down." This is a clear reference to "trickle-down economics"—the pejorative term the left used for the pro-free-market economics of President Reagan's first term. Obama's statement was part of a larger effort on the left to exploit the financial crisis to claim that free markets have been "discredited."

What was McCain's response? He offered no rebuttal to Obama's attacks on the free market—even as Obama pointedly repeated them—and instead assured viewers that he also had "warned about corporate greed and excess." It is the old Republican politics of "me, too."

It might be argued, with some merit, that a reluctant me-too Republican is not as bad as a motivated ideological enemy of free markets. And there are a few issues, such as health care, on which McCain is significantly better than Obama, advocating a quasi-free-market approach based on tax credits, as opposed to Obama's plan for nationalized health insurance.

But any such considerations are overwhelmed by McCain's stand on an issue that is much bigger than the current financial crisis—so big that it threatens to create a *permanent* state of economic crisis, as a matter of principle. The plan to cap America's emissions of carbon dioxide, in the name of stopping global warming, would progressively restrict America's energy consumption. It is a plan for ever-increasing, self-inflicted material deprivation, enforced by sweeping government control over the economy.

Obama is in favor of such a cap on our energy use. McCain has *crusaded* for it. This is an evil so great as to make positive support for either candidate impossible.

And yet there is almost always a lesser between two evils. Even if two men are nearly identical in their convictions, they are not identical in their

character, their history, and the way they react to concrete events.

In this election, there is one crucial question about the character of the two candidates that does highlight a sharp and morally revealing difference between them. It also happens to be the most basic and elemental question we can ask about a man who would be president of the United States: *Does he love America?*

To ask that question is to immediately invoke Obama's close, long-time associations with his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, and with one of his key Chicago political sponsors, the unrepentant former Weathermen terrorist William Ayers. (See "The Unmasking of Barack Obama," *TIA*, Vol. 20, No. 1.) Associations of this kind matter because they reveal who and what a man will tolerate, and more: they reveal what he regards as normal, what he is comfortable with. They reveal, not just Barack Obama's convictions or his calculations, but his sense of life.

What they tell us is that Obama himself may not hate America, but he has been comfortable dealing closely for long periods of time with people who *do* hate America and who have been willing to say so loudly, publicly, repeatedly.

When the mainstream media finally began airing videos of the Reverend Wright screaming "God damn America" from his pulpit, I wrote that Obama was "finished," because, "In national-level American politics, you cannot associate yourself with such a sentiment and survive." We will soon see whether that turns out to be true, but it *ought* to be true. A man who is comfortable with hatred of America cannot be allowed to sit in this nation's most powerful office.

This alone is a sufficient reason to vote, not for McCain, but against Obama.

As for McCain, his history as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, enduring torture for years rather than betray his country, speaks volumes. But so does his explanation of why he endured. Elsewhere, I have described how this confirmed McCain in his profound commitment to altruism and how this contradicts the basic principles of a country founded on the right to the "pursuit of happiness." (See "Honor and Pragmatism," page 13.) But

notice the attitude toward America that nevertheless shines through. Consider this passage from his speech at the Republican Convention:

I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else's. I loved it not just for the many comforts of life here. I loved it for its decency; for its faith in the wisdom, justice, and goodness of its people. I loved it because it was not just a place, but an idea, a cause worth fighting for. I was never the same again. I wasn't my own man anymore. I was my country's.

I'm not running for president because I think I'm blessed with such personal greatness that history has anointed me to save our country in its hour of need. My country saved me. My country saved me, and I cannot forget it. And I will fight for her for as long as I draw breath, so help me God.

If any other politician said this, you would think it was overly melodramatic and obviously insincere. But when McCain says it, you know he means it.

Why does this matter? Foreign policy is the one area in which the president acts virtually alone. On domestic issues, the president proposes and Congress disposes. But in foreign policy, the president can and must act on his own initiative. If he wants to do something, it is very difficult for Congress to stop him—and if he refuses to do something, it is very difficult for Congress to make him act. This is why the president's deepest, basic motivations and sense-of-life “gut” reactions matter. Without that kind of psychological support, he could not possibly sustain decisions made under the highest pressure, often in the face of disapproval from the entire world.

