

MOVING OBAMA LEFT

BY DAVID MOBERG

After Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) secured his party's nomination in June, his tightly knit campaign message began to fray at the edges. Critics from across the political spectrum charge that Obama has shifted to the center or right on a host of issues, and that the flip-flopping was—take your pick—good, bad, inevitable or duplicitous.

Progressives, whose hopes for Obama grew from his early opposition to the war in Iraq, and the youthful movement his candidacy inspired, wondered how much they could trust him on Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, civil liberties, gun control, the death penalty, trade, government funding of faith-based groups and other issues.

Disappointed as some progressives may be, Obama has not made a dramatic shift to the center: He's always been more centrist, cautious and compromising than many of his supporters—and critics—have wanted to admit.

"I don't think he's changed positions," says Robert Borosage, co-director of the progressive advocacy group, Campaign for America's Future. "He's always been a cautious liberal."

The *Wall Street Journal* took the supposed changes as Obama's admission that the conservative positions on most issues were correct, and concluded that Obama, as much as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), would represent a third term for Bush.

Right-wing anti-Obama groups warned their followers that a devious Obama was trying to woo evangelicals from the conservative fold. McCain's backers used the controversies to tarnish Obama's character and disillusion his supporters.

Meanwhile, centrists rejoice that the middle—wherever that shifting spot may be—is always best. And a few on the left find evidence, once again, that no Democrat can be trusted.

Even if Obama is more consistent than critics allege, questions still haunt progressives. Does an Obama presidency promise dramatic and progressive change, as his rhetoric sometimes suggests? Or will Obama simply shift from Bush's neoconservatism back to the confused—if slightly less conservative—perspective of the Democratic Party establishment?

And what president would Obama most resemble? A Lincolnesque figure who would bring national unity (without a civil war), as Obama often implies?

A Clinton, who campaigned to "put people first"—as he had put it—but failed to take bold steps and ended up triangulating political differences?

A Kennedy, who inspired millions but got dragged down by conventional assumptions about American power in the world, as evidenced by the Vietnam War and Bay of Pigs?

Or, as many on the left fantasize, an FDR running a conservative campaign but responding to the times with dramatic reforms?

the American people,” Obama had said in February. “We must reaffirm that no one in this country is above the law.”

But in June, Obama told reporters that the FISA compromise was an improvement since it would put an “inspector general in place to investigate what happened previously.” He continued: “Given ... all the information I received ... the un-

according to a November 2007 *Chicago Tribune* report, and thus shifted on that point in his support for the court decision.

Obama also sided with the conservative bloc’s view that the death penalty is constitutional in child rape cases.

As a state senator, Obama reformed procedures to Illinois’ flawed application of the death penalty, but he did not op-

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On the record

The character of an Obama presidency will depend not just on Obama but also on worsening world conditions that demand a new direction—economic collapse and financial instability, environmental and energy crises, failure of a military approach to terrorism, worsening inequality and insecurity for most Americans.

It also will depend on opportunities, such as the size of a Democratic congressional majority, and pressures, including demands from popular movements at home for an end to the war, single-payer national health insurance and worker rights, as well as high expectations from nations and leaders around the world.

What Obama says as a candidate does affect his chances of winning. It can also skew the direction of his potential presidency and demonstrate his will—and ability—to be a forceful leader.

In most of the controversies, Obama has maintained previous positions that often departed from progressive orthodoxy.

On other points, however, he has shifted in disappointing ways.

Obama broke his promise to vote against and filibuster the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) re-authorization. The measure included immunity from prosecution for the telecommunications companies that aided the Bush administration’s warrantless wiretapping of citizens.

“There is no reason why telephone companies should be given blanket immunity to cover violations of the rights of

derlying program itself actually is important and useful to American security as long as it has these constraints on them.”

Though Obama didn’t change his views on the merits of the legislation, his vote for the bill—which passed easily, thanks to many Democrats’ defections—angered civil libertarians and the left blogosphere.

