

Obama's sermon at Notre Dame

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President Barack Obama's commencement address at Notre Dame University took on heightened political significance after several weeks of a media-hyped protest by anti-abortion fanatics denouncing the presence of a supposedly "pro-choice" president at the nation's leading Catholic university.

As it turned out, the reactionary campaign mustered little more than one hundred protesters, most of whom were brought to the campus from other locations. Residents of South Bend, Indiana—where Notre Dame is located—were overwhelmingly hostile to the anti-abortion fanatics and their publicity-minded campaign. Even after weeks of a right-wing media campaign spearheaded by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, the overwhelming majority of Notre Dame students were hostile to anti-abortion forces. The handful of protesters who tried to disrupt Obama's speech were completely drowned out by chants from the crowd.

This outcome was not particularly surprising. National opinion polls show that a very sizable majority of the population opposes further restrictions on abortion, and that there remains a strong consensus in support of the Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1973. Randall Terry, one of the principal protest leaders, publicly admitted that the aim of the Notre Dame campaign was to revive the "moribund" anti-abortion movement.

Obama could have easily ignored the protest and used his appearance to address any number of issues of greater concern to Notre Dame students and the country as a whole. Or, if he felt that the question of abortion had to be addressed, he might have taken the opportunity to present an unambiguous defense of every woman's constitutionally-established right to

privacy and her freedom of choice.

Instead, in what has become this administration's standard operating procedure, Obama opted for an approach that was as spineless as it was reactionary. The central premise of his speech was that the views of those who would deny citizens their democratic rights are no less deserving of respect than those who seek to secure and defend those rights. He approached the issue of abortion as if this legal right should be perpetually subject to negotiation between those who seek to exercise their rights and those who would deny women the protection of the law.

Obama's indifferent attitude toward the defense of democratic rights was not confined to the issue of abortion. In a statement whose reactionary implications grows clearer with each reading, Obama declared: "The soldier and the lawyer may both love this country with equal passion, and yet reach very different conclusions on the specific steps needed to protect us from harm. The gay activist and the evangelical pastor may both deplore the ravages of HIV/AIDS, but find themselves unable to bridge the cultural divide that might unite their efforts. Those who speak out against stem cell research may be rooted in an admirable conviction about the sacredness of life, but so are the parents of a child with juvenile diabetes who are convinced that their son's or daughter's hardships can be relieved."

What is Obama's point? That the general who favors martial law "to protect us from harm" has a view that is as legitimate as that of the lawyer who defends the Bill of Rights? That the views of the evangelical pastor whose hateful sermons encourage anti-gay discrimination are to be seen as a valuable contribution to the national discourse? And, finally, that some sort of common ground should be found between those who

oppose stem cell research and those whose children may die because of such reactionary efforts? Why is opposition to stem cell research, rooted in ignorance and hostility to science, being praised by the president as “an admirable conviction about the sacredness of life”?

On the issue of abortion itself, Obama tacitly implied that women who undergo this procedure are engaged in disreputable activity, and that the moral high ground is held by the opponents of abortion. He declared: “Let’s honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause, and make sure that all of our health care policies are grounded not only in sound science, but also in clear ethics, *as well as* respect for the equality of women.”

Obama overlooks the fact that no one is compelled by law to undergo abortion. Those who disagree with abortion are not required to avail themselves of the legal right to have one. But why should the president feel obliged to “honor the conscience” of those who would deny this right to those who decide to exercise this right? The so-called “conscience clause” would make it possible for health care workers to deny individuals treatment to which they are legally entitled. Then there is the suggestion that “sound science” may be based on bad ethics. Again, the president is adapting himself to the baseless claims of the religious right, which demands that science be subordinated to their ignorant and reactionary world view. As for Obama’s reference to the “equality of women,” the phrasing makes clear that these words were included only as an afterthought.

There are many other aspects of Obama’s speech that betrayed a callous indifference to democratic principles, including the separation of church and state. Obama’s remarks were far less a political speech than a religious sermon, with numerous invocations of God, a reference to “original sin,” and the retelling of his own discovery of Christ.

Does Obama—whose late mother was an atheist—actually believe any of this? In the Notre Dame rendition of his conversion story, Obama emphasized the influence of the Catholic hierarchy. He did not

mention the name of his long-time pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. When it was politically convenient to do so, Obama gave credit to Wright, the politically-connected black preacher from South Chicago, for his religious consciousness. Obama even used Wright’s phrase, “audacity of hope” in the title of his best-selling book of the same name. But after Wright’s criticisms of US social and military policy became the center of a media campaign during Obama’s battle with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, Obama dumped Wright and his congregation, where Obama and his family had been parishioners for years.

What was on display at Notre Dame was not Obama’s deep-rooted religious convictions—which, we suspect, are as flexible as all his other convictions—but definite political calculations. The president’s every move is intended to accommodate and cultivate the most reactionary social forces.



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