Obama, in a ‘slap in the face,’ invites right-wing evangelist to the inauguration

David Walsh
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President-elect Barack Obama’s various appointments and political choices are taking on an almost provocative character. The Joint Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies announced Wednesday that Rick Warren, a right-wing millionaire evangelist, will lead the opening prayers at Obama’s swearing-in ceremony January 20.

Warren is a religious bigot and know-nothing, hostile to gay rights and abortion rights, a believer in creationism and “free market enterprise for religion, as well as for everything else” and a supporter of American imperialism’s agenda to dominate the globe.

The son of a Baptist minister, he preaches a sort of New Age evangelism at the Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, where he has gathered a large following. The author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren avoids for the most part the semi-fascistic rhetoric of televangelist and former Republican candidate for president Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell, claiming to be a man of the “middle” and not the Christian right.

His mentor, he explains, is management consultant Peter Drucker and he has been compared to “entrepreneurs” like Ray Kroc (of McDonald’s) and Sam Walton (of Wal-Mart). In turn, he claims to be mentor to former GE chief Jack Welch and pastor to Rupert Murdoch, two of the most unsavory and ruthless business figures around. Warren’s web site approvingly cites this comment from *Forbes* magazine: “If Saddleback ministry was a business its influence would be compared with Dell, Google or Starbucks.”

Despite the affable, ‘up-to-date’ façade, Warren’s primitive and anti-democratic views are hardly a secret. He compares same-sex marriage to incest, pedophilia and polygamy, claims that socially-minded theologians advocate “basically Marxism in a Christian form,” denounces supporters of abortion rights as “Holocaust deniers,” and opposes stem-cell research.

On the right-wing Hannity & Colmes talk show on the Fox cable channel in early December, host Sean Hannity suggested that the US should kill Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—“We need to take him out.” The “non-political” Warren concurred, commenting, “the Bible says that evil cannot be negotiated with. It has to just be stopped. … In fact, that is the legitimate role of government. The Bible says that God puts government on earth to punish evildoers.”

Speaking of homosexuality during a television interview in December 2005, Warren commented: “[I]s it natural? Is it the natural thing? … If Darwin was right, which is survival of the fittest then homosexuality would be a recessive gene because it doesn’t reproduce and you would think that over thousands of years that homosexuality would work itself out of the gene pool.”

In regard to Proposition 8, a measure to ban gay marriage, which was on the ballot this November in California, Warren told his supporters: “There are about two percent of Americans [who] are homosexual, gay, lesbian people. We should not let two percent of the population … change a definition of marriage that has been supported by every single culture and every single religion for 5,000 years. This is not even just a Christian issue, it is a humanitarian and human issue, that God created marriage for the purpose of family, love and procreation.”

Warren thrust himself into the 2008 presidential election as well, hosting a forum this past August in which he quizzed presidential candidates Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain about a number of “hot-button” issues (see “Obama, McCain vie for support of Christian right”), including abortion, same-sex marriage, each candidate’s “greatest moral failure” and his attitude toward “evil.” Obama’s willingness to appear in such a setting and his pandering to the religious right were the most significant aspects of the event.

Now, after naming a host of Bush and Clinton leftovers and other pro-big business, pro-war functionaries to his cabinet and winning the ringing endorsement of the current president and vice-president in the process, the president-elect has picked Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration.

The choice is cynical, made purely out of political expediency.

In a review of *The Audacity of Hope* (see “Obama’s The Audacity of Hope: Portrait of a modern American political operative”), we noted Obama’s transparent opportunism on the question of “faith.” Raised essentially without religion by his

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liberal mother, “a citizen of the world,” the aspiring politician realized at some point in his sojourn that “Americans are a religious people” and that he had to come to terms with the “African American religious tradition” if he was to find acceptance by the political establishment. His account of discovering “God’s spirit” in a church on the South Side of Chicago lacks the slightest ring of truth.

In inviting Warren, Obama is seeking to build up support among the most reactionary and backward elements of the population for his administration and its policies of war and austerity. The *New York Times* described the action as “an olive branch to conservative Christian evangelicals.” A further illustration of the “seamless transition” from the Bush to the Obama administration.

A host of gay rights and liberal organizations have denounced the inaugural invitation to Warren, decrying it as “a slap in the face.” Joe Solmonese, president of Human Rights Campaign, in an open letter to Obama, called the decision “a genuine blow” to gay and lesbian Americans. He went on: “Our loss in California over the passage of Proposition 8 which stripped loving, committed same-sex couples of their given legal right to marry is the greatest loss our community has faced in 40 years. And by inviting Rick Warren to your inauguration, you have tarnished the view that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans have a place at your table.”

Solmonese noted that Warren “has often played the role of general in the cultural war waged” against gays and lesbians.

Kevin Naff, editor of the *Washington Blade*, a gay newspaper, argued that the Warren decision revealed a “tone-deafness to our concerns” that “must not be tolerated. We have just endured eight years of endless assaults on our dignity and equality from a president beholden to bigoted conservative Christians. The election was supposed to have ended that era. It appears otherwise.”

The People for the American Way, a liberal advocacy group, noted that Warren’s supporters would “portray his selection as an appeal to unity by a president who is committed to reaching across traditional divides. … [T]he sad truth is that this decision further elevates someone who has in recent weeks actively promoted legalized discrimination and denigrated the lives and relationships of millions of Americans.”

Sara Posner, writing in the *Nation*, commented: “Now it has officially gone too far: Democrats, in their zeal to appear friendly to evangelical voters, have chosen celebrity preacher and best-selling author Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at Barack Obama’s inauguration.’

Obama firmly defended the invitation to Warren at a press conference in Chicago Thursday. The soon-to-be president asserted that he would remain “a fierce advocate for equality for gay and lesbian Americans.” His decision to permit the evangelical bigot to deliver the invocation merely expressed his desire “for America to come together, even though we may have disagreements on certain social issues.” This was, he explained, “part of the magic of this country … that we are diverse and noisy and opinionated.”

This argument, a rationale for the worst sort of unprincipled politics, is absurd. It doesn’t take much insight to understand that providing a public and key political platform for a rabid enemy of gay and democratic rights *undermines* equality for gays and lesbians, along with everyone else.

The vast bulk of the population has no interest in “coming together” with the likes of Warren and the rest of the fundamentalist-evangelical Christian hierarchy, a social element deeply hostile to the working class, the poor and minorities, as well as to science, culture and everything smacking of the 21st, 20th and other recent centuries. Such a confluence of interests is “magical” indeed, rooted in fantasy and wishful thinking.

Obama and his entourage are clever politicians, but too clever by half. They calculate that they can move as far to the right as they like, because the official American “left” has nowhere else to go and, in any case, no stomach for opposing such a trajectory.

It’s perfectly true that the *Nation* editorial board, officials of People for the American Way and many well-heeled gay rights advocates will never break from the Democratic Party. In the end, these elements will rationalize and explain away every reactionary measure taken by the Obama administration—they are bound to the Democrats by class interest, defenders all of the profit system.

The mass of the American people, however, is another matter. They have no interest in sticking with the Democrats. Seeing Obama for what he is, a venal and dishonest representative of the American financial and corporate elite, will be an essential political experience and open up the floodgates.

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