Obama’s vote also defied majority public opinion: nearly two-thirds of respondents to a January 2008 poll for the American Civil Liberties Union said that the government should be required to get an individual warrant before listening to conversations between American citizens and people outside the country. Obama’s decision did little to inoculate him from McCain attacks and undermined his image as a different, more principled political leader.

Obama also angered many liberals by siding with the conservative bloc of the Supreme Court against the Washington, D.C., handgun ban that interpreted the Second Amendment as protecting an individual right to own guns.

Obama has publicly supported the individual right to possess firearms at least since his 2004 U.S. senate race. A campaign spokesperson said in April that a staffer in Obama’s 1996 Illinois senate campaign incorrectly indicated he supported a ban on handguns.

Obama—who is a longstanding supporter of government’s right to regulate guns—has said he believed that the District of Columbia gun ban was constitutional,

pose the death penalty in all cases.

In his autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*, he wrote, “I believe there are some crimes—mass murder, the rape and murder of a child—so heinous, so beyond the pale [that the death penalty is warranted].” But the crucial issue before the Supreme Court was whether the rape alone—not murder—of a child permitted capital punishment. So Obama, reversing his previous position, took sides with right-wing Justice Antonin Scalia when he could have deferred to the court majority.

Shifts, but not flip-flops

Critics have misrepresented or overstated most of Obama’s other supposed rightward shifts. Progressives might not like his decisions, but they are hardly “flip-flops,” as critics from both sides have alleged.

For example, Obama’s decision not to rely on public financing for the general election reflects both his own fundraising success and the massive funding edge the Republican National Committee has over the Democratic National Committee.

But John K. Wilson, author of *Barack Obama: This Improbable Quest*, argues that Obama had only pledged to “aggressively pursue ... a fundraising truce,” not to adopt public financing under any conditions.

In November 2007, Obama wrote, “My plan requires both major party candidates to agree on a fundraising truce, return excess money from donors, and stay within the public financing system for the general election. ... If I am the Democrat-

ic nominee, I will aggressively pursue an agreement with the Republican nominee to preserve a publicly financed general election.” Obama could have been more aggressive in pursuing an agreement, but he wasn’t backing out of a firm pledge to take public funding.

It’s no big surprise that on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama has muted his earlier expressions of sympathy for the Palestinian people and echoed full-throated support for Israeli positions. In a speech to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, he called for recognition of an “undivided” Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. He explained afterward that, rather than prejudging a thorny “final status” issue in the Middle East conflict, he was arguing that the city should not be physically divided by barbed wire.

Obama’s embrace of Bush’s program for funding faith-based initiatives, which angered many secular progressives, was not a flip-flop. He has said openly that religious institutions should play a greater role in public life.

In the *Audacity of Hope*, Obama distances himself from secular liberalism, writing that, “I think we make a mistake when we fail to acknowledge the power of faith in the lives of the American people, and so avoid joining a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our

modern, pluralistic democracy.”

He advocated regulation that would require non-discrimination in hiring and the use of public funds only for secular ends.

“To truly be successful, this initiative must utilize the unique resources and identity of the faith community, while at the same time recognizing the indispensable role that government and public policy must play in tackling the root causes of poverty,” writes Jim Wallis of the liberal evangelical group Sojourners. “Obama’s proposals also contain necessary protections for religious liberty, pluralism and constitutional safeguards.”

Mainstream reproductive choice groups such as NARAL and Planned Parenthood support Obama and have usually given him 100 percent approval on his voting record (even though he voted “present” on some legislation in the Illinois senate, as part of legislative strategy by defenders of abortion rights).

In April, however, Obama, departing from the position of most pro-choice organizations, said that states could properly restrict late-term abortions if they make an exception for cases that threaten the health of the mother.

In a recent interview with *Relevant*, a religious magazine, Obama said “mental distress” should not be counted as a health exception. NARAL responded to this new

statement—not necessarily a shift, since his earlier votes were against late-term abortion bans with no exceptions—by emphasizing that Obama’s position was still consistent with the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*.

