

Obama, McCain vie for support of Christian right

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In his first joint appearance with Senator John McCain since the end of the Democratic and Republican primaries, Democratic presidential nominee Senator Barack Obama went head to head with his Republican rival in pandering to the Christian right.

Last Saturday's event, coming little more than a week before the Democratic National Convention in Denver, has exposed once again the turn by the party and its candidate to the right in the run-up to the November election.

The venue for the joint appearance was the Saddle Back Church, a so-called "mega-church" in Orange County, California, run by the millionaire preacher Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, who advocates blending Christianity with business management and marketing methods.

The two candidates briefly shook hands and exchanged a stiff hug as McCain replaced Obama on the stage. They did not engage in a debate, but rather submitted separately to nearly identical questions posed by Warren.

Front and center in the hour-long questioning of each candidate were the "hot-button" issues that the Republican Party has managed to successfully exploit in previous elections to mobilize its one significant mass base: the Christian right. With the US economy continuing its downward spiral, there is concern within the Republican leadership over whether pushing these buttons this year will produce similar results.

McCain offered the scripted answers that have been used by the Republicans to appeal to these layers. Asked "At what point does a baby get human rights?" McCain answered unhesitatingly, "At the moment of conception."

He added, "I have a 25-year pro-life record in the Congress, in the Senate, and as president of the United States I will be a pro-life president, and this presidency will have pro-life policies."

While winning enthusiastic applause from the audience of evangelical Christians, the implications of such a policy go well beyond the banning of abortion, calling into question the legality of stem cell research as well as various forms of contraception. If turned into law, the principle of legal rights beginning at conception could make any woman who suffers a miscarriage a potential homicide or manslaughter suspect.

Obama gave what amounted to an agnostic answer to this

question, despite the ample body of law rejecting the notion that the fetus enjoys the legal status of a person and the clear identification of the "life-begins-at-conception" view with attacks on the basic rights of women.

"On this particular issue, if you believe that life begins at conception... and you are consistent, then I can't argue with you on that," Obama said. "What I can do is say, 'Are there ways we can work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies?'"

The Democratic candidate also stressed his willingness to support restrictions on late-term abortions, given exceptions for cases in which a woman's life and health are at risk.

The answer reflected the overall attempt by the Democratic Party to blur the lines on the abortion issue. The upcoming convention in Denver is to include a prime-time speech by Senator Robert Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania, the leading Democratic opponent of abortion rights. Casey's father, a former Pennsylvania governor, was barred from speaking at the 1992 Democratic convention because of his identification with the so-called "right to life" anti-abortion cause.

On the issue of same-sex marriage, Obama also tilted towards the Republicans and the religious right. "It's a union between a man and a woman," the Illinois senator responded when asked by Warren to define marriage. He added, "For me as a Christian, it is a sacred union. God's in the mix."

Obama said he backed same-sex civil unions, claiming they could ensure the same basic rights.

Asked which Supreme Court justices they would not have nominated, Obama singled out Clarence Thomas, declaring that he didn't think "he was a strong enough jurist or a legal thinker."

McCain said he would not have appointed justices Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, David Souter or John Paul Stevens, even though he voted to confirm all but the last, who was nominated before McCain was elected to the Senate.

Both McCain and Obama were also asked about their personal faith and their "greatest moral failure." As to the latter, McCain invoked the breakup of his first marriage, while Obama referred to drug and alcohol use as a teenager.

Questioned as to whether evil existed and what could be done about it, McCain delivered a semi-hysterical response,

essentially equating evil with “radical Islam.”

“We defeat it,” said the Republican candidate. “If I have to follow him to the gates of hell, I will get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice and I know how. No one should be allowed to take thousands of American—innocent American—lives. Of course evil must be defeated. We are facing the transcendent challenge of the 21st century—radical Islamic extremists. Our troops will come home with honor and victory and not in defeat.”

By contrast, Obama made reference to Darfur, street violence in the US and child abuse, while affirming that ending evil was “God’s task.”

At another point in the discussion, the two candidates were asked to name the “three wisest people in your life.” After naming his wife Michelle and his maternal grandmother, Obama insisted he could not limit it to just three and went on to name Sam Nunn, the former CIA agent who made a political career as one of the most right-wing Democratic leaders in the US Senate, and Richard Lugar, one of the Senate’s most senior Republicans.

For his part, McCain cited General David Petraeus, who directed the US military “surge” in occupied Iraq, and Meg Whitman, the CEO of e-Bay.

Warren also asked both candidates to “define rich.” Obama sought to deal with issue delicately, making a joking reference to the lucrative publishing ventures of his questioner. “If you’ve got book sales of \$25 million, then you qualify,” he said.

McCain announced that he didn’t “want to take any money from the rich.” He added, “I want everybody to get rich,” while suggesting a possible cutoff point: “If you’re just talking about income, how about \$5 million?”

He noted sympathetically, however, that “some of the richest people I’ve known in my life are the most unhappy.” The British *Guardian* noted sardonically that his wife, the brewery heiress, “applauded from the audience.”

Obama showed himself better able to weave biblical references into his policy statements. “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you do for me,” he said in describing his social views.

In a clear appeal to the right, however, the Democratic candidate answered a question as to what he viewed as his single most important policy shift in the last 10 years by pointing to “welfare reform.”

In 1996, as a member of the Illinois state Senate, Obama had opposed the Clinton administration’s policy of “ending welfare as we know it,” warning that throwing millions of mothers and their children off the welfare rolls through forced work programs would create immense social dislocation and suffering.

Now the Democratic candidate says he sees the wisdom in Clinton’s policy, which led to a dramatic increase in child poverty and has left over a million former welfare

recipients—the great majority single mothers and children—without jobs or benefits, while forcing many more into poverty wage jobs that cannot cover basic living expenses, child care and transportation to and from work.

“We have to have work as a centerpiece of any social policy,” Obama said.

One controversy quickly erupted over the joint appearance. Warren had claimed that during Obama’s questioning, which came first, the Republican candidate had been confined to a “cone of silence,” a room in his church without access to television or radio. In fact, McCain’s motorcade had arrived at the church a half hour after the event had begun. Many questioned whether McCain and his handlers could have heard the live broadcast of the same questions that were then put to him.

A spokesperson for the Republican candidate dismissed the controversy, declaring, “The insinuation from the Obama campaign that John McCain, a former prisoner of war, cheated is outrageous.”

A recent CNN opinion poll showed McCain winning 68 percent of the white evangelical Christian vote, as opposed to 24 percent for Obama. This is, however, a significantly smaller share than the 78 percent enjoyed by Bush in the 2004 election.

McCain’s recent statement that he would not exclude figures like former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge as a vice presidential running mate based on their support for abortion rights evoked howls of outrage from leading figures in the Christian right.

His performance Saturday appeared designed to counter such animosity. In the past he has sought to deflect questions about personal religious beliefs. Asked last December during the South Carolina primary whether he had been “saved,” McCain replied that “one’s faith and religion, in my view, is something between me and God.”

This time around, however, he affirmed before the California church audience that he had been “saved and forgiven.”

As for Obama, his repeated professions of his Christian faith only help to prop up the reactionary political edifice constructed by the religious right and the Republican Party over the whole past period.

Involved in this reactionary non-debate is a deepening of the protracted attack on the fundamental constitutional principle of separation between church and state, which has been central in driving official politics in America to the right.



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