

Obama repudiates Reverend Wright in bid for support from the political establishment

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The clash between Senator Barack Obama and his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, marks another turning point in the protracted contest for the Democratic presidential nomination. Following the media uproar over Wright's statements at a series of public appearances over the previous four days, Obama clearly calculated that he had to publicly repudiate the minister or face the collapse of his presidential campaign.

He did so forcefully, listing a series of statements made by Wright, mainly in his appearance Monday at the National Press Club in Washington, and repudiating them both generally and in detail. He singled out Wright's claims that the 9/11 attacks were an inevitable response to the US government's own terrorist military violence in the Middle East; that Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, was one of the greatest voices of the 20th and 21st centuries; and that the US government might have created the AIDS virus to commit genocide against nonwhites.

"I am outraged by the comments that were made and saddened over the spectacle that we saw yesterday," Obama said. Referring to his long association with Wright as a member of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, he continued, "The person I saw yesterday was not the person that I met 20 years ago. His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate and I believe that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church. They certainly don't portray accurately my values and beliefs."

Obama seemed to take particular offense at Wright's suggestion that the presidential candidate's March 18 speech on race relations in the United States—in which he voiced some criticism of Wright's views but was more conciliatory to the minister—was an exercise in political posturing.

The overall reaction reveals a candidate who is being put through his paces by the ruling elite, and feels, under the pressure of the media firestorm, that he must do everything possible to reassure the political establishment and distance himself from any hint of political radicalism.

Reverend Wright's views are an eclectic mixture of black nationalism, radical criticism of US foreign policy and conspiracy theories, with a dollop of anti-Semitism—or at least tolerance for the anti-Semitism of figures like Farrakhan—thrown in.

The real concern, as far as ruling circles are concerned, is not Wright's supposed "anti-white" bigotry, or even his friendliness to Farrakhan. There are far more religious and racial bigots in the camp of Republican John McCain, who has been embraced by most of the Christian fundamentalist groups and television evangelists, including figures like the Reverend John Hagee, an open anti-Catholic bigot.

The concern is with Wright's sharply worded critique of the US government, which he suggested, quite correctly, is a criminal conspiracy against the rights of the people of the world, as well as black and other minority people within the United States itself. (Wright, as a reactionary black nationalist, regards white working people as part of the oppressors rather than as the largest component of the oppressed).

Any sympathy with such a hostile attitude to American foreign policy is of course intolerable, from the standpoint of the ruling class, in a politician who is seeking the position of commander-in-chief. Obama is being criticized as well for reacting too slowly and too timidly to the Wright "problem" once it emerged as an issue in his campaign.

Back-to-back editorials in the *Wall Street Journal*, published Tuesday and Wednesday, illustrate these concerns—as well as the appreciation, on the part of a major mouthpiece of big business, for Obama's efforts to disavow any political agreement with Wright.

Tuesday's editorial noted: "Early in his campaign, Senator Obama earned support from many voters with the notion that he wanted to transcend racial politics. Rev. Wright is exacerbating them in a way not seen in recent years. Barack Obama cannot remain on both sides of this. He has to make a decision. He is not running for national Mediator. He is running for President. In time, that job brings tough decisions. He's there now."

The next day's editorial, published after the senator's press conference, was headlined approvingly, "Obama Gains," and declared that Obama "addressed the issue with clarity and decisiveness." The editorial went on to suggest, in a tone dripping with cynicism, that Obama should go on to revise his views on raising the capital gains tax—an issue of paramount concern to Wall Street billionaires—and applauding his step in that direction in his interview with Fox News broadcast last Sunday.

"Mr. Obama no doubt will encounter questions again about his plans for taxing capital gains," the newspaper concluded. "The more he looks at the issue, the more we suspect he'll discover that it matters to the people whose votes he's seeking." The *Journal* is here referring not to ballots cast in primaries or the general election, but to the more important "votes" cast by the members of the financial oligarchy whose influence permeates both the corporate media and official Washington, and will make or break the Obama campaign.

It is not yet clear whether Obama has succeeded in proving himself to the ruling elite, despite some indications of a favorable response. The media frenzy, once set in motion, may be hard to tamp down.

Besides the *Journal*, a significant portion of the press has raised questions about why Wright provoked the political furor. There have even been suggestions that Wright's appearance in Washington was promoted by the campaign of Obama's rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton.

The *Chicago Tribune*—the hometown daily for both men—questioned Wright's motives in an editorial Tuesday, observing, "By the end of Wright's performance, you had to wonder if he was trying to torpedo Obama's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. He surely didn't seem troubled by that possibility."

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert wrote in the same vein, "The Rev. Jeremiah Wright went to Washington on Monday not to praise Barack Obama, but to bury him." He noted that Wright, pastor of the largest congregation in Chicago's South Side, "has been a very savvy operator, politically and otherwise, for decades ... He knows exactly what he's doing."

The *New York Daily News* and the *Los Angeles Times* both reported that the minister who set up Wright's Washington appearance, Rev. Dr. Barbara Reynolds of the Howard University School of Divinity, is a longtime support of Senator Clinton, and had publicly criticized Obama for his comparatively warm approach to Wright in his March 18 speech in Philadelphia.

There has as yet been no significant defection on the part of the superdelegates, the elected officials and Democratic

National Committee members whose votes will be decisive in the closely contested race. In the wake of Clinton's victory in the Pennsylvania primary April 22, Obama has continued to pick up more endorsements from previously uncommitted superdelegates, and now leads Clinton by 1,735 to 1,600 according to the most recent tallies.

Among ordinary voters, the Wright affair is of only minor interest. An AP article on Wednesday noted that among all those interviewed in North Carolina in advance of next Tuesday's primary, only one voter raised the question of Wright unprompted, and none said they regarded Obama's relationship with the minister as decisive. "Virtually all the prospective voters knew details of the matter," the AP reported. "But unlike TV and radio talk show hosts, they found it far less interesting than the candidates' positions on health care, gasoline prices and other kitchen table issues."

The Obama-Clinton race remains locked into the demographic pattern that emerged strongly in Ohio March 4 and last week in Pennsylvania. Polls show Obama drawing overwhelming support among black voters, and students and youth, particularly in college towns. Clinton leads among predominately white rural and small town voters, among women and among the elderly.

Neither candidate offers policies to defend the interests of working people. Neither will bring an end to the war in Iraq. On the contrary, both support the expansion of US military aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia, Clinton suggesting a US military "obliteration" of Iran, Obama calling for US military strikes against supposed terrorist targets in Pakistan.

As Obama moves ever further to the right, propelled both by competition with Clinton and attacks from the media and the Republican candidate John McCain, the primary contest continues to demonstrate that the Democratic Party offers no alternative to the program of war, social reaction and attacks on democratic rights conducted by the Bush-Cheney administration over the past seven years.



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