Obama “is right on the health exception, and he is right on reproductive choice, and he is going to be there for us 100 percent,” NARAL President Nancy Keenan told National Public Radio.

During the primaries, Obama said he would re-negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Then in June, *Fortune* magazine headlined this story: “Obama: NAFTA not so bad after all.”

This was no flip: Obama had never proposed to cancel NAFTA, simply reopen NAFTA and use U.S. leverage to strengthen labor and environmental protections, which he says he still wants to include in all trade deals. Obama has consistently expressed his support for expanded trade while recognizing the costs that globalization imposes on many people.

Progressives want Obama to expand his critique of current global economic policy, but despite those reservations, AFL-CIO public policy director and long-time progressive trade policy analyst Thea Lee says, “I think [Obama] has a better position on trade than any Democratic presidential nominee in my memory.”

Obama stirred controversy when he said he might “refine” his plans for Iraq as conditions change. He quickly restated his plan to start withdrawing troops as soon as he takes office and to remove all combat forces within 16 months—a strategy given new credibility by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s call for foreign troops to withdraw by 2010. Throughout the campaign, Obama has said, he would be “as careful getting out as we were careless getting in.”

“I don’t think his position on Iraq has changed,” says Tom Swan, manager of Iraq Campaign 2008, a coalition committed to pushing withdrawal from Iraq during the presidential election. “It’s not as fast a withdrawal as many of us want, but it’s clearly different than staying for 100 years.”

There are two bigger worries for progres-



NICHOLAS KAMM/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

sives: First, how big a residual force would Obama retain and what would they do? Second, will his shift of troops to Afghanistan presage a counterproductive war in that country—making it Obama's Iraq?

The issue is not whether Obama has flipped, but whether he will shape a new foreign policy that acknowledges limits to militarism, unilateralism and the

for dramatic change and, for other supporters, a new post-partisan politics. If he appears not to be principled in his pursuit of fundamental change, he risks losing the energy that could carry him to victory.

Strategists from the Democratic left argue that Obama needs a bold progressive plan, especially on pocketbook economic issues and the war, not only to solve the na-

and the option of a public plan

While some on the left may still opt for the Green Party's Cynthia McKinney or independent Ralph Nader, most typically say they support Obama because of the need to defeat McCain. Members of the 125 chapters of Progressive Democrats for America (PDA) overwhelmingly preferred Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) or

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exercise of global power. To his credit, Obama has emphasized aggressive diplomacy over war, particularly in dealing with Iran, and despite his plan to expand military action in Afghanistan, he also proposes increasing economic development aid to win its people away from supporting the Taliban.

No Wellstone

Domestically, Obama's sermons to black audiences about family responsibility are politically valuable for winning white votes. Despite legitimate criticism that blacks alone seem to be singled out for failing families or watching too much television, many African Americans also embrace Obama's message. It was consistent with Obama's politics (he often talks about how government can't solve all problems) and did not preclude increased social responsibility toward the needy.

And his appointments of many mainstream Democratic economic and foreign policy advisers may raise anxieties, but they're not surprising for a candidate who has talked about transcending ideological divisions. Overall, Obama is no crusader like the late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.), but a "pragmatic progressive," says Wilson.

"He's made some small shifts but no fundamental change," says Wilson. "Some on the left simply overestimated where he stood and thought he was some leftist. He hasn't changed fundamental values, but he's always been willing to compromise."

Throughout the primaries, Obama walked a political tightrope, inspiring hope

tion's problems but also, simply, to win.

"The enthusiasm he garnered from younger people was based on their perception of him related to what they wanted to see, not what was there," says Bill Fletcher, executive editor of BlackCommentator.com, and a leader of Progressives for Obama. "Their perceptions of him were rooted in rebellion against the Bush and Clinton years, and their hopes for a different kind of politics. If Obama presents himself as a kinder, gentler DLC'er [the corporate-oriented Democratic Leadership Conference], it's not going to inspire."