Consider, as just one example, President Bush's decision in late 2006 to order the “surge” in Iraq—against the wishes of the “wise men” on the Baker-Hamilton Commission, in opposition to the advice offered by the Pentagon's top officials, and in the face of a hostile congressional majority that had vowed to force a retreat from Iraq. Bush made his choice simply because he found the prospect of an American defeat in Iraq to be unacceptable—not just politically unacceptable, but *personally* unacceptable. Because defeat was something he could not live with, he was willing to make a decision virtually alone and to stand behind it in the face of

nearly unanimous opposition.

In terms of his knowledge, judgment, and experience on foreign policy, McCain is better than Bush and far better than Obama. He advocated the surge for at least a year before Bush ordered it. And when the tiny free nation of Georgia was invaded in August by a newly aggressive authoritarian Russia, McCain showed presidential-style leadership in rallying to the beleaguered nation's support, while it took Bush two days to return from the Olympic games, and it took Obama nearly a week to recognize that the issue was important enough to interrupt his vacation. And of course, Obama opposed the surge, repeatedly declaring that it would not work and had not worked, and then chose as his vice-presidential running mate a foreign-policy “sage” whose alternative suggestion had been to partition Iraq into ethnic and sectarian enclaves, following the model of Bosnia.

While knowledge and experience explain part of this difference, the fundamental is that McCain *wants* to fight for America, and that drives everything else.

So after all, we *can* find some good to motivate us in choosing among the two evils we face. McCain does not really understand America and, judging from his reaction to the financial crisis, he has no understanding of the free market. But in the one area where he would have the greatest degree of autonomy as president, he has the attitude that is indispensable in a commander in chief: an unbending conviction that America must always be supported and protected in any conflict with any enemy.

That is the fundamental reason to vote, not just against Obama, but for McCain. It is what makes him clearly the *lesser* of two evils—no matter how vicious the current political context may be.

There is one other reason to vote for McCain, and that is the effect of the presidential contest on congressional races. The Democrats are hoping that Obama's “coattails” will increase their majority in Congress, possibly giving them a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. That is reason enough to vote for *any* Republican congressional candidate, if only to preserve the one procedural road block that could prevent the Democratic leadership from en-

acting its agenda.

There is reason to believe that congressional Republicans would be a roadblock to some of the left's worst statist measures. In this dismal campaign year, it is congressional Republicans who have been responsible for the only three positive political developments.

Early this year, Republican opposition defeated a test vote on a proposal for "cap-and-trade" energy rationing. In one of the procedural maneuvers by which a Senate minority can check the power of the majority, the bill failed a vote over whether it should be brought to a vote. Of the 36 senators who actively voted to block the bill (another 16 let the bill die by abstaining), 32 were Republicans and only four were Democrats. Of those who voted to move the bill forward, 41 were Democrats and only seven were Republicans. In short, if cap-and-trade is going to be blocked next year when it comes up again for a vote in Congress, it is going to be blocked by Republicans.

As if in deliberate contrast to the cap-and-trade

proposal, congressional Republicans originated the only really successful Republican political issue of this year: their campaign to repeal restrictions on domestic oil exploration. In an election year, each party usually defers to its presidential candidate to drive its agenda. Instead, House Republicans launched the "drill now" initiative, and the McCain campaign followed their lead.

Finally, when the financial bailout bill was first brought to the House for a vote, the trillion-dollar boondoggle was unexpectedly blocked by a rebellion among House Republicans, who voted against it by a ratio of two to one, denouncing it as a "slippery slope to socialism."

The House was eventually browbeaten into voting for the bill. But it still matters that the only glimmer of a spirited defense of liberty in Congress has come from the Republican minority.

This is something that is worth supporting, not as the lesser of two evils, but as a greater good. In the evil times to come, we are certainly going to need it. **I**

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