'The movement, not the person'

Antiwar and healthcare proponents are organizing independent efforts to make their issues central to the presidential race this fall, and to keep pressure on Obama.

Iraq Campaign 2008, for example, is mobilizing a broad coalition to knock on "a million doors for peace" on Sept. 20, talking about the war in Iraq and its costs to Americans. On healthcare, progressives are divided between growing ranks of single-payer, Medicare-for-all advocates and a new, institutionally weightier coalition of more than 100 labor unions and other advocacy groups—Health Care for America Now. The coalition, which includes organizations such as AFSCME (public employees) SEIU, the AFL-CIO, Campaign for America's Future, and ACORN—promote a strategy closer to Obama's proposal that would include employer-provided or individually purchased corporate insurance

John Edwards. Now, says PDA Executive Director Tim Carpenter, their goals in the campaign are to support "more the Barack Obama movement, not Barack Obama, the person" and "to make him a better candidate."

Democracy for America did not endorse a candidate in the primaries. Now the 725,000-member group—which grew out of the 2004 Howard Dean campaign—is working to support Obama and to push issues, such as withdrawal from Iraq and universal health insurance.

"This battle is about a culture of activism versus a culture of incumbency," says DFA chair Jim Dean, Howard Dean's brother. Whatever disagreements DFA may have with Obama, "I'd rather have the discussion with Obama than with John McCain."

Obama's campaign will set its own course. The dominant culture could push him to become more conservative, not only during the campaign, but even more so if he wins. Yet by organizing popular movements, progressives can promote issues in the election, encourage Obama not to drift to the right, and build the expectations and organizations that put demands on an Obama presidency.

"It's going to be a bumpy ride," says Carl Davidson, an organizer with Progressives for Obama. "People will get bent out of shape. This is politics. You've got to keep a laser focus—stop McCain, stop the war, keep your eyes on the prize."

And the prize is the possibility—not the certainty—of what an Obama presidency can deliver. ■

Dereliction of Duty

McCain's record on veterans' issues is shocking and awful

BY CLIFF SCHECTER



Presidential hopeful Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) talks to World War II veteran George Dusdenbury on Jan. 18, in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

AT A TOWN HALL meeting in Denver in early July, a Vietnam veteran asked presidential candidate Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) why he had opposed increasing healthcare for veterans whenever Congress had taken up the issue over the past six years. McCain virtually ignored the man's question, dissembling his opposition to an updated GI Bill for veterans. After the questioner challenged McCain's response, the senator reacted as he usually does when queried beyond his comfort level: He got visibly angry.

Because McCain is running for president almost solely on his biography as a war hero, he can't—and won't—allow the slightest doubt to linger about his dedication to soldiers both past and present. It didn't matter that the vet simply wanted to know how McCain—himself a former soldier and prisoner of war—could op-

pose important healthcare legislation for veterans. In fact, he didn't even ask McCain about the GI Bill that he opposed, which had been supported by a bipartisan group of 75 senators, including Republican veterans Chuck Hagel (Neb.) and John Warner (Va.).

Most notably, McCain also testily responded to his inquisitor that he had "received every award from every vets organization."

The problem is, not only is that assertion not true, but McCain's record on veterans' issues paints a picture of a man who has been willfully negligent when it comes to providing for his former brothers and sisters in arms.

As Iraq War veteran and former Democratic congressional candidate Paul Hackett says, "Here is a guy who touts himself as a friend of veterans, but his history shows just the opposite. How can

someone who cares about our men and women in the armed services vote against the GI Bill or veterans' healthcare?"

Dying on the vine

In 2005, Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii), now chair of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, introduced legislation that would have increased veterans' medical care by \$2.8 billion in 2006. He also introduced another bill that would have set aside \$10 million for "readjustment counseling services"—a program to provide a wide range of counseling, outreach and referral services for those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, to ease their readjustment back into society. (This program was started in 1979 for Vietnam veterans, so one would think McCain is quite familiar with it.)

But McCain—and other Republicans who are more concerned with using government funds for tax cuts for